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Kevin Archer oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, February 27, 2004

Kevin Archer (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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Narrator: Dr. Kevin W. Archer
Current Position: Chair, Geography
Department
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Academic background

Dr. Archer earned a bachelor's degree in economics and a master's degree in geography at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He got a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in geography and environmental engineering. His specialty is urban development.

Experiences overseas

As a doctoral student, he was sent to northern France to work in a public policy institute on regional development issues. After returning from France, Dr. Archer received a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Belgium, where he spent the following year.

Marriage; Job market

In the meantime, Dr. Archer was married to a fellow student from McGill with whom he had been keeping in contact. While in Belgium, the couple had a baby. Because his wife had been so supportive of his academic pursuits, he agreed to do the same for her, and the two moved back to the United States where she began her doctoral studies at the University of Maine. When she completed her Ph.D. four years later, Dr. Archer entered the job market. "The problem was ... it's hard to find two tenure-track positions in the same institution ... it's hard to find them in the same city ... so I wanted to find somewhere where it might be possible to get her a job too."

USF

When he came to the University of South Florida, he believed that he might be able to work out some arrangement whereby his wife would be able to work as well. For his interview, Dr. Archer flew out of Maine on a propjet in the midst of a blizzard at nearly five degrees below zero. When he arrived in Tampa it was a beautiful February day at around seventy-eighty degrees. "I was taken to the Hurricane at St. Pete Beach ... I just shoveled my car out of snow ... and here I am the next day sitting at the beach in a full suit and people are walking around in bikinis and it's sunny and I was thinking ... life

doesn't have to be this hard." The Geography Department at USF agreed to work on his behalf in order to find a position for his wife, Ingrid.

First impressions of USF

When Dr. Archer stepped on campus, his first impression was of an industrial park. "I thought it was ugly as sin ... I couldn't figure out what the campus was ... On the other hand I saw that it was a place of real opportunity ... It looked like a place that I could hit the ground running ... and still have time for my family." He made the decision based first on family, and secondly on a "fairly decent salary" that was offered to him in addition to finding work for his wife.

After a few years, Dr. Archer received help from Provost David Stamps in securing employment for his wife at the University.

Human Geography

Dr. Archer was the first in the department to study "human geography," an approach that "the older fellas didn't understand." While geography itself is the study of the human-environment relationship, human geographers study how people affect the socially constructed environment, asking questions such as how cities are constructed and how they modify human behavior. "My human geography is more social ... Why is it that we have rich people in the suburbs and poor people in inner-cities, and how do those environments affect the behavior of those people?"

Human laboratory

Because he saw USF students as largely regional and homogenous, one of his goals was to "bring the world to them." Being at a commuter university where many students maintain lives off campus makes it more difficult for Dr. Archer to "take them into my little laboratory which I call my classroom" and get them to think differently about the "real world" and its human constructions. He perceives another role he plays at the university as doing "missionary work" for the discipline of geography.

Personal reputation on campus

"I have a reputation around campus so that people that take my classes ... you know ... he's crazy as a loon, he's going to pound walls, he's going to jump up and down, wake you up, he's going to be like a Protestant minister – in your face, and so, you better be ready for it."

Development of the department

In the late 1980s, a new department chair was hired to bring in a "more modern geography," focused in part on computerized cartography – referred to as Geographic Information Systems. This computerization facilitates a more effective understanding of geographic relationships. While that is a valuable technique, as a geographer, it is important to determine what data should be considered and how to interpret the results.

Department revitalization

At one point in the 1980s, the department had dwindled down to three faculty members, and there was talk about closing it down and reassigning the staff elsewhere. The Dean at the time recognized its value and worked to save the department from dissolution. Part of the program's revival was the hiring of a new dean in 1987 who began bringing on new faculty members. Dr. Archer was hired in 1991.

Experiences at USF

"My experiences here have been mostly positive ... I've been very impressed by my ability ... to get to know upper administrators on a personal level ... they don't embody a sort of haughty institutional approach to their position ... it makes it a lot more interesting ... it's a team effort ... we are creating an institution."

Current work

Though he enjoys serving as chair of the department, his "real joy" is teaching and research. He currently teaches one single-credit course each semester in addition to his administrative duties, and also participates in the honors program.

Memorable experiences

One of his most memorable experiences with his students was taking them on a field-trip to Celebration in Orlando, "Trying to give them a sense of what the meaning was instead of just being a sort of theme park experience – but a real lived environment that was being constructed right in our midst ... I think that stands out because it turned around a lot of their thoughts ... about the polarization of wealth and poverty."

End of Interview