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Adrian Cuarta oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, June 16, 2003

Adrian Cuarta (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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

Narrator: Adrian Cuarta (C)
Current Position: Director of
Physical Plant

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Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg (G)

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Library

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TRANSCRIPTION

G: Today is Monday, June 16, 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 the university history. Today we will be interviewing Adrian Cuarta, who came to USF in 1980 as both a student and a superintendent for utilities of physical plant. Currently he is the director of physical plant. Good morning Mr. Cuarta.

C: Good morning.

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

C: Well we arrived in Tampa about 1957, and of course at that time there was no university yet, although I think it had been started. But the campus had not started construction yet. My family moved here from New York in 1957. We moved to West Tampa and I started school there, which we stayed the rest of our time in Tampa. As a matter of fact, my mom and dad still live in the same house in West Tampa. So we grew up in this area, and of course there wasn't anything out here. [There wasn't] much of anything but sand, and we never really took any time to come out here because there really wasn't anything to

see. I came out to the university for the first time in approximately 1961 or 1962. As a student at McFarland Park Elementary School we took a field trip to the brand new University of South Florida Planetarium, which used to be in the math/physics building, one of the first buildings built on campus. I remember Dr. Carr, who was the only one that had ever run the planetarium, was the professor who put on the show in the planetarium. As students in a fourth grade class, we were bussed out here to see the planetarium show. I can remember that time as very interesting for us because we'd never seen anything like it. It is interesting to note that many years later, in 1980 when I came to work at USF, Dr. Carr was still here and he was still doing his planetarium show. Of course when Dr. Carr retired, the planetarium closed up because there wasn't anyone else to do it and he was the only one who knew how. So I think the planetarium was donated to MOSI. It's still going, but it's across the road now at the Museum of Science and Industry. That was probably my first contact with the University of South Florida.

G: Do you remember what the campus looked like?

C: Well in 1962, as far as I can remember, there were only a handful of buildings. I know we drove straight to the physics building in a school bus, but I believe there were probably five or six buildings. That's all there was at that time, and a lot of open space. We didn't spend any time on campus being fourth graders, we just went to the planetarium and saw the show and then rode all the way back to west Tampa, which was a long ride in those days [because] there wasn't much of any roadways to take us here. I don't recall the route we took, but it clearly wasn't an interstate ride or anything like that.

G: Being from West Tampa, what kinds of things were you hearing in your community about the university? I'm assuming that coming from an immigrant community, the idea

of a university was a pretty significant one, especially in those early days. Can you talk a little bit about that?

G: Yeah. I think that no one really knew what to make of the university. It was brand new, so you really didn't have a whole lot of conversation about USF as an institution. I don't think anyone really understood what it was going to be. The notion of a university was still pretty foreign to most of us. My parents, who had not graduated from high school, didn't really have a sense of what a university meant. Of course living in that household and being our age we didn't really know either. I think getting through high school was probably the most significant thing for us and our parents. So the notion of universities, I think, was pretty foreign. Again, the University of South Florida was only something that we were introduced to in school and by virtue of our teachers in school that talked about it and brought us out here for field trips and what not. But, at home in our neighborhood it really wasn't much of a topic of conversation. I have to tell you this because [it was] working class families and lower middle class, and a fairly ethnic neighborhood of Italians and Hispanics, that had a lot of county jobs and city jobs and those kind of things. Your hope was to graduate from high school and do something with that. Although some individuals did go to college, most did not.

G: What did you do directly after high school?

C: Well, actually I had applied to the University of South Florida and was accepted and I was going to come here when I graduated. Unfortunately, with the war on, a lot of us had draft numbers that were pretty low. I'm trying to remember, [but] I believe mine was number fifty-seven. Normally you would be drafted if your number was somewhere between 100 and 200. For those who weren't around for that, it was really a lottery

where on national TV they had a particular date and they would reach into a bowl and pull out dates. If you were eighteen years of age and they pulled out your birth date, the order they pulled it out was in the order you'd be called. So you would watch it on TV and they pulled the numbers out and the dates out, and then you would then expect to get a notice. My friends and I, who were in high school at the time, had to decide [what to do] when our dates were pulled. Either we were going to maybe get drafted and go into the army, or [we could] try to go to college and maybe get a deferment, which was possible in those days. When my number came up I looked at it and said, well, I don't know if I'll be eligible for deferment. I really don't want to be drafted in the army, [but] if I'm going to go, I just assume choose where I go. So some friends and I went down and we signed up. I signed up for the U.S. Navy, so when I graduated from high school, I went off to the Navy for four years and was stationed out west in California because we went from there. The war was in Southeast Asia, so we were out west where we took our deployments into that area for the war. I spent my four years pretty much in California. [I was] going overseas, but based out of California. And then I would visit here once in a while, but of course it was so far away it was hard to do that. Then when I got out of the service, I spent a few years in California working. After about 1978 or 1979, I decided to come back home. My family was still here and [I] decided we should move back. I moved back here in about 1979 and was looking for a job and ended up finding this job here at the university. I was hired in 1980 to be the utility superintendent, so that's really where I started back in my hometown. As long as I was working here I decided I should get my degree. I'd already started college in a variety of places out in California, but I wasn't finished. So I went ahead and started here and I had about three years to do. It

took me about three years, and I graduated from the College of Business Administration here at USF.

G: I want to go back to a couple of things that you said. First of all, in your last year of high school, applying to USF, why did you apply to USF? Was it because it was a local university? Other friends were doing it?

C: I think it was just a local university. It's interesting, I think, because normally I've seen families where the parents don't graduate from high school, so the next generation of children graduate from high school, and then it's the next generation that go to college. In our family it was a little bit different. My parents didn't graduate from high school, but all their children went to college and graduated, so it was kind of unusual. I think we didn't have that culture of going to a university, so when the notion came up of where you should go, it wasn't like we were spending [a lot of time deciding] like a lot of kids do nowadays. I know my son is going to be going off to college [soon]. For two or three years you look at universities and colleges and you get books and you study them, [but] none of that happened. It was a matter of coming down towards the end of your high school career and saying, well what are you going to do? So a lot of my friends were going off to various colleges, so I decided I guess I need to do the same thing. [There was] no notion of leaving to go somewhere else. It really didn't make any sense. Why would I go off to another university when there's one right here and you could be home with your family and all your friends? So I applied to the university. Of course back then, when you took the Florida twelfth grade test, if you scored a certain number you were automatically admitted to Florida universities. It was a pretty simple matter then of saying, okay, I'm going to go to USF. That's kind of how it came about. There wasn't

any study involved. It wasn't like I got out the books and compared USF to FSU or UF. It really was just a matter of you had a university that was right down the street and it made a lot of sense to come here.

G: When you returned in 1979, after going through war and a lot of adult experiences, how did you hear about the job for the superintendent for utilities?

C: Well I came back to Tampa and to my surprise USF had grown a lot. Being all the way out west, you didn't hear about USF; no one heard about USF. So when I came back to Tampa, I started looking at major employers. In looking at major employers the university came up as a major employer. I hadn't really considered it before. Actually when I moved back here it had never really occurred to me that USF might be a potential employer. I think you tend to think about universities more in the academic issues. Like if you're a faculty member or something like that, you would think to seek employment there. I don't think it ever occurred to me that the university was a place that had all kinds of employees that did all manner of jobs. I believe I saw the ad in the paper, but I'm not sure about that. It's interesting. The other day we had a retirement for one of the human resources employees. At his retirement I saw another employee who's been here a long time, and that employee was the first person I spoke with when I came here because he was in HR at the time and his job was to pre-screen applicants who wanted positions at the university. So I remember talking to James Lewis. I saw him the other day and he and I were talking about the [fact that] he was the first individual I spoke to at the University of South Florida back in 1979.

G: What is the responsibility of a superintendent for utilities?

C: Well the superintendent is basically a department head, and that's one of the departments

in the physical plant division. The physical plant division is a large division that has ten or eleven departments, and one of them is utilities. The utilities department is like your local utility in town; it's almost like Tampa Electric. They're responsible for providing all the utility services to the whole campus: water, sewer, electric, gas, drainage, all the things that relate to utility services to all the buildings and all the grounds on the campus.

So that department has individuals that operate those systems and provide all the utility service and does repairs and modifications to the system to keep everything going.

Things we take for granted, like lighting and water that runs all the time. It's a 24/7 operation that pretty much operates invisibly if they do their job properly. It's one of those jobs [that] if you do it well, nobody knows you're doing it, which is interesting.

The reason I was hired for that job is because my experience had been in that field starting in the Navy, that's what I did there. Then when I got out of the Navy, I worked for some corporations out in California doing the same thing. My experience is what brought me to this job here.

G: Now in addition to being the superintendent, you were also going to school.

C: That's correct.

G: Did you go to school through the GI Bill at all?

C: Yes, exactly. One of the benefits of working here was that I could do some fee waiver for courses. Also, in coming to school at USF, I was able to utilize my GI Bill that I had gotten from being in the service. So I did use all of my GI Bill to get through my education here. It was interesting. I don't know about today, but in those days you were required to go to class. If you missed two or three classes in a semester you could lose your benefits, so they kept close track of your attendance and all that. It wasn't a

problem for me, but it was something that they were required to do. But the other thing at the university that was very good was the fact that I was able to work here and being on campus made it easier to go to school. Plus I also had the benefit of having a lot of contacts to make getting through school easier. In other words I could find out what I needed to do or not do, [or] how to register for this or take care of that. The VA office here on campus was very helpful to veterans and doing that made it easier. Plus working here also, I would go to classes in the evening, but instead of going home I would just stay in the office until it was time for class, a 6:00 PM class or whatever, and then go to class and drive home afterwards. So I was able to do that. A lot of times I'd be able to go to the library at lunch time or take care of things, or if I had to talk to a professor I might be able to do it during the day time. I was on campus so it made it extremely [easy]. I don't know that I would have been able to get through it otherwise. I would hope I would, but I think I had a clear advantage to a lot of students who had to work full time and go to school as well. I was taking ten or twelve hours a semester as well. The minimum I took was ten, and some semesters I took twelve. It was intense, but I was determined to get through it without spending ten years on it.

G: And you were in the College of Business?

C: Yes, that's right.

G: So you got a B.A. in management?

C: Yes.

G: You mentioned the VA office. What kinds of help or assistance did they provide for former veterans? Were there a lot of veterans going to school at USF in the 1980s?

C: I think, in answer to your first question, they were the folks that helped you through the

paperwork. So when you first came to USF and you wanted to go to school and you wanted to draw on your GI benefits, they were the first place to go and they were very good at making sure that all your paperwork was in order. As you can imagine, the federal government is probably even more intense than we are here for paperwork. They helped you through that process and helped you make sure you understood what it took to continue your eligibility and how many classes you had to take and how all that process worked. That was very important. But they were always there at any time if you ran into any difficulties. I was fortunate. Being on campus, working here, made it real simple [for me], so maybe my experience is not typical. I think that if you were someone who didn't have the benefits I did of working here, you would clearly be challenged to be able to do what I did in the time frame I did it in. I'm sure that they provided assistance to others in a more intense fashion than I needed. I didn't need as much because I was here and I had a lot of help from a lot of folks. My superiors and others were always very supportive in my efforts, and that helped a lot. I think that as far as other veterans [go], I really didn't know. A lot of them in my classes? I don't know. I don't recall that being something that anyone advertised. You've got to remember, I think, that the war was not very popular. I like to tell the story about how the difference between the Gulf Wars of recent history and now, thankfully our service men are considered heroes and they're applauded, as they should be, for their efforts. But in our day that's not something you talked about. It wasn't something you talked about you were involved in. People didn't wear uniforms proudly or any of that kind of stuff. Consequently, I think it was this thing that people just tried not to think about and talk about very much.

G: In terms of what the campus looked like in the 1980s when you returned, what did the

grounds consist of?

C: Well it was pretty much grassy open spaces. Mostly grass. Most of the sand had disappeared by then [and was] covered over with grass and some trees. [It was] clearly not the change that has occurred in the last ten years, but even in 1979 it was pretty barren and open. Of course the challenge was getting to and from class in the afternoon in the rain and the heat. I hear a lot of that conversation, but I guess from my standpoint I wasn't that critical of it. I realized, even back then, that for a university, which in 1980 had clearly not been there very long, it takes a long time to develop an atmosphere, an environment, a culture, and all that kind of stuff. I wasn't critical of it. I understood the kind of time and effort it takes to build something. The University of South Florida had a phenomenal growth; even at that point we had a come a long way. I think where we are now really staggers the imagination because I don't think anybody considered it back then. When I first came to work here I believe the Sun Dome was under construction, but previous to that I think the business building was the last building built. There really wasn't much construction going on. You didn't get a building very often. We're kind of used to seeing construction now, and people talking about this building and that, but back then if you saw one building every few years or something that would be really a big deal. There wasn't anything out there in the world of really big landscape projects, which is something we see now. Martin Luther King Plaza, I think, was the turning point for the campus in the notion that you needed to develop the external environment and connect it to the internal environment in order to bring it all together into an environment that people would enjoy. I think that's worked successfully. But previous to that I don't think anyone was focused on the idea that you needed to have an external environment

that was appealing. I think Martin Luther King Plaza project really made that change to the environment. People now start to appreciate that and want more of it, which is a great thing.

G: In terms of how the physical plant was structured in the 1980s, can you talk a little bit about the different divisions?

C: Yeah. In 1980, I think it was the typical model. It was all centralized where you had everything operated out of one area in our place north of campus. Individuals were dispatched, if you will, as needed, when calls came in. 1980 doesn't seem that long ago to me, but it's interesting to note that when I came here in 1980, we still had dial telephones. We still had rotary telephones; we didn't have push button phones. There weren't any computers of course. Some areas did have a terminal that was hooked to the main frame, but for most folks, especially in physical plant, it was all very low tech. You wrote things on pieces of paper, and hopefully the pieces of paper wouldn't get lost. But you really couldn't track anything. I'd probably say customer service was pretty bad. It just was a whole different environment and, I think, a different attitude as well. I think the attitude of state employee, public employee, was pretty prevalent at the time. The notion that, well, you're not paid very well, therefore you can't expect too much, was pretty prevalent as well. [It was] not a good environment, that's for sure. I don't want to be critical of the folks who were here at the time; it was just the way it was at the time. [It was a] different mind set. The whole customer service thing had really not hit yet. I think, as we all know, that all that came from the Japanese move into the auto business, which they learned by our example and ended up beating us in many ways. So that change took place later. But I think the attitude was laid back. The nice part about it was

that it was a smaller family environment. The employees were more connected, they spent a lot of time together, they celebrated more together, [and] they did a lot of nice things in that regard. Now I don't think they were necessarily very productive in those days. I think it just comes with the size of the institution. Now, of course, we're a lot bigger, we have broader responsibilities, [and] we have teams of people and they have certain areas of the campus they're responsible for. So we've gone to that model. Also I think the environment is one where people are a little more concerned about the social aspects of work. There's a lot of pitfalls these days to the socialization at work and I think that has put a damper on things a bit. It's still a great place. Folks still get along well, do well, [and] love working here. I think the interesting thing about the university, and I was talking to someone the other day, is that I recently went to a little retirement celebration for a lady who was one of the first employees here. Rose Maglinte is just now retiring. Rose has put in forty-three years, so she came here in 1960, and I believe she was the first wave of employees. So it is interesting to note that you actually know someone who was the first employee and is retiring, even though I wasn't part of that first wave [but came] much later than that wave. But it's interesting to go to a place where you actually have employees who you talked to who started here. For instance, Phyllis Marshall was someone that I knew quite well from those days who was still working here. It's also interesting to know someone whose name is on a building who's quite famous. Phyllis is still with us thankfully and she still represents the university. She was one of the first employees at the university when she was working in the University Center. I saw Phyllis recently and reflected on that as another interesting part of the history of USF, that we still have a lot of folks who started this place. They're still with

us. They're still here. They're still around and they're still involved. I don't know how many institutions are like that, especially after forty-three years. I think it might be pretty rare. We have this living history going on that you can actually talk to someone who was there at the beginning. You can't do that with Harvard or University of Florida after 130 years or whatever it is, but we can do it here. I think that's an advantage for us. I think we have a better institutional memory because of that.

G: You've been here now for quite a while, what major changes have you seen in physical plant within the last twenty-three or twenty-four years?

C: I think the biggest change is the focus on customer service. I think we have, through a lot of hard work, changed the notion that we are low paid, low skilled, and that we can't provide service to people and we can't make them happy and we can't make them appreciate who we are and what we do. That's the biggest change, I think, and that's been the focus for quite some time. I think it's changed a lot. Our employees get a lot of recognition now; they get a lot of accolades. I think it's also related to the fact that everyone at the university has embraced the similar model. The fact that we're getting recognition means that the folks who are receiving the service understand that they are getting services and that it's beneficial to recognize people for providing those services. So that's something we never used to see. You never used to see people going out of their way to write a nice letter or a memo or make a phone call and say, I just want you to know that Mary Jones, custodian, is doing a wonderful job. We're so happy with her, she's always here, [and] she always does her thing. [That's] interesting because previously to that you were invisible. I always tell our folks that physical plant work is pretty much in the hygiene business, that is, people don't know you didn't do your job

until you don't do it. That's changed quite a bit. I think people do understand what it takes to do all those things that maybe they don't see very often. They come to work, they leave, and they come back, and the things are done, but they really don't see anyone doing them because it's done at night or it's done during the weekends. So I think folks understand what's happening and what it takes and they're appreciating more, which is really nice for the employees. I think it's made a big difference. But, also I think the other fact is the whole university has moved more towards a model of being competitive in the market place. I think the university is a great place to work because we are competitive. I think we're as competitive as just about any other place in this community. As far as an environment to work in, I don't know that there's much better than here. Recently we were very pleased to be featured in a foundation publication that basically gave credit to folks who contributed, who gave back to the university. I think the document was called Faces of Philanthropy. They came down to physical plant and they wanted to take pictures of us and interview us because we had created a scholarship fund within physical plant that went from \$500 in 1998 to over \$12,000 in 2000, and those are all employee contributions. What the employees do is they contribute to this fund and it's entirely dedicated to physical plant employees who want to get their degree. We've had probably a dozen or so employees going through the program and we've had some graduate. What they did is they took pictures of us and interviewed about a half dozen of the university employees who were working in physical plant and who were taking advantage of our scholarship. It is pretty amazing because most of the contributors will never go to school, they'll never go to college, [and] they have no plans of going to college. They don't give the money because they think they're going to use

it, they give it because they believe that someone will benefit from it within their group. As I said in that article, as we talked about, college degrees are pretty rare in our area. It's funny because you're in an environment that's full of degrees. I mean we have people here with a dozen degrees. So on one hand you have all these academic individuals who are very highly educated and have a lot of credentials, and on the other hand we have our folks who have their own credentials that clearly do not have academic degrees and those kinds of things, and they never will have. But they appreciate the fact that education is important and those of them among them that can do that they're very pleased to do that. It really is kind of an amazing story when you look at it. I've always found that our lowest level employees tend to give more in a charitable campaign than any others, and that's an interesting twist.

G: How has technology influenced the way physical plant is doing their work? I imagine, for example, when you received a dispatch in 1980 it was a lot different than in the year 2003.

C: Oh yeah. I think I told the story to some folks. It's pretty amazing when you think back that in 1984 I went out and said we have to do something. We get work orders come in and they're written on little pieces of paper and they're handed out, and then if those pieces of paper disappear, no one really knows whether the work was done or not or exactly what was requested. I think it was about 1984 that [I] went out and dove right into technology and bought a PC and a printer. Then of course I had to find somebody who knew something about it. I have an individual who works for me now that's been with me the whole time and he was responsible for our automation, if you will, and we've

come a long ways. At that time he was a student here and I hired him because he had messed around with his brother's PC. His brother was a dentist and bought a PC for his business so he said, you're a smart college student, and maybe you can figure this out. So he was working with his brother and when he told me this story I said, well you're the only person I know that knows anything about PC's. So we hired him in. Now we have this massive network and we have probably 250 PC's on desktops. We have a network and we're integrated and in the web and we've got programs that track work orders and all kinds of things. Our accounting systems are integrated with all that business so that dollars are tracked and so forth. I think it's a pretty interesting change, but it wasn't simple—that's for sure. When we first went with the PC and tried to put them on people's desktops, they absolutely, positively, did not want anything to do with that. A lot of our employees had been here many years already and they resisted it. Now of course, when someone's PC goes down it's the end of the world [and] they don't know what they're going to do or how they're going to do their work. But at least back then people weren't really interested in it, and you can't blame them. It was a whole learning curve of learning this new thing that was pretty scary. It has definitely changed our business to the good. There isn't any question about that. I think one of the reasons customer service is where it is today is because we have the ability to respond rapidly. And now with email it's just pretty amazing. It's an instantaneous thing. The downside is everybody expects instant response, so the standards are higher. But that's alright. I think that's a good thing. We've risen to the challenge and I think that it's been a very positive thing [for us] and for the university. The university has grown and I think our name has gotten out there because of technology as well, so that's been a real positive.

G: Particularly in the last ten years the university has gone through some tremendous growth. How has the growth affected the way physical plant does its work? Because there's a larger area to cover than there was in the early 1960s when USF began.

C: You're absolutely right, and you know we have not grown in proportion to the growth of the university. As a matter of fact, we have fewer people now per square foot than we had in 1980. So you ask yourself how are you able to do the work? I think there in lies the change in attitudes, as well as technology. I think the technology allows for fewer employees to do more. I say that because they know exactly what needs to be done. They know exactly when it needs to be done. They know when something hasn't been done, and supervision can also keep track of the employees a lot more efficiently. So dispatching the employees, getting the work done, responding to calls, all those things being automated, has made the difference. But, also I think the fact that we have focused on a higher quality employee [makes a difference]. One of the things that we do in physical plant that we started many years ago that's still pretty rare around here, and some people agree with it and some don't, [is that] any employee that's hired has a full criminal background check as well as a drug test before they're hired. We're talking an FDLE and nationwide FBI background, which is done via fingerprinting. We decided some years ago that the only way we were going to be able provide the service the university needed as we moved up in the world and became an important institution, especially as research one, is that we had to make sure that our employees were the best employees we could find. With that you have to pay them more, which was fine, we wanted to do that and we thought it was important to do that. But on the other hand, how do you ensure that the employees you're hiring are quality employees? I think along with

that, in our community other employers were doing similar things. I think the danger for us was that employees who didn't have good backgrounds, or were someone you didn't want on your campus, could not get jobs at those places that were screening [and they] would end up here because we did not screen. We decided that our employees were in a position of trust because they had access to most areas of campus and to a lot of things that were important to the university. And the safety issue for our students, as well as our staff and faculty, were important to us. So we decided to take on that challenge. We've been doing it for many years now and it's an accepted routine with us, but we believe it has made the difference. So to answer the question how have we been able to do more with less, I think it applies to the philosophy we took on years ago that we want to have fewer employees, better employees, [that are] better paid. We believed that better paid, better employees could be more productive than lower paid, less quality employees. I think you'd say, well that's a given. Certainly. But, I think that concept is one that wasn't necessarily recognized until a few years ago. So I think that changed. Many areas of the university have gone in the same way. I think in administrative services that years ago we decided that numbers of employees is not the way to go. I think the philosophy years ago, in 1980, was that if there was something additional to do, well give me another employee to do it. I think the notion that the existing employees were operating up to speed was not considered, and again, going back to low pay and those kind of issues. I think now what we're saying to folks is we're going to compensate you appropriately for the market we're in, we'll give you all the tools, but that you will be efficient and you will be productive. The employees have risen to the challenge and I don't think it's a problem. Also, I think [with] the screening of employees, we're able to tell our

customers, the faculty and staff, that we've done our best to find quality employees for USF that we can be proud of and that can provide top service. I think that's something that we've undertaken that may be controversial in some sectors, but we believe it was necessary. I think that it's worked for us and that's why we've been able to stay ahead of the growth even though we're shrinking all the time. The recent budget situation does not [help]. Now we just have to come up with a new strategy. I'm not sure what that is yet. If we keep shrinking I'm sure will to get to the point where it will be difficult, but I think our folks can rise to the challenge at the moment.

G: With all the new construction at the university and the new master plans, is physical plant a part of that planning stage? Are they consulted? Are you consulted? Hey, we want to build five new buildings, what's your input?

C: Yeah, we're involved in the process. We work very closely with facilities planning construction, who's responsible for the planning construction of major facilities. We're involved with them and we're involved with the master plan, so we know what's coming. We're also involved in the process that the university has for requesting new facilities, and that's quite a lengthy process. So we know what's being recommended, what's being approved, and we also track what the legislature is doing with some of those requests and whether or not they'll get funded. The good news is that that kind of process is lengthy, so consequently you do have a lot of time to prepare for something that's coming. Usually when a building starts construction you're not going to occupy it for a couple years, and previous to the construction of that building, the planning for that building takes another couple years. A lot of times a building that you see coming out of the ground, we've been thinking about it, planning it, and dealing with it for probably five

years. So it's not new, and by the time it is ready to occupy, we're ready. It doesn't mean it's not challenging, because we never really know if we're going to have additional funding and in what amount to cover that. We don't normally find that out till late in the game, but we still work hard at planning how we're going to deal with that. We work very closely with our friends in facilities planning and construction, and even with the academic affairs, to deal with those issues. Something that has been probably a big benefit is that years ago the university buildings were built from Tallahassee by the Department of General Services in Tallahassee. They had their offices up there and they'd pretty much come down and build a building. I think very few people had a whole lot to say about the buildings in those days. That's all changed. All of it is done locally pretty much. All we do is request approval from Tallahassee, but pretty much everything is done here locally. Involving many people in the process is something that has evolved over the last few years that's been a tremendous benefit. I think previous to that, a lot of folks weren't involved, which led to situations where people didn't understand what was coming or what it was intended for. Now I think there's a lot of buy in with things we're going to do, but physical plant has been at the table for all these things. Sometimes we get some surprises, but it's rare that we get a major surprise. We know what's coming and we're planning all along for how we're going to deal with that.

G: Over the years I'm sure you've seen and been involved with different things happening in different buildings, major problems in buildings. Have there been floods, pipes bursting, etc., that have gone on?

C: Unfortunately, yes, that's true. I think we've been very fortunate. We have not had what I would say [are] catastrophic [occurrences]. Catastrophic meaning that there hasn't been

loss of life, total destruction of a building, or something like that. We've had some flooding and some minor fires and stuff like that, but we haven't had some of the catastrophic events that a lot of major universities have suffered over the years. Just recently I saw a program about the Seton Hall fires where they lost some students, which was an unfortunate event. We've been very fortunate in that regard. We deal with those things on a daily basis; I'm talking about the minor problems with flooding and those kinds of things. But, they haven't really been anything that we can't handle. I think, for us, most of the year what we prepare a lot for is hurricanes. We've been around for a few hurricanes, and the most challenging was Elena because it never came ashore. We spent three days here with thousands of people from the community waiting it out. That was very challenging because thousands of people who are displaced from their home and have to occupy academic buildings is not a very comfortable situation. But our folks rise to the challenge. It's pretty neat to see that they're willing to stay here for days and work and provide services and support for those evacuees that were here. That was a pretty unusual situation just because no one knew whether the storm would come ashore or not. It just lingered out in the gulf and threatened us for a few days, so evacuation order required these folks to leave the low lying areas and they came here. I don't recall how many people we had. I know we had several thousand, and I believe it may have been 3,000 or so that were here. I think the biggest challenge for us was that we had some nursing homes that were evacuated here. In those days planning wasn't as good from the emergency folks, so we had people with medical needs and all that that were sent over with not everything they needed. As a matter of fact, I think one interesting story is we were able to call the local Kmart because nursing home residents were sent here and they

didn't have blankets or anything. They were just put in wheelchairs or gurneys and sent over in their gowns. We were able to get hold of the manager for the local Kmart and told him our situation and he said come on down. He opened the store for us, we went down there, and we bought every blanket he had in stock. We brought them back to the university and used them for these elderly individuals who had come from a nursing home and didn't have any way to cover up or to stay warm. It can get pretty cold in those buildings, especially at night. I think people pitch in. Hurricanes are usually the big thing we face every year, and we're in hurricane season now. It starts in June and goes to the end of November. We always pray, but we hope that it will be another quiet season.

G: In terms of diversity, I've noticed in the last ten years that I've been here many more females working in physical plant. Is that the case?

C: Oh absolutely. We've worked hard for that. I think that we've always had a lot of female representation in certain sectors of physical plant work. [For example, the] custodial department was always classically minority females. We've tried to change that, and we have been able to attract skilled trades females. We have several that are electricians and some others. It's still challenging, but then the market doesn't have a whole lot of females in those areas anyway, so they're hard to come by. We have worked hard to do that in management, for instance, as well, and quite frankly, anywhere else we can find a candidate. We haven't tried to focus on any individual group. We really have tried to find the best employee for the job for the university, but we have found that there are a lot more females in the marketplace who are very qualified. That's very good news for us and we're pleased to find them. We still are challenged in what I call the skill trades for females: plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and that kind of thing, so if you

know any, send them our way. But, we have been able to attract a few, and that's an important thing for us. Part of the changing of the culture in the workplace is by diversity, especially in our business the male/female diversity issue as it relates to some of the more skill trades areas where you don't normally find females. That's where we've been focusing. And interestingly enough, we've also tried to balance off diversity in other areas that have quite frankly been too heavy, for instance, in minority females. We say, well where are the males that could improve the diversity of that area? So I think that's something else that we've tried to look at to make sure that we're balanced if we can be.

G: You went from being the superintendent for utilities in 1980, to the assistant director of physical plant in about 1985, to the director for physical plant in 1987. I know we spent a lot of time talking about the physical plant, but what are your main responsibilities as the director of physical plant?

C: As with most directors, I would say that the overall responsibility is to guide the unit, and to guide it in a way that matches up with the university strategic plan and initiatives and also keeps our focus on that university mission. It's sometimes hard for folks in our area to be connected to the university. You look at the university mission, and I know our people read it and go, well I don't see myself in there. So we've worked hard over the last few years to try to put our employees in the frame of reference that says, yes, when you read the university's mission statement or you look at their strategic initiatives, you have to look carefully, but you're in there. These are the words that say to you, this is you. I think we've worked hard at that and that's all been part of that, I think it's impossible to provide good customer service if you don't feel connected and you don't

know why you're doing it. Recently we had some conversations where I was talking to some employees, and I asked them why do you think you're here? Other than just earning a paycheck, why do you think you're here? The employee said to me, well I'm here to mow the grass, that's what I do, I mow grass. I said, well no, that's not why you're here. I said, mowing the grass is what you do, but why do you mow the grass? I think the realization occurred once we talked about it that the grass has to be mowed because we want a certain appearance. This certain appearance will reflect well on the university, will attract students and faculty and researchers in the community, and we'll have more foundation dollars, we'll improve; it does all those things. So if you look at strategic initiatives and you look at the mission of the university, you'll see that you're in there. You're in there because you are enhancing the university's environment, which does a lot of things for the university. So that's the change in mindset that has to go along with changing how we view our work. It's hard because our employees on a daily basis are involved in work that is not very glamorous. It's so far removed from research in some lab somewhere that you have to continually get the message to them that they're part of it, they're part of this whole operation that makes it possible. I think the modern employee gets it, and we've been able to get that message through. But, that's been very important. I think that's another thing of how we do it with fewer people and all that, and that's another part of it. It's because they understand now that if they don't do their job and do it like they're supposed to when they're supposed to, that it indeed affects [the university]. Sometimes the effects are immediate, but the effects may be long term and not positive for the institution. The university's done a real good job of recently coming up with the strategic initiatives and publishing that. We've gone through it and picked

out what do we have to do to make sure those initiatives are successful. Now our strategy and the things we're doing are predicated on the university's strategic initiatives, and then we're communicating that to the staff so that they know exactly what it is they're supposed to do and how they fit in to the overall picture.

G: Two more quick questions. Where do you see physical plant in the next twenty-three years? What direction do you see physical plant? I know that's a big question.

C: We have gotten ourselves more involved in what I would call non-traditional issues on campus. I see the continuous integration of the facilities management, physical plant, whatever you want to call it. Physical plant is a really old term, by the way. It goes back to 200 years probably, so a lot of people don't even know what it means. It just means everything that's physical. The physical world, if you will, our physical environment. We're involved now, more than ever, in crossing lines with many areas, [such as] research [and] information technologies. As we all know, everybody talks about the global community. I think we're having a global community right here. We have to. The only way we're going to be able to do all the things we want to do and be what we want to be is to continue to have integration. What I see is that. I see down the road, years from now, where you won't be talking about physical plant as much as talking about a larger entity, something that is more integrated and isn't as defined into the physical or the non-physical. A lot of what we do is not physical anymore. With information technologies and automation, you can't see it or touch it. I think that's where we're going. Our people are getting more and more involved in all kinds of things, and I think the university is encouraging that. We find ourselves at the table with all kinds of things, whether it might be a search for a new general counsel for the university [or

whatever]. People are starting to include us in a lot of those things because they're starting to see that we have a lot to offer in that regard.

G: My final question, and this is something that I've asked everyone before you. If you could leave on camera a statement about USF, what it's meant to you in your life, colleagues, former students, and being the fact that you were a student and you have this unique opportunity to be a director, what would you want to say about the University of South Florida and its influence on your life?

C: You hate to be trite, but I think opportunity is probably the word that I would think. I think that I moved around a bit, struggled a bit like most people do early on in your life, but I think coming here provided an opportunity that was unparalleled anywhere. I've been very fortunate that I came here at the right time and it was the right place. I've had lots of opportunity and I've met a lot of great people. I think a lot of people I work with are very talented folks; some of the best, I think, in the world. I don't know how I could have gotten a better opportunity anywhere else than here. I think that I try to express to people I talk to, new employees, that you can make your life what you want. If you come here you have the ability to do that. There's just so much here for you. You have to apply yourself, no one's giving anything out here, like anywhere else nothing's free, but on the other hand, I think that the culture, the environment, and the community is one that if you really decide that you want to build something, coming here you can do it and do it readily. The resources are here to do that. One of the things we try to do with our scholarship at physical plant is try to promote that. My sense of it is I wanted others to enjoy the benefits that I've gotten from being here at the university. We have so many employees here, we have so many people here, but they don't go to school here, they

don't get their education. I know it's not for everyone, but you're here and it's right here. It's almost like, you don't have to drive anywhere, you don't have to go anywhere, it's really right here for you and it will change your life. I think that if I was to leave anyone a message, I'd say if you really want a possibility that you're going to change your life for the better, I think you can come to USF and you can work here and you can go to school here and you can do that. It's real and it's possible and there are a lot of examples that you will find here. We're really proud of what we've done. We also feel like we've built something. Other universities that have been around for hundreds of years, I don't know that their employees feel like they've built anything. They came [and] there they were. Harvard's there, it's famous. I will leave here, whenever I do that, having known that we were responsible, and I was to some small degree, of building something that is important. It's been phenomenal really. I don't have any statistics, but [the growth has been] unprecedented, I think, in the history of modern universities and what it's meant for the community, and maybe even to the country at large. I think that that's pretty neat and I'm glad I was a part of it.

G: Thank you very much Mr. Cuarta.

C: Thank you.

End of Interview