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Philip Amuso oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, April 14, 2004

Philip Amuso (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Arrival as a student in 1969

There was an illness in Dr. Amuso's family just after he graduated from high school. He had planned on going to the University of Connecticut and was even offered a football scholarship from UCONN, but circumstances dictated that he stay close to his family.

He lived in Sarasota at the time. He had only been to campus one time. He drove through with his brother when the two were on their way to Pittsburgh. Dr. Amuso's first thought was, "what an ugly campus." There were lots of sandspurs and gopher holes. In the beginning USF was not his first choice because the school didn't look very nice, which is important to many high school students. Once he got here, Dr. Amuso also realized that he was far enough from home to still have an independent student life, but close enough to go home regularly and help his family.

Family Expectations

It was always expected that he would go to college. A lot of his friends decided to not go to college and they all got jobs. Dr. Amuso found it difficult to go to school while all his friends were making money and doing well.

Time on campus

This was his first time away from home, so Dr. Amuso had to practice self-discipline. After the first semester, his grades weren't as good as he was used to. He worked very hard for two years to get an academic scholarship. He got the chance to live in the dorms, but didn't have too much time to go to parties because he had to keep his grades up.

Dorm Life

Life in the dorms taught Dr. Amuso how to get along with people who are different. There was a very diverse population in the dorms. They shared bathrooms, which was a difficult experience for Dr. Amuso. Dr. Amuso was a fairly neat individual and his suitemates were a little less clean, so they all had to adjust to one another. He had been friends with his roommate since third grade, and they are still friends to this day. They talk to each other regularly.

They got involved in intramural sports. Both Dr. Amuso and his roommate Ron had opportunities for scholarships. He and Ron both got the opportunity to go to Marshall. They decided to not accept the scholarships but didn't really have a definite reason for declining. This was 1969 and in 1970 a plane carrying the Marshall football team crashed, killing all the players and coaches on board.

Football at USF

They really wanted the school to have a football team, which USF President John Allen did not want. They wanted a football team so badly that some students would go sit outside John Allen's office and try and get an appointment with him to discuss the positive aspects of the football team. One time they were so obnoxious that they were taken away by the police force.

They played intramural football and basketball and occasionally went to Gainesville or Tallahassee if they wanted to see a game.

Academics at USF

Dr. Amuso's schedule was "really hectic." Because he didn't know exactly what he wanted to do. He'd started out in engineering because his uncles were all engineers. He realized after his first two quarters that he didn't want to do that. Dr. Amuso then decided to go into the school of business and stayed there for a year. After that he realized that he wanted to go into science. He was behind a little in that program because he had been in the other two programs, so Dr. Amuso sometimes took as many as twenty-one hours. He still has a recurring dream when he is stressed or tired that he forgot to go to calculus class all semester and has an exam that he is unprepared for. To this day he is not sure how he managed everything with regards to time.

Dr. Amuso ended up in biology and microbiology. He went straight through and got his master's in microbiology. He went straight to work at a hospital and then decided he wanted to work in public health. He stayed there the remainder of his career.

Turmoil on campus

Dr. Amuso lived in the dorms for three years. He got married after his third year and moved off campus. There was a lot of turmoil on campus because of the Vietnam War. This was a difficult period for the country. He had many friends who didn't go to school, many of these young men went to Vietnam and many didn't come back. He had a deferral for four years, but the deferral ran out in 1973. There were a lot of protests on campus and on other campuses around the country. The country also had many problems with race relations. This was a "tense" period. Right before Dr. Amuso graduated around the time of the oil shortage, when people would wait in line for hours to get two dollars worth of gas. Then gas prices shot up.

The mall area between the Marshall Center and the administration building used to be wide open and a space utilized for protests and other large gatherings. Dr. Amuso tried to avoid those gatherings because he didn't want to risk his career. He remembers that there

were a lot of people who would come and argue both sides of an issue. The police showed up regularly to keep the peace. There would be a peace rally almost every week. Peaceful ones would go on for several hours. There were “very few” demonstrations for why we should be in Vietnam. Some faculty members were involved in the protests and rallies.

Racial issues in Florida

Florida had very little racial integration throughout the early and mid-1960s. His freshman year of high school in Sarasota was the first year that there was widespread integration. Dr. Amuso thought that it was a great experience and he really learned to make friends with different people and discuss issues with people of different opinions. This continued on campus at USF. He thinks that everyone learned to get along with one another. Dr. Amuso thinks that people today don't really understand what it was like back then.

Changes in the Campus

The campus went from “Sandspur alley” to becoming one of the “most beautiful campuses” in the state and even in the southeast United States. They have made the architecture more varied and paid attention to making sure there were a lot of green areas on the campus. Dr. Amuso noticed a lot of great change during President Castor's administration.

Campus life is different now. We have Greek housing and married housing. There are a lot of different types of housing on campus now and they are comparable to the apartments you could get off campus before.

Dr. Amuso's degrees

Dr. Amuso got his bachelor's degree in microbiology. He wanted a degree that would get him a job even without a master's. He ended up getting a master's in microbiology. He worked in a hospital for a while, which was not as satisfying as Dr. Amuso thought it would be. He got the chance to work in public health at the Epidemiology Research Center for the Department of Health. They had a job opportunity here in Tampa and Dr. Amuso took it. Dr. Amuso then went to work for the Florida Department of Health's Bureau of Laboratories, located on the USF campus. Dr. Amuso went through the College of Public Health and finished his PhD in the year 2000. He has a degree in Tropical Public Health and Communicable Disease.

What his work entails

He spends a lot of his time on domestic security, homeland security, bio-terrorism, and chemical terrorism research. He never thought that his focus would be in these areas. They are no longer dealing with emerging infectious diseases; they are also dealing with humans using diseases as weapons against one another. This is exciting and rewarding because they feel that they are doing something for the nation and the citizens of Florida. Dr. Amuso didn't go into the military because the draft ended before he graduated. This gives him the opportunity to feel that he serves his country. He also serves as the director for the Department of Health's Tampa lab and he is on the faculty in the College of

Medicine in the Division of Infectious Diseases. Dr. Amuso also serves as the assistant bureau chief for statewide laboratories around Florida.

Involvement in the Alumni Association

For about ten years after Dr. Amuso graduated with his master's he had little to do with the University. He got interested in the Alumni Association and joined. A friend of his was on the board in the mid-1990s, and asked Dr. Amuso to consider being on the Board of Directors. This may have been "the single most rewarding after-graduation phenomenon" for Dr. Amuso. He is impressed that the school is growing so quickly and is so different than it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Dr. Amuso is happy to see this and is happy to have a say in the direction that the school takes.

The Board of Directors interacts in the long range planning of the school. The President is a part of the Board, and the Board interacts with her cabinet. They are a part of the selection processes for some executive management positions. This helps alumni feel that they have a say and get to interact with the school. Having a football program here has been a big plus for the school. It draws alumni to the school and gives people something to focus on for homecoming weekend. Dr. Amuso thinks that in twenty or thirty years USF will be like other schools in the state that have a big donor base which gets together around homecoming.

There are certain things that still go on that went on in the early 1970s. Students certainly still spend a lot of time partying. There are new traditions going on at USF and some are continued from decades past. People used to go see movies on the hill, which they still do today.

Earth Day

In spring 1970 USF celebrated the first Earth Day. Having a strong biology background, Dr. Amuso was very excited that a world body was starting to pay attention to the environment. The U.N. recognized Earth Day. They were trying to find solutions for pollution. There was raw sewage pumped into Tampa Bay, which made the Bay "absolutely filthy." The air in Tampa was very polluted. People were dying from respiratory problems as a result of the pollution. People gathered on the malls and participated in the events. A television station interviewed Dr. Amuso about five years ago and asked about the first Earth Day. He feels that we've come a long way, but the environment will get dirty quickly if we take a step backwards. There were hundreds of people there for the first Earth Day.

Dress Code

Dr. Amuso never saw the dress code and isn't aware if there was an official one. His "first experience with mini-skirts" took place at USF. His mother noticed the short skirt one of his dates was wearing and asked him afterwards "what kind of girl would wear a skirt like that?" People were wearing shorts and cut-off blue jeans. Everyone wore bell-bottom jeans. No one ever enforced the dress code around Dr. Amuso.

The economy was in bad shape while Dr. Amuso was at USF. They didn't talk too much about inflation because the students were all poor. They talked about gas prices because their cars were important. Dr. Amuso had an old Ford Falcon that could be used to cart a lot of students around.

He ate the campus food regularly. The food had a lot of starches, it was fatty and it was "not so good." They ate at Andros or Argos because people paid for meals and housing. Everyone ate there at least a couple of times each day. If they didn't eat there they ate at Burger King because Whoppers were only sixty-nine cents. The Burger King was on 30th Street, but it is gone now. There was also a Dairy Queen in Temple Terrace and a McDonalds nearby. There was no University Mall until the mid-seventies. A lot of students didn't want them to tear down the forest to build the mall. One night there was a mysterious fire and all the trees burned down anyway.

Hangouts

People hung out at the Empty Keg in the University Center. There were also hangouts on Fletcher and Fowler Avenues where students shot pool and socialized. Dr. Amuso didn't start spending time with his professors until he started work on his master's. They would have cookouts where students were offered free food. This experience meant a lot to students.

Current Job at USF

Dr. Amuso is no longer on the Board of Directors for the Alumni Association, although he is still a committee member. He is also on the faculty of the College of Medicine and he has a courtesy appointment at the College of Public Health. His laboratory is on campus in the University Technical Center. He comes to USF every day and still gets to work with the University. They are currently designing a new Interdisciplinary Research Building.

Most Proud of at USF

Dr. Amuso is most proud of the fact that he has been able to use his degree in "the way that it was intended" and "maintain contact with the University." He has three degrees from USF so it is an important part of his life. He was talking to interim President Richard Peck, who reminded him that the diploma is like a stock certificate: it becomes more valuable as the University becomes more prestigious. The more the alumni can do for the school, the better everything will be for those involved with USF.

End of Interview