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## Victor Crist oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, March 12, 2004

Victor D. Crist (Interviewee)

Mark I. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

### *Biographical Information*

Mr. Crist was born at Mercy Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana and was a member of the seventh generation of his family to live there. He spent the first five years of his life in New Orleans, but moved after his biological father passed away in 1960. His father was a medic in the Pacific theater of WWI and died from war related wounds. His mother, who had a degree in nursing, met another military man in 1962, got married, and moved the family first to Washington for six months and then to Pakistan. He spent three years at schools in Pakistan. One of them was a convent school on an island where they had to go out in a four-wheel drive vehicle, which could only take them out to school when the tide was out. When the tide was out they would go to the school and when it went out again they would return to the mainland. It was a French convent and the nuns had similar habits to the ones in *The Flying Nun* television show. During this time his family traveled through the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.

He returned to the United States around the age of nine and lived in Louisiana for a few years until his father got transferred to MacDill Air Force Base to set up the Intelligence Unit of Strike Command, the earlier incarnation of Central Command. His father retired in 1968 and they decided to stay in Florida. The family lived on the beach on Treasure Island.

Mr. Crist's family is part Scottish, German, British, French, and Italian. There are so many different types of heritage and so many different ethnicities represented that he can see legacies from other generations when he returns to New Orleans.

### *Coming to Tampa*

He was around eleven years old when he came to Florida. The first thing Mr. Crist noticed was the heat. It was hot in Pakistan, but it was a dry heat and they took naps during the hottest part of the day. When they returned to the United States, especially in Louisiana, it was both cold and humid. When they traveled from New Orleans to Tampa, they took U.S. 19. It had just been built and there was nothing on that road for miles. They were towing a trailer. They were going to camp out on the ride down, but the car

kept overheating, the air conditioning didn't work and he and his sister were "just drowning in sweat." All they remember from the trip was "mosquitoes and heat."

#### *Parents on school*

His parents believed that education should be well rounded. His father thought that athletics and physical education were important. His mother was involved in public service and cultural matters, so they both thought that the kids should be exposed to both aspects of learning.

#### *Piano*

Mr. Crist started studying piano at four. By the age of ten he was competing statewide and by thirteen he was competing nationally. Everyone thought he would be a concert pianist, but he became interested in dance and singing.

He met a girl in 7<sup>th</sup> grade named Angela who wanted to be an actress. He taught her how to read music and swim and she taught him dancing and French kissing. She was his campaign manager in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Students were selling candy bars and the money was going to athletics. They decided that Mr. Crist should run for treasurer and divert the funds to arts. Angela and his sister were the campaign managers, and he beat the most popular cheerleader with the most popular boyfriend. He diverted half the money to the arts and the athletics department got the other half. Angela went on to be a "movie star" and in 1995 she was recognized as the top black film actress in America. He came onstage while she received the award. Her name is Angela Bassett and she is "a fine person."

#### *Extracurricular activities*

Mr. Crist took karate and studied boxing, wrestling, track, swimming, diving, scuba diving, and boating. He was also a sea scout and was active in music, dance, theater, art and many non-profit organizations. They helped feed the hungry, or took part in one of the eighteen different Pinellas County civic groups that his father helped start upon his retirement. His childhood was busy, but it was very fun and active. They were allowed no more than two hours of television a week. They were allowed five minutes on the telephone and no more than a cumulative of thirty minutes a day.

#### *School*

In Tampa, he started school at Gulf Beach Elementary on St. Petersburg Beach, then Azalea Jr. High School, which is where he met Angela. For high school he would have gone to a certain school, but it was the first year of integration and there were a lot of riots and fights, so they went to private schools, either Bishop Barry or Admiral Farragutt. The former being an all-boys Catholic school and the latter being an all-boys military school. He decided that since Bishop Barry was going to turn coed he should go there. He'd have to bring two pairs of underclothes to school because he would be drenched with sweat by the end of the day.

### *Problems with reading*

While in school, Mr. Crist had a “physical challenge,” which required a lot of tutors helping him with reading. Between his junior and senior years of high school he went for a summer program at Eckerd College. The program was for advanced students and there was a specialty program for those who had trouble reading. They diagnosed dyslexia and a very acute focus, which combined made it very difficult for Mr. Crist to read. The counselors thought that it would be good for him to seek a trade that would not involve much reading.

### *Crist starts a boating business*

At the time he had started a business, which was doing really well. Two of his friends dropped out of high school to run the company, but his parents would not allow this. He still worked there, but his friends ran everything. The business was called Victor’s Vessel Valets. He had the attractive cheerleaders and the big football players clean yachts for wealthy people. Eventually the enterprise grew to Gulf Coast Boat Cleaning and they made good money and had a lot of fun.

### *Thinking about practicing law*

Mr. Crist had an uncle who was vice president of legal affairs for Proctor and Gamble in Cincinnati. Both of this uncle’s sons went into law and he had another cousin in entertainment law. Mr. Crist liked the idea of entertainment law. He became active in the debate team and actually took first place in the state competition for persuasive speaking. He came in second and third in the nationals in two different categories. Trial law seemed like a good idea.

### *SPJC and USF*

Mr. Crist enrolled at St. Petersburg Junior College. Although he had the grades to go to other schools, he still wanted to test his reading skills. At the time his mother was reading his textbooks to him and he wanted to test his independence with reading. He did well at SPJC and transferred to USF. He may have gone to Tulane, but he was engaged at the time and his fiancé did not want him to leave. He intended to go to USF and commute to his reader (still his mother) and stay with his girlfriend. That relationship did not last more than another year, but his mother did remain his reader. He would buy two sets of textbooks and record his lectures. He then sent the recordings to his mother, she would type him notes and then she would record the chapter on a tape and send it to him. He ended up with a 4.0 average in his major. He got two degrees and a minor. All in all, Mr. Crist did three years at SPJC and four years at USF. When Mr. Crist graduated he had full-time credits in three different undergraduate degrees.

### *Deciding on a major/minor*

He started with a major in business and political science/pre-law; he also took a lot of communications classes because of the debate team. He got the opportunity to work an internship with an attorney. One of his professors needed someone to help with a difficult case and he got to learn a lot from the program. He also learned that he didn’t want to do be a lawyer. He was three years into his program. The primary reason was his eyesight. He had to do a lot of research on his own, which was difficult. Now he

wasn't sure what he wanted to do. He took more and more classes in communications and decided to stay on another two semesters and get a second degree in communications. He had two great professors that thought he had a skill for communications, and urged him to stay in a field that utilized this skill.

#### *Activism on USF campus*

He spent a lot of time as an activist on campus. There was one important issue to Mr. Crist: they wanted to get affordable quality housing on campus because it was really lacking. A group of students created an off-campus housing union so off campus students could collectively bargain with landlords. The off-campus housing agency at USF came about as a result of this. They also got Legal Aid, which was originally a lawyer who came and talked to students, to expand so students could deal with their landlords collectively. They wanted to "provide a vehicle where students could actually discriminate against slumlords." They published a blacklisted collection of preferred properties but the lawyers would not allow that. They created their own publishing company to publish an off-campus housing referral list. They sold advertising to get money, but when they sold this advertising it became an off-campus lifestyle magazine with preferred listings in it. They sold a lot of advertising and everything was going really well. Soon all their clients wanted them to design ads and billboards and cable television spots. Around this time the students realized that they had an ad agency. Mr. Crist decided that he belonged in advertising. He reincorporated the company as Metropolitan Communications Incorporated, brought people from other firms, and "the rest is history."

#### *More business adventures*

He had sold his interest in the boat cleaning company and he went into a partnership in a condominium conversion company. His partner knew about the condominium aspect and Mr. Crist had startup money and kept the books. When he came to USF, it was too hard to do schoolwork and the work with the condominium company, so he sold his interest in that as well.

#### *Teaching dance*

For about ten years, Mr. Crist worked as a model and at a dance studio. He used his background in dance to develop dance steps to teach people at happy hours.

#### *Study schedule*

During this time, Mr. Crist had set studying hours that nothing could upset. He only got about four or five hours of sleep, but even today he schedules hours in the morning where he does his business. He believes that an amount of time needs to be set aside for work and this time cannot be infringed upon.

#### *Fraternity*

In his senior year, Mr. Crist's girlfriend's best friend was in a sorority and they found that he could speak like an auctioneer. He got to know the guys in the Sigma Chi fraternity and realized that the one thing missing from his college days was living on campus. His friends were off-campus and he wanted to have an on-campus experience so he joined the

fraternity, which added a year to his schooling, simply because he didn't want to leave. They didn't tell him the fraternity was in financial trouble. He became senior vice president, and the only other pledge from his class, became his "right arm." They redid everything and transformed the entire organization. The fraternity even re-elected everyone. They changed direction. Within six months, the president had to step down because of his grades and Mr. Crist stepped in as President. At the end of the year they were off probation and won the award for improvement statewide. The following year they won the improvement award on the national level. He is still active and is chairman of the housing board. They finally have a house on campus and a "great group of brothers." He is glad to have had an on campus experience and now he feels an immediate bond, friendship, and conversation with all other Greeks that he runs into.

### *Student Government*

He always thought that he would get a degree, get a job, make some money and then retire. After retirement he thought he would become active in local politics. It didn't work out this way. Mr. Crist started a business, made the money, went to get the education and then got elected to public office and now is looking to start a family at the age of fifty.

He got involved in student government because he wanted to help issues that he thought were important. Action is important, not talking. He realized that a group of like-minded people need to get together, identify and build on their strengths and weaknesses and move forward. Mr. Crist got involved in student government because the housing issue was important to him. He also had a love for the arts and thought that the school was not strong enough in the liberal arts to be accredited by the Phi Beta Kappa honor society. The president at the time, John Lott Brown, had a science background and a lot of the money went to that part of the school. Mr. Crist persuaded the powers that be to let him be the advocate. He was very effective and unafraid to stand up to the administration. This led to more responsibility.

### *Sun Dome issue*

The student body president felt that he needed a strong voice on other issues, such as the Sun Dome. The Sun Dome was poorly constructed and the administration took the money to pay the legal fees out of Arts and Sciences fees, which are set aside for A&S fees. They created the Sun Dome advisory Board to which Mr. Crist was appointed. They came up with a solution to the issue and they also created a plan to make the Sun Dome a profitable endeavor. He even got to meet Neil Young and be the personal escort for Neil Young's mother on the evening of Young's concert. He was invited to travel to Miami on Neil Young's bus, but "at the time it wasn't such a good idea."

### *SG wants University Center and fine arts to be priorities*

Mr. Crist probably enjoyed the Capital Improvement Trust Fund Task Force the most. This took a lot of "maneuvering and political strategy." The school was getting a lot of money and they needed to prioritize how this money would be spent. The university president had a "hidden agenda" that the Task Force was expected to pass but they "threw a monkey wrench in." They forged a coalition with the St. Petersburg, Sarasota

and Ft. Myers campuses and each took their three top priorities. Number one was the renovation of the University Center on Campus, which had been number twenty on the list. A Fine Arts rehearsal hall moved from number ten or eleven to number two. These were needed to strengthen the student voice and encourage the development of the performing arts. He feels a lot of pride seeing how far fine arts has come at USF.

#### *Honor societies*

He was treasurer of Mortar Board and ODK honor societies. He was a member of all the top honor societies because his “grades were very good” and his “leadership was very strong.” Mortar Board and ODK were the two top honor societies. Mortar Board is very scholastically based and ODK is also scholastic, but it is also leadership focused. He got to meet many great people through these organizations, including Steve Wenzel, who was an administrative legal adviser and the advisor for ODK.

#### *On being a student*

Mr. Crist feels that his time as a student was “the best time of my life” and “he met some of the best people.” He recommends getting involved in student organizations very strongly.

#### *Mentors at USF*

Looking back on his time at USF he was mentored very well by his debate coach. Mr. Crist also received good advice from the attorney in the School of Business, the Dean of Student Affairs, Dan Walbolt who was VP of Student Affairs, and Phyllis Marshall. These people may have been at odds with Mr. Crist on some issues, but there was a certain amount of respect for one another that was important to their relationship. He learned a lot from them and still hears from them. Dick Bowers, who just retired, is an “incredible, incredible individual.”

#### *Accomplishing his goals as a student*

He ran ten student body races and never lost one. He had a five-year plan and wanted to see that carried out. Even after he graduated, while working as a professional advertiser, Mr. Crist ran five more campaigns with handpicked candidates. They had to have “the skill to do the job, the talent to do the job, and the independent spirit to stand up to the powers that be.” They also needed to stay focused on the five-year agenda. They were able to see the Marshall Center updated, Fine Arts Rehearsal Hall built, and student priorities still remained paramount.

#### *Graduation*

Mr. Crist graduated in 1983. He had wanted to do three years in the Peace Corps and go to Africa or China. He has always loved African art and culture. He couldn't go because he had started a business and was making more money than he ever thought possible. At this time, Mr. Crist had employees that relied on him and he thought it was important to not let them down. When the bottom fell out of the advertising industry, he was able to sustain everything because he had been conservative with his money. His mother and father always taught Mr. Crist that money isn't what is important, it is quality of life that

is important. Money will come if you are good at what you do. They taught him to be fair with people and they will be fair with you.

### *Political Ambitions*

Mary Figg was running for the State House of Representatives. She came by student government. He didn't know anything about her party affiliation and didn't think to ask her because he was not involved in politics outside of school. He was impressed that she came back three times to convince them to vote and to get them to register. Mr. Crist always carried a two-dollar bill for a good luck charm and he gave it to her. He told her to deposit it if she needed to, but it had brought him luck so she should probably keep it.

In 1992, he had long, curly hair and an earring. He started a civic group, the off-campus housing agency. The condition of the university area was so bad that by 1989 the area was the second largest economically depressed area in Florida. Ninety percent of the property around the campus is residential. Of this ninety percent, seventy percent went into receivership and closed when the Savings and Loans went under. People were being pushed away, and at the same time the Reagan Administration's bond money was created. This allowed for New Tampa to be created. Insurance companies and banks were building large apartment communities for restricted incomes. The west side of campus turned into "a large ghetto" making campus improvement difficult. Many different groups merged under the name USF Area Community Civic Association and Mr. Crist became the president. They have over 4,000 members.

### *Election to office*

In 1992, the elections were reapportioned so everything was redrawn. All the politicians were campaigning very actively and the civic group worried that they were not getting enough attention. The neighborhood was low income and they were worried that no one was listening. At one of their meetings they had an old man take off his hat. Everyone put their names in the hat, the old man said a prayer over the hat and whoever's name was drawn had to run for office to bring attention to their cause. Mr. Crist's name was pulled from the hat. He could either run for a County Commission Seat or a House Seat. There were eight or nine people running for County Commission and there were only two people running for the house seat. Mr. Crist asked for advice from some political advisers. At first they were surprised that he was a registered Republican because he was a civic activist with a ponytail and an earring. He has been a registered Republican since he was eighteen. He registered at eighteen because he wanted to vote in the primaries and Republicans were the only people holding primaries on the beach where he lived. His mother also switched parties because she wanted to vote in the primaries. Mr. Crist figured that since he believed in free enterprise it wasn't a very big deal. In order to decide which seat to run for, Mr. Crist talked to political consultants. They all said that he should run for the county commission seat because he was well known as an activist, and a Republican could win it. The House Seat on the other hand was different; no Republican had ever been elected from those precincts, from president of the U.S. to county commissioner. The House seat would require a lot of money, political involvement and connections.

Mr. Crist went back to the organization and said that since the business was doing so well, he didn't have the time put into the election. He decided that it might be good to "sell" the neighborhood as a package and they could get the people to try and make that their priority. They developed the name "suitcase city" and formulated an identity for it.

He decided to run for the House seat and went on the campaign trail. The district was only thirty-three percent affiliated with his party and over forty percent minority. This was a very young/single/female-voting constituency. The average voter was a "forty-one year old, pro-choice, Democratic woman." If he had run on the Democratic ticket he would have lost the primary and been destroyed, so he decided to stay a Republican and try to lose gracefully.

He did have an extensive amount of manpower, and a message plus a solution. He wasn't selling to get elected, he was selling his solution on those who would get elected. The media was so intrigued by this that he got a lot of media time and got endorsed by both papers (the *St. Petersburg Times* had never endorsed a Republican). He couldn't get the Republican Party to take him seriously until the paper endorsements. They did a poll and found that he got fifty percent of the vote without spending any money.

His opponents were powerful and well financed with lots of contacts. It was a very clean race and his opponent was "an honorable person." He had almost 400 people walking around in support of him. Democrats would wear Victor Crist t-shirts and Clinton/Gore badges while telling people why Democrats were supporting him. Independents went out with Perot badges and Republicans went out with the Bush badges. They would all go to Democratic/Republican/Independent houses. The Republican Party came around after the poll. They wanted to come in and run his race. They wanted it to become very partisan and Mr. Crist said "no." He told them that if they wanted him to win they should just give him money and allow him to use his skills as an advertising executive.

At the time Charlie Crist was running for the State Senate and he was raising a lot of money. They found out what Charlie Crist's platform was and asked his campaign to focus on the "Crist" aspect of the campaign, so both candidates were running, but the similar name recognition helped them both out. Both Crists felt that they would not win. Mr. Crist didn't find out he won until the following day after the election and he was shocked. Charlie Crist also won his race.

#### *Going to the Legislature*

Mr. Crist remembers going to the legislature the night before being sworn in. He was worried because he didn't know the process or the people involved in legislation. He called his mother and she encouraged him quite a bit. The first two years were difficult because neither party received him very warmly. He found a former house speaker, a Tampa Democrat, who was on a board with Mr. Crist at MOSI. MOSI had an issue and this gentleman was the point person for government relations and Mr. Crist was the legislator so they had to work together. Mr. Crist asked this man to help teach him the process. He also developed the confidence that he needed and the friendships he needed to work within the system. He realized very early that "this is a process about

relationships, it's a process about honor and respect and if you can develop relationships and they are formed on honor and respect, regardless of party affiliations you will get the help you need when you need it.”

#### *The effect of his time at USF*

His time at USF was very instrumental in getting prepared for his legislative career because there were always issues that needed to be dealt with. He has always loved talking to the students and the faculty here. He already had a relationship with unions and students because he had been and advocate for so long. His relationship with the administration needed to develop. He had always been on the other side of the relationship.

While at USF he learned to debate an issue and develop coalitions and organize, while still respecting opposition on the issue. He developed the skills to persuade people to see issues the way he sees them. USF was a “wonderful venue” for a person to learn book smarts and apply those book smarts. At many universities you are isolated inside the community, but at USF on-campus and off-campus issues were closely tied.

Mr. Crist believes in a “holistic approach” to education, which means students should be exposed to everything you would need to be exposed to. He wants many different lecturers to come to campus and allow students to debate and engage in discussion. He has always advocated for an “open door/open mind” policy with the universities. Mr. Crist believes that we need to “stay focused on optimal learning environments.” He worries that he interacts with the administrators too much and there is too little interaction with students and faculty. Mr. Crist wants to go directly to the faculty and the students.

#### *USF's Multiple Campuses*

This is actually a central Florida campus and not a campus in south Florida. At the time the school was erected it was the southernmost school. Populations boomed, but it was difficult to get here. So people could get access to an education, USF created satellite campuses. Mr. Crist thinks that is a great idea. Communities have grown and there is a greater need for space and curriculum. Mr. Crist is not an academic, but he does know that “we need to stay focused on making sure that quality, affordable, accessible, education is available.”

#### *USF versus FSU and UF*

His greatest influence on campus is the capital projects. He has learned the appropriations process and has helped bring a lot of money to the school, which has been tough because of the relationship FSU and UF have with the state. The way USF is perceived among legislators is changing because there are more USF graduates in the Senate. The older the school becomes the more graduates are placed in positions as community leaders or in the political area. USF, UF, and FSU all have great quality educations and facilities. The institutions differences are in age and alumni placement. USF is “coming of age” and because of this they get more attention and resources. It is a

respected institution and the president is very visible. The research is known around the world.

#### *Projects Mr. Crist is working on for USF*

Mr. Crist has worked very hard and has helped raise over \$150 million to get Capital Improvements and programming at USF. He believes that his legacy will be tied to what he did around the campus. The university is as good as the professors and the students, but the communities around the school have to be good communities in order to attract the best.

He has a couple important projects he is working on now. Mr. Crist started as a liberal arts lobbyist, and has been working for years with the school of visual and performing arts and other liberal arts programs on campus. There is now a project that is a collaboration between USF, McGill University in Canada—one of the top ten research institutions in North America—the University Area Community Development Corporation—a non-profit organization that Mr. Crist helped create in the community—and Bay Area Youth Services. The program is called Prodigy. About 1,800 children are in this intervention program, of which the courts send approximately 900. They modify deviant juvenile behaviors and use the visual and performing arts to do this. They hope to prove that arts education helps encourage learning skills. Children engaged in the arts do better in school and after school. McGill is on a twenty-year research project and Mr. Crist helped initiate the partnership. They will begin publishing some articles on their findings this summer. He thinks that his will become a state and national trend and USF will have the copyrights and residuals from this.

Mr. Crist was also instrumental in bringing the new school of music to the campus. He has worked for three years to get the \$68 million required to get the money. He has worked with the Moffitt Center to develop their expansions. The new University Area Community Center Complex has been a project that Mr. Crist has worked very hard on. Over 2,000 people use it a day. There is a new park and a new magnet school with after school programs, which encourage the arts. Mr. Crist has been very busy trying to help the community and expand programs for children in the area. He is also very interested in the Junior Achievement Program because this is what got him interested in business in the first place. The majority of these programs, such as the visual arts school, the Health and Human Services Trade School, the health center, and the developmental center, are within walking distance of USF. He is working on the expansion of the Alzheimer's center and hopes to get funding within the next two years. They need to get satellite clinics for research.

#### *Importance of partnerships*

Mr. Crist is “good at bringing people to the table” and “finding resources.” He feels that he is at his best when “forging collaboratives.” The theme of his discussion today has been partnerships. He is willing to work with all kinds of people and find common ground with them. He tries to leave politics and differences aside and “focus on a common goal and a common objective.” He learned this from his parents. It was

reinforced in his family upbringing and he developed these skills in school and tested his practices at USF. He is using this belief to develop things for the people of Florida.

*USF in five or ten years*

He thinks that in the next ten or twenty years USF “will be one of the top research institutions in North America.” The school is already an “excellent research institution” and the school’s urban setting gives a “strong base outside of campus to forge collaborations.” “The research developed and the application of that research” will “make USF international.”

*Victor Crist in five years*

Mr. Crist wants to get married, start a family and “be a dad that’s going to be able to focus” on his children. His life ended up “upside-down.” He began with a career, which has brought him an opportunity and experience to share with his kids. He wants to be “the very best dad that a man could ever expect to be.” He wants to “cultivate the love for humanity and the desire to achieve” in his children that his parents instilled in him. He hopes his legacy lives on “not through a building or a program,” but through his children and their children.

*End of Interview*