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Maura Barrios oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, June 13, 2003

Maura Barrios (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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

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TRANSCRIPTION

G: Today is Friday, June 13, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, Oral History Program Assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews here in our studio in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, students, and alumni in order to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today, we will be interviewing Maura Barrios who came to USF in 1968 as a student. Currently, she is the assistant director of Latin American and Caribbean studies. Good afternoon, Maura.

B: Good afternoon, Yael. It's nice to be here.

G: Let's begin by you taking us to the year you came to Tampa and what circumstances brought you to the University of South Florida.

B: Well, I didn't come to Tampa, I was born in Tampa and went to public schools here. Unfortunately my high school, Jefferson High School downtown in Tampa, had been dis-accredited in the year 1967. We were told that because of the dis-accreditation we probably wouldn't be able to go to university. However, I stayed at the high school. Many of the students had to go to other high schools at that time. I just had the courage I guess to go ahead and apply, but that meant that I didn't start until January when some

friends of mine came and talked to me and said well why aren't you going to the university. I was accepted based on, probably, exams. Back then it was the Florida placement exam, and I always did very well on exams. The other thing that I need to mention is there was a critical moment. I came from kind of working-poor, Latino family and university wasn't really in the plans back in the 1950s and early 1960s. The University of Tampa was the only university in town, but many people started to discover USF and it became the place to go if you could make it. Tuition was very cheap, so my parents gave me their old car and I would drive up to Sligh Avenue where the interstate ended, and then you got on some country roads, through orange groves, and actually shell and dirt roads to get to this foreign far-away place called the university. That was 1968. The person that encouraged me most to come here was a history teacher in my high school, Judith Lewis. I'll never forget her. She actually had left Jefferson but came back to ask me why I wasn't going to university, and [she said] that I really should. I believe that teacher made all the difference in my life. That probably has something to do with why I studied history later on.

G: When did you first hear about USF?

B: [I] probably [heard about USF] in the early 1960s. The university had opened in 1960. I have a brother who is older. Now, my brother went to Gainesville, University of Florida. [He's] another very bright person in my family. [He went] on scholarships. Other people in my community started attending USF in 1962, 1963, 1964; very few [went].

G: Being from the Latino community, why did you feel that it was important to go to USF? Were your parents very encouraging of your going to USF in the late 1960s?

B: Yes, in fact I recall; and I talked to Sam Gibbons about this, the father of USF; that in

fact it was the Latino population of Tampa who had lobbied him to say we need a university that is close by, that is accessible to working-class people. That was actually the argument that he put forth in the legislature to create the first university in an urban center, and it happened to be Tampa. I'm very proud to say I believe it was the Latino community who valued education but couldn't afford it and certainly weren't going to send their kids off to Tallahassee or Gainesville, which back then could have been considered hostile territory. So that, I think is the connected history between USF and the Latino community. It goes right to the very creation of the university.

G: What did the campus look like and the surrounding areas look like in 1968?

B: It's incredibly different. It really was rural. It really was orange groves. It really was dirt roads. There was one restaurant on Fowler Avenue; that probably came later, but it was the University Restaurant. That was it, that was really it.

G: What were you interested in studying when you first came to USF?

B: I really floundered. I was really overwhelmed coming from a very protective, enclave kind of environment. I hadn't really studied hard. I'd gotten through school, [but I was] not very serious about school. Unfortunately, there was a message sometimes that it wasn't anything to aspire to, especially for females back then. So, I was very confused when I got here. Of course it was 1968 and there was incredible social movement and social issues that were much more interesting to me than what was happening in the classroom. I got very involved with that, sometimes what I was learning outside of the classroom more than in the classroom. That was that particular moment in history, that year, of turmoil and conflict and, in a way, social revolution. [The] women's liberation and the Vietnam War, all of that was part of my education at USF.

G: Let's talk a little bit about those social issues. Were there student demonstrations against the Vietnam War?

B: Oh absolutely, there were huge demonstrations, sit-ins, speech-ins, arrests. I had friends who were very active. In fact Jeff Shelley was on the cover of *Time* magazine being dragged by his long hair at USF. There was even this mythology that USF was the Berkeley of the South. I don't know if that's myth or true, but it was a very, very active place. I think it had to do, again, with the identity of USF in the 1960s. This was a small, liberal arts college with a focus on fine arts, so it attracted students who had a particular interest. We weren't the traditional fraternity/sorority football crowd. We were the liberal arts/art crowd and attracted really good professors in the humanities and the arts and really good students. We were really proud of that. That's what attracted me to USF. It was sort of like the New College of the 1960s then, and then it all changed after that.

G: You mentioned the women's liberation movement, what other major political issues, if you will, sort of permeated inside the campus?

B: Well the issue of race and civil rights, I mean we had race riots in Tampa in the summer of 1967 so that was very fresh in our memories. [There was] the issue of race and coming to the university and suddenly finding myself in what was a very mono-culture world. In fact I was the only person from my high school here at USF. It was a very lonely, alienated kind of world culturally. I felt like this exotic sort of foreigner in my own home town, so I was very sensitized to race. I can only remember just one black person in 1968.

G: In terms of other kinds of diversity, you being Latino were there a lot of other Latino

students going to USF? You mentioned the fact that you only remember seeing one African-American student, which you're right; were there other ethnic kinds of people around?

B: It seemed very mono-cultural, as I'll put it. There were Latinos. Now, you have to understand that Tampa has a Latino community that's been here a hundred years, so you have very different levels of assimilation and you have very different levels of economic conditions. Certainly there were Latinos from the middle or upper classes who were attending USF or Florida State or other great universities; it's not a condition that all Latinos shared. I happened to come from a much more modest background.

G: In terms of course work and your schooling, what were some of the classes that really stick out in your mind? I know it was a long time ago, but I'm certain there were some classes that really you took hold of.

B: I'll never forget. Oh, there were some great professors: Daniel Rutenberg in humanities, I get the chills thinking about him, who took us outdoors and introduced us to really important ideas in the humanities. I remember Knocky Parker and his famous music class, I was there. I remember Larry Broer introducing me to American fiction. He's still here working in my building. I remember Dr. Gould was somebody who was very respected. There was also Dr. Stevenson in American Studies. I can't remember but there was a professor who was fired for being an anti-war activist, and many of the professors were. Back then, when it was a small university, there was a lot of interaction with students and professors. There was kind of this beatnik place, and faculty and students shared in that space equally. It was really a great time to be here.

G: Would you say that there was more interaction between students and faculty in those

early years than there is today?

B: Oh absolutely, I believe so; not that I've been a student here for very long, but I can't imagine that. It was a small town, it was a small university, and people with certain sort of liberal ideas tended to find their place very easily together in one place.

G: Because USF was such a new institution when you came here were there ideals that were expounded to you about the university? What kind of feeling were you given about the university being the fact that we didn't have sports? That idea of accent on learning, was that something that you felt as a student?

B: Absolutely, in fact I think that's what attracted us and I think that I recall that even today. My friend John Shelley who was very active here at the university said when we were at USF the accent was on learning, now the accent is on earning. It tells you about the kinds of changes, in terms of values, that have taken place as USF became comprehensive and became a university that wants to be everything to everybody, and serve the community, and serve the corporate world. Many of us lament or cry about the loss of the commitment to the humanities, to the arts, to liberal education, to professors who could speak out on social issues and important issues because that was all part of my education. There was no College of Business, there was no College of Engineering, there was no College of Medicine. I remember the business school started in the HMS building. Then the ROTC was not allowed, they were run off campus. That was the environment that we had kind of defined. The students defined the environment in those days. There was much more dialogue with the president, and I think there was a lot of respect for President Allen who was the person who decided in many ways that we would be a university that was different, that would not be traditional, that would not put money into

football. I think the students of that particular time period appreciated that and supported that. So, I think there was a lot of support, although I think he got some heat later on with the anti-war demonstrations and some challenges.

G: Was President Allen a person that you, as a student, saw on campus? Was he a visible kind of president?

B: I don't recall that he was, but I was a commuter. I was working, so I would come here and leave. I wasn't a person that was really living the university life that much. My friends would talk about President Allen. He was always part of the conversation in some way.

G: Was there a dress code in those early days for faculty and/or students?

B: I don't recall that there was. There certainly was in my high school; we never wore shorts or pants. I'm trying to remember. I don't think so. Mini skirts had already happened, so it was hippie times. I don't think anybody was going to impose any dress code on us at that time.

G: What did you ultimately decide to study at USF?

B: I dabbled. I was very interested in literature, languages, humanities, and then I fell in love with dance. So, I did that. Then I couldn't decide, because really I was making up for no education in my public school past. I was just a sponge for everything and wanted to learn everything and couldn't really commit to anything. I got a degree. I switched to liberal arts, and that allowed me to try different things. I got to history later on.

G: Ultimately were your parents supportive of you getting a degree, being a Latino, being a woman in those days? I assume, aside from your brother, you would be one of the first people in your family to get a higher education.

B: Absolutely yeah, my mother went to high school. My dad who was brilliant, unfortunately came from a very poor family and had to drop out at seventh grade to go to work during the Depression. So, we always had that bittersweet kind of memory from him. Fortunately, and I always had this model of my dad, my dad went back and educated himself. In other words, you don't have to depend on anybody to do that. He spent years in libraries reading all the important literature. So I had that in my home, that value of education, but not in a formal way. It was just important that it be part of your life, that you live this; you don't buy this, you don't get this, you live it. But I think my dad was bit resentful at the same time. As we became more educated and started challenging him. Of course I was the baby and the radical, so I would really challenge at the dinner table. That meant for really good discussions. In the Latino family we do that: we fight, we argue, we debate issues of politics. Again, we live that, it's normal for us. I think it was, for my dad, a mixed feeling. My mom was much more of a social butterfly and there weren't high expectations for Latinos. I really created my own vision for my life.

G: Of those years as a student at USF is there something; a story, a funny anecdote, or something that you really remember about being a student at USF; that you carry with you to this day?

B: There's so many stories. It is where I grew up. USF is the place that I left home. I grew up, I discovered a brave new world, I discovered friendships, I discovered love and romance, I discovered politics, I discovered books; I mean it's the place where I grew up. The whole experience of being here and feeling like it changed my life and really made me who I am in many ways, it was sort of the foundation. I look at USF as having done

that for me, giving me that vision that I was trying to find.

G: In those early days was the larger community supportive of having a state university? I know that today it seems like they're much more supportive and USF is much more in the news, but in those days were the connections, the community and the university connections, good?

B: I wouldn't know. I was kid and I didn't participate in paying attention to those kinds of issues. You know what's interesting is, even today, we do a lot of work in the community at our center and there's still this sort of old Tampa, Latin attitude or loyalty to the University of Tampa. So, when we go down there and do something sort of really avant-garde in the Centro Asturiano, for example, they said well that's very USF. So I think that it's a cultural time-warp more than it is a lack of support. I'm not sure, but USF was always seen as this alien place in the corner of Tampa that was doing strange things that were very avant-garde. That probably didn't relate much to the old southern traditional town that was right down the road.

G: When did you graduate?

B: I didn't graduate until 1974, and I didn't graduate from USF. I went to Utah and graduated from Utah State because I was married and I was following my husband in those days for his graduate school. I came back and got a master's. In 1998 I graduated. I did the master's while I worked at USF. [I took] one class per week at night [for] six years. I finally got to that history teacher's idea of what I should be doing, but I really kind of took the long journey.

G: What were you working as?

B: I floated around. I loved traveling. I lived in Boston. I worked at secretarial jobs, I

worked in an English lab teaching foreign students English in Colorado, at Utah State I work for Upward Bound, I was a social worker. See, there was that need to sort of work on the social issues, the inequality issues. Social injustice or social justice issues always attracted me at the same time, so I did that.

G: When you returned to USF, why did you decide to come back to USF and why did you decide to pursue a master's in history?

B: Well, I was working in Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government for three years, 1986 to 1989. I had a wonderful, wonderful job at the Kennedy School and then I had a child. If you've ever lived in Boston and you're from Florida, it's really, really hard to reconcile having a child and living in that environment. Again, being Latina, I wanted my child to have that sense of community and family support. That drew me back to Tampa, right back to my neighborhood, right near where my parents lived after having been away for many, many years. I had seen the world, but I came back to Tampa and it seemed very natural for me to work at USF because I had worked in university settings often. That's where I always pictured myself being, so I did get a job in administration and the provost's office. I started going to history classes, and fortunately I found Louis Perez. [He] was teaching Latin American history. I had encountered him in the 1970s here. I finally that moment [that] was right for me to commit to studying Latin American history, and I had the best possible professor for anyone interested in the history of Cuba, which was my interest. Then, Alejandro de la Fuentes came later on. I'm just very fortunate that these people happened to be in Tampa. I was here, and for me it was more than just studying history, it was recovering my own history and identity. It was a very sort of serious matter for me, and I spent many, many, many long hours in

your special collections in the library, too, to recover that history. It's Tampa Cuban history, which has been missing. It's sort of USF again plays an important role in forming my life, my identity.

G: Once you received your master's in history, where did you go from there?

B: I was already working in administration and, fortunately, I asked for an assignment in International Affairs, because that's really where I needed to be and I belonged. I kept lobbying. I was really in shock that in 1990s the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida didn't have a program in Latin American studies. Because I was placed in high places as an assistant I could say to the provost why don't you have a program in Latin American studies? I think that I bugged them so much. I was a thorn in their side, and then I started organizing the community and the students and the faculty around lobbying for a center. Luckily, we did that. So, I really created my job. Again, USF tolerated me and allowed me to do that. So needless to say, I was assigned by the provost to go work in International Affairs to begin the Latin American Studies Program.

G: Okay, I really want to focus in on that. Why had USF not come up with the idea of having a Latin American Studies Program when, it seems to me, other universities and the topic itself in that era were becoming popular?

B: I don't know. Actually, most Latin American studies centers that are everywhere in the US, even Iowa and places like that, most have Latin American studies centers; they all came about after 1959, the Cuban revolution. Suddenly the United States was very interested in this region, which we had neglected. You can see it, most centers are created after 1959/1960. I don't know why it didn't happen at USF. It's a mystery to me. I wasn't here a lot of those years. We have one of the best centers in the nation at

Gainesville, so maybe they didn't want to compete with that. I don't know.

G: When did the Center officially begin?

B: The Latin American Initiative, which was the planning stage and bringing people together around that, started with Betty Castor at a huge reception. [On] April 1995 we launched the Latin American and Caribbean Initiative at USF, which brought in all colleges and faculty and all disciplines to discuss and think about what were we doing, what strengths did we already have, what was the inventory of what was being done, [and] how could we bring that all together. We had a one-and-a-half-year planning process that included most deans. It was a very high-level commitment from the president, the provost, and the deans to create the Center. We hired a director and officially opened in the fall of 1997.

G: What were some of those first initiatives that you were interested and other faculty members were interested in creating in 1995 for the University of South Florida?

B: We put together teams that looked at different interests. Distance learning was an important initiative in terms of transfer of technology across our region. There are people in engineering that were interested in that. Public health and medicine, medical anthropology has been very active, and literature and language is always there. We thought USF had very unique opportunities to do something special. We saw that in the areas of public health [and] engineering, but education wasn't or isn't a very international place but we saw potential for that too. Now, they're doing things in the Caribbean. The other program that I'm most proud of, and the faculty and deans actually put this together, was that we would infuse knowledge of Latin America among all faculty. We believe that Florida is part Latin American and that anybody teaching our students would

need to know it. So, we started to take faculty on development trips to Latin America. We went to Mexico for three years, we went to Costa Rica, and to Cuba. The faculty would come back really charged, really renewed, and really with their minds open to this world. We just thought that needed to be done. Again, this is Tampa, Florida, this is Latin America. You can't stay in this corner and not be aware or involved or informed about the Americas. I think the Center has played a major role in bringing the community and the university together more, and also just infusing this appreciation and knowledge among a lot of faculty.

G: Who was the first director?

B: The first director was Michael Conniff. He came from Auburn University, and originally he had a Ph.D. from New Mexico I believe, he had been at New Mexico. He was an expert on Brazil and Panama in history.

G: Through the Center, how did you guys make contact with students? Did you begin to offer degree programs specific to Latin and American Caribbean Studies?

B: Yes, we had an undergraduate certificate in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, and that would draw in a lot of freshman or undergraduates. We reached out to students in International Studies or students who were interested in international business. We reached out to students through many of the student organizations. We had a graduate assistant who would actually go recruit students on campus. We did a lot of lectures and cultural events that would bring students in to see what we were doing while they were learning something about Latin America at the same time. We did a lot of community events to build support in the community, to remain connected to that community. We did a major program in 1997 with the Spanish Civil War Remembered project, No

Pasada. We coordinated that out of Latin American and Caribbean Studies. It was very exciting because the whole community and the whole university participated. There's lots of creative things you can do if you think broadly. If you make it relevant to students and community people they will come, as they say.

G: You talked about this idea of taking different professors to different countries. I'm particularly interested to talk about Cuba. Is this a unique feature to USF? Are other Latin American and Caribbean Studies programs doing this, and how does one go about arranging such a, it would seem to me, difficult venture?

B: It's actually not that difficult. I think that we've put up our own sort of barriers, but there's very clear US guidelines from the Treasury Department about what you can and can't do with Cuba. Fortunately, during the Clinton era that was very much opened up to academics. People who are doing research or learning or teaching a class or taking students on a class experience, Cuba is just as available as any other country and you just have to go through that paperwork process. The university can get a license to be able to give faculty and students the permission to go. So, we did all of that and that was organized. Fortunately, we had a committee for Cuban studies that faculty had organized to really educate the administration and others that this is done, and yes it is done at many universities in the US and very legal. Just because we're in Florida doesn't mean that those rights are not also granted to us. It was an interesting process; it wasn't always easy.

G: Once you began to take professors over to Cuba.

B: Well, we only took professors one time because we really tried to change the location as often as possible. It started in Mexico the first three years, then Costa Rica, and then

Cuba. There's always interest in Cuba because it's such a laboratory for so many topics.

So that year the faculty decided that they wanted to go to Cuba.

G: Is the university establishing relationships with other universities in Mexico, in Costa Rica, in Cuba?

B: A major activity of International Affairs is exchange agreements with institutions all over the world. You try to develop exchanges [such as] faculty visiting scholars. You try to recruit students to come and get their master's or Ph.D. here. Yes, we do that all the time. With Cuba we don't have any formal exchange because it's really not feasible to try to recruit students to USF, and part of the exchange is to do that, is to bring the students here if possible. We also have this very wonderful program that grants in-state tuition to students from Latin America and the Caribbean. This is a state of Florida program and nobody really knew about it, so our office took up that challenge. That's why we became so involved in recruiting students and then started to raise money for the scholarship money. We found, again, our community incredibly responsive to try to help the students coming from those countries.

G: Where do the majority of students come from?

B: The majority today are coming from Colombia. There is a wonderful Columbian association in town of professional people who are committing the scholarship money.

G: These Columbian students attend USF?

B: Yes, they have to full-time degree seeking and they have to have a 3.0 to qualify. Then, eventually the department of the colleges will provide. They do very well. I am really proud of them; I'm really proud.

G: What other kinds of unique programs does the Center incorporate?

B: Well, you know we designed the first master's program in Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino studies at USF. That was a collaboration among many people and many faculty. It's the first program that actually includes Latino studies in the whole state of Florida. Again, I don't know why the state of Florida is really way behind on the issue of Latinos, Latino studies programs. When you compare it to Texas, California, or New England states there's Latino doctoral programs. We've just managed to insert that with one or two courses, but we think it's a beginning and we think it's important, and that makes us unique. They're really relevant to the future of our state.

G: Why are USF students interested in getting higher-level degrees in Latin American and Caribbean and Latino Studies?

B: Sometimes they're like me. I mean I have some students who are coming back to find themselves and their identity and their culture and their language. I'm amazed at how many students I have that come in and remind me of myself doing that. We also have many, many students who are just good people who want to understand something about some other part of the world, and it makes sense for them to want to understand Latin America because it's nearby and because Latin America is coming here more and more. There's this phenomena of what I call the *re-conquest*. Indigenous people from Mexico are now all over the South. I think more and more people are aware of this population and this culture and the language issues, and they want to be able to learn more about that world. Sometimes they want to be international business people. A lot of students from International Studies come over and get further degrees there. A lot of kids from the Midwest [come]. I don't know why, there's something about Midwest folks. Military people are in our program. It makes sense; I mean they're right here at MacDill. It just

really makes sense for them to study Latin America. They're some of our best students.

G: As an assistant director what are some of your major responsibilities in the Center?

B: I try to be the person who is always open to the students, kind of back up. I do a lot of advising to students. I do a lot of work with the Latino students, students coming from Latin America and the Caribbean, [and] the scholarship program raising the money for them sometimes. I do a lot of community work. Very often I'm on boards or committees planning events. For example, we're working on a Latin American art festival in Tampa. All over Tampa Bay [we're working with the community]. We're working with Tampa Museum of Art's exhibit coming this fall. So, we've worked with Pinellas County on film festivals. Any time anybody needs some support to bring, again, the university and the community together on anything Latin American, Caribbean, Latino I tend to be involved.

G: Where do you see the Center in ten years?

B: I see it vibrant, hopefully grown with lots of students, more faculty, more staff, more budget. I see it giving a lot to the university and the community. I think we're on that track now. It's very visible and appreciated, and I think that will pay off and benefit the future students.

G: I have two more quick questions for you. Because University of South Florida is now a Research I institution has that greatly impacted the Center?

B: [No] not yet. We are a grant-writing operation, so we're very prepared to raise money if we need to write grants around research projects, bring faculty together to do research projects and write grants. That's part of what we do.

G: Significant changes in the university that you've seen over the years, are there any

particular that stand out good or bad in your mind?

B: I think the faculty has remained excellent. I don't know if I'm becoming a grumpy old lady, [but] I find students and I think this is not USF, it's national, the climate of knowledge seekers, the culture seekers perhaps they're in the honors college, and I'm sure they are but I don't see that as strong as I did among my generation, and I'm very worried about that.

G: My final question to you, and this is something I've asked everyone sitting in that chair before you, if you could leave a final thought of your previous experiences here at USF; given your unique history, you being a student, leaving the university, and then returning and ultimately becoming a director of a new initiative at USF; what would you like to leave on camera to future generations, to past colleagues about your experiences at the University of South Florida?

B: I think it's a privilege to have been here and to continue to be here. I think that we should all remember that having an education and universities are sometimes kind of a delicate balance in society. It's something that we really need to protect. I've seen that go up and down. I find that, at the moment, we're at a delicate point. I would want to inspire everyone, students, faculty, staff; now and in the future to always defend [and] protect this wonderful, important institution in our community.

G: Maura, I want to thank you very much for your interview.

B: You're welcome, it's great to be here.

End of Interview