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Joybubbles (Joe Engressia) oral history interview by Andrew Huse, August 23, 2004

Joybubbles (Joe) Engressia (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
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Current Position: Former USF student
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Moving to USF

Joybubbles, then known as Joe Engressia (aka the “Whistler”), decided to move from Miami to Tampa in order to attend classes at USF in the fall of 1968.

Initial impressions

Initially, he remembers being impressed by the facilities on campus, though he was, “of course, deflated that there wasn’t phones in the room, being that I’m a real phone artist.”

Academics

Joybubbles was not “properly motivated” enough as a young student to really have a clear vision of what his goals were. Academically, he went from electrical engineering to mathematics to business administration, recalling that he “hadn’t really thought it through at the time – what I really wanted.”

Interest in telephones

He first became interested in the telephone at the young age of three years, when, as he was playing, he declared to his mother that he was “a telephone man forever ... Last year I celebrated fifty years of that ... and I still am just fascinated with [it].”

Engressia’s blindness

Mr. Engressia was born totally blind, as was his sister. Thus deprived of sight, he found an appeal in telephone communications because of “the electronics, the sound, reaching out to people, the technical challenge ... I could learn it so good I could do things with it that people never knew it could be done.” Because he could not write things down, he had to rely upon his memory as he learned various tricks of telephony.

While he was attending school in Tampa, he obtained a book on tape entitled, *The Fundamentals of Telephony*. “I was playing that a lot while I was at USF instead of studying like I should.”

Student protests

While he was a student at USF, Engressia remembers that there was “a lot of passion” about the war in Vietnam, evident in frequent protests and demonstrations.

Spending time at the Holiday Inn hotels

He used to spend a lot of time going to local Holiday Inn hotel swimming pools where he particularly enjoyed playing with children and smelling the chlorine. “I loved Holiday Inns at that time ... Partly it was a place of peace for me ... kind of a different world that I really liked.” On one occasion, Joybubbles even journeyed as far as Jacksonville to stay in a Holiday Inn hotel. “That [trip] was really when I first realized that I could actually move away from home and live by myself ... It was a real kind of a critical spiritual turning point there on Friday, May 30 of 1969.”

Departure

Engressia left USF in March 1971 without having graduated. “I didn’t know really why I wanted [a degree] or what it would do for me ... I wasn’t getting what I needed or what I wanted from the education system ... It was just something that was compulsory.”

Whistling

He really did not participate in too many campus social activities, until, after a couple months at USF, he gained some notoriety as the “Whistler,” a skill whereby he “whistled” long-distance phone calls illegally without being charged any fees. He became quite popular among students, providing twenty-five to thirty students with free long-distance calls. Before too long, a security agent from General Telephone came to see him. Though he does not remember the specifics, some sort of disciplinary hearing was held on campus where he had to explain his behavior. As a result, he recalls being suspended for the rest of the academic term.

Engressia’s whistling became known as “phone freaking,” and spread among various people all over the country who took an interest in the phenomenon.

Calls around the world

On a number of occasions, Joybubbles completed phone calls to himself all the way around the world.

Delta Gamma escorts

For some time, the girls of Delta Gamma sorority at USF agreed to escort Engressia around campus from one building to another. However, after he started getting into legal troubles from his behavior, the girls discontinued their efforts. Forced to make the trips across campus on his own, he remembers having to ask a lot of people along the way for directions.

National publicity

Engressia started to gain national notoriety as “the Whistler,” appearing on shows like Larry King, and conducting radio interviews with stations as far away as Ireland. “It was

quite novel then ... It was pretty exciting ... After all these years, somebody was actually taking an interest in me and it was quite gratifying.”

Engressia believes his IQ was once measured around 172.

Ham radio license

After being encouraged by so many to do so, Engressia eventually went out and obtained his ham radio operator’s license. “But still, it was nothing compared to the phone.”

Phone friends

One of his “big obsessions” currently is setting up local numbers in Australia, so that he can become “phone friends” with people from areas on the other side of the world. He is also now able to access the internet and other features over the telephone.

Name change

As a survivor of child abuse, Engressia decided to change his name to Joybubbles in an attempt to recover the childhood that he felt he never really had. “In 1988 I decided to have a childhood at last.” He first picked the name while spending some time at a spiritual retreat. The name quickly caught on among his friends, and in 1991 he went to court and had his name changed legally.

Ordination

He also at one time obtained a ministerial certificate in metaphysical ordination from the Community of Spiritual Seekers in Florida. “So I could legally marry people if I knew how – which I don’t.”

Closing remarks

“I’m still glad I went to [the] University of South Florida ... Everything you learn goes together to make your life more rounded and interesting ... I think the university experience is valuable ... I like to give back what I can, share what I can.”

End of Interview