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Margaret Fisher oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, July 11, 2003

Margaret B. Fisher (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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

Narrator: Margaret Fisher
Current Position: Retired in 1975 as Assistant to
Vice President for Student Affairs and
Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies
Date of Interview: July 11, 2003
Editor: Danielle E. Riley

Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg
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Abstractor: Mary E. Yeary
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

Margaret Fisher came to USF on 1 September 1960 as the director of women's affairs.

Throughout the course of her tenure, Ms. Fisher had over thirteen titles.

Circumstances that brought Ms. Fisher to USF

She was pinned to the U.S. Office of Education for a research evaluation job in the Bureau of Higher Education. She was hanging around Washington, D.C. She had just left Hampton University, where she spent two years. One morning she got a call from Max Wise, who was involved with student affairs at USF. He said to Ms. Fisher, 'Why don't you come down here?' She decided to come down and take a look at the University.

What had Margaret heard about USF

She was very excited about the plans for the University. She heard a lot about the plans in the Association of Higher Education. She had good friends at FSU and UF. Her friends at both institutions gave good marks to the state, USF, and its students. She was impressed with that. Max Wise was just leaving Florida. Ms. Fisher says that he told her USF is not as bad as it looks and that it is not as bad on the inside.

Why was Ms. Fisher hesitant to come down to Florida and see USF?

She was leery about coming to Florida because she was aware of the political instability, which was characteristic of the state. A state university in Florida was not really attractive to her.

What ultimately attracted her to come to USF?

When she came and looked at the University she was really impressed with the plans and designs of the programs at USF, particularly the interdisciplinary programs, which had been of interest to her ever since she was an undergraduate at the University of Texas. The interdisciplinary programs at USF really attracted Ms. Fisher to USF. She was also attracted to the University because people she knew were involved with it, such as John Allen and Russ Cooper. She had high regards for them.

Ms. Fisher is a member of the class of 1956 at USF

She is proud to be a member of the class of 1956. She was the first honorary alumna that the Alumni Association picked. They honored her when she retired. They chose to honor people who were involved with the University at its creation.

How does an institution pick its birth date?

Ms. Fisher says that some institutions pick the day when the university actually opens as its birth date. USF chose to honor its 50th anniversary by using the creation day as the starting year. She says the two most popular dates for birthdays are the date the institution gets its charter from the state government or the date of the first classes. Also, institutions use the date of its first commencement. It was decided that USF would start with the first freshmen class and work up. However, USF chose its birthday as the year when the University was first planned.

First time she saw USF campus

Ms. Fisher says the campus was scrubland and sandy land.

Sense of excitement in the beginning

“We knew we were here to make the desert bloom and to put a fine university here,” Ms. Fisher says.

1960 hurricane

In 1960 a hurricane hit the Tampa area. Ms. Fisher says it was a strong one. Thankfully, it caused very little damage. Ms. Fisher says a door broke in the University Center. Also, there was a small sinkhole at the corner of the UC. The hurricane almost caused the corner of the building to fold in.

1966 tornado

Ms. Fisher says the 1966 tornado tore up Carrollwood. USF’s switchboard operators were aware of the approaching storm because early on in the day they were receiving calls asking if the University was going to be open. The operators tried the president and could not get through to him. Most of the deans lived out in Carrollwood so the switchboard operators could not get in touch with anyone. The one person they finally got a hold of was the assistant dean of women. The switchboard operators told the assistant dean that she was the only one they could get a hold of and then they asked her what should they do. The assistant dean believed that if Dr. Allen were at the University he would close it for the day. She came to the University and was in charge of it until things got straightened out and administrators began to show up. The tornado took the roof off of Epsilon Hall.

First impressions of Dr. Allen

Ms. Fisher knew Dr. Allen before she came to USF. She liked him. She says once she arrived at USF, it was just fun to be there working with him.

What was Dr. Allen's vision for the University?

Ms. Fisher says that Dr. Allen made it quite clear that USF was to be a first-class university. By first class, Dr. Allen was referring to the University's programs. USF should be a full service university, rooted in the community, and have strong ties throughout the university world both nationally and internationally. Ms. Fisher says that Dr. Allen had a growth-oriented attitude. "USF was to be a growing organic institution. He was very clear about that. He encouraged us to take that approach. [He] had a national mission," she states.

Book written by Russell Cooper and Margaret Fisher

The book that both Russell Cooper and Margaret Fisher wrote is called *Vision of a Contemporary University*. Ms. Fisher says that when President Mackey replaced Dr. Allen there was a discussion about having a 20th anniversary for USF in 1976. When Dr. Cooper stepped down as dean of the Liberal Arts College, Dr. Mackey asked him to assume responsibilities for writing university history. Dr. Cooper began writing the book. Sadly, Dr. Cooper died before he could finish it. In 1978 Ms. Fisher was asked to finish the book.

Ms. Fisher comments on Russell Cooper

Ms. Fisher says that Dr. Cooper's vision was similar to Dr. Allen's. He took an organic view of the University. He was aware of the interaction between the University and the different local communities. He was a good man to work with. He liked to explore new ideas and work with people. He watched other universities grow and learned from them.

Director of women's affairs

She says it was not about a sexual division of labor. She says that they were equally concerned about the progress of both men and women.

Ms. Fisher comments on Cecil Mackey

His approach was more bureaucratic and hierarchical. That was their impression. He was structural. He was trying to eliminate things. He appeared to be in tune with the privatized movement. He was intent on getting the University out of things, which we regarded as valuable and helpful for survival. She did not sympathize with the way he was reorganizing everything. He wanted USF to look like the other universities and have some uniformity.

Budgetary restraints

Ms. Fisher says, "USF expanded more rapidly than anyone could believe, which is one reason why we were always out of money."

Ms. Fisher discusses USF's presidents over the years

She has enjoyed all of the presidents. She says that Carl Riggs was a delight. She enjoyed Cecil Mackey. She says that John Lott Brown had his own style and was firmly grounded in an organic view. Frank Borkowski took a musical view. Ms. Fisher says that Borkowski liked things to be in tune and to chime together. She thinks that the University always had momentum and that all the presidents never did anything to

impede that. “Everyone contributed a lot to the growth. I enjoyed every one of them. I told Castor not to take the presidency, because I thought we needed her in the State Department of Education. She did a good job for us. She did such a good job with community relations. It has been fun watching Judy Genshaft. She really enjoys that job,” states Ms. Fisher.

What is Ms. Fisher most proud of in her tenure at USF?

She used to say she was proud of the trees that were planted in the quad. They planted the whole strip of trees on both sides of the sidewalk from the Student Services Center to the Fine Arts Building. Students were involved in planting the trees. USF could not afford to hire professionals to plant the trees due to budgetary concerns.

Where does Ms. Fisher see the university in the future?

“We are going to be a strongly community-oriented full service university with strong international ties, particularly to the Caribbean and the Americas,” she states.

Any last words that Margaret Fisher would like to leave behind

Ms. Fisher comments on the University, noting that, “It looks good, but it does not look too idealized. What you see is what you get. It has an air of elegance about it,” she states.

End of Interview