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Lianna Fox oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, July 21, 2003

Lianna Fernandez Fox (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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Narrator: Dr. Liana Fox
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at Hillsborough Community College
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Abstractor: Mary E. Yeary
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

Dr. Fox first came to USF in 1964 as a student studying mathematics education. She continued her education at USF, receiving her master's degree in 1980 and a Ph.D. in 1998.

Circumstances that brought Dr. Fox to USF

She was born in Tampa in 1947. When she graduated from high school she did not want to go to college. She wanted to be a beautician and go to beautician school. Her mother was Sicilian. Dr. Fox's mother was so proud of the fact that she had talked her parents in to letting her finish high school, which her mother had not been allowed to do. Therefore, Dr. Fox's mother insisted that she would go to college. If, after going to college, Dr. Fox wanted to do something else, she could. The family then started talking about where she was going to go to college. She is a descendent of Cuban and Sicilian cigar workers. Dr. Fox's family was a very conservative, strict, Latin family. Neither one of her parents wanted her to go away to college. She says that if USF had not been built where and when it was then she probably would not have gone to college. The University of Tampa was very expensive at the time. It was access and affordability that allowed Dr. Fox to go to USF.

How did the creation of USF help immigrant families and people in Ybor City?

Dr. Fox says the creation of USF had a tremendous influence on people in her community. "We are probably just starting to realize that influence even though it has been going on for almost fifty years. We are starting to think back on the things that contributed to our success both professionally and personally," she says. Dr. Fox says the success had a lot to do with the people who they went to school with as well as where they went to school. "We developed a very tight network of folks. We still all get together very often and see each other regularly. Many of our children who did not stay in Tampa are coming back. They're realizing that there is something to say for this really great network of family and friends that has developed here. Most of that developed from our college days at USF," states Dr. Fox.

How did her family feel about her attending a university?

Dr. Fox says attending college was a priority for her parents. “They wanted us to. When it actually came down to it, my first choice was St. Mary’s Dominican in New Orleans, and there was absolutely no way they were going to let me go to New Orleans,” she says. Dr. Fox says that for a lot of other young women the access and affordability of USF was what helped them to be able to go to college.

Dr. Fox wanted to live on campus

Dr. Fox says the big decision after one decided to come to USF was whether to live on campus or drive back and forth from home. Dr. Fox says the greater number decided to commute. Dr. Fox wanted to experience the full university life and live on campus. Her parents were not open to the idea. Her parents agreed to let her live on campus when the older sister of one of Dr. Fox’s good friends, Maggie, needed a roommate. Maggie lived in Gamma Hall. Dr. Fox persuaded her parents to let her live with Maggie. Her parents were okay with that since she was a long time friend of the family. Dr. Fox lived on campus for three years.

Going home on the weekends

“Of course, every weekend we went home with our laundry and went to visit our friends that didn’t live on campus. It was the best of both worlds. You got to enjoy the university experience as much as you wanted and when you got homesick you just packed up your car and drove home,” she says.

What did USF look like in the early days?

She remembers a lot of sand and sand fleas, but no grass. They were constantly being bit on the legs and ankles by the sand fleas. She remembers always being hot. The campus had no sidewalks. She says the campus in the 1960s was a campus of dots. She thinks that USF is now beginning to connect the dots.

University Center

“The UC was the heart and soul of everything we did,” she says. USF had three dorms at the time: Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. Since there was no other cafeteria on campus the students went to the UC with their meal cards to eat. Dr. Fox says the UC was where the commuter students and the resident students got together every day. “There was a wonderful connection there of what was going on on-campus to the people who were driving back and forth,” says Dr. Fox. In the UC everyone talked about what was going on around campus.

University Restaurant

The only other place in the area to eat at besides the UC was the University Restaurant, located on Fowler Avenue.

Did many from the Ybor area attend USF?

There were a lot of other people from Ybor that Dr. Fox recognized.

Gamma Hall experience

It was the first time she shared a bathroom with thirty other girls. She says that was an interesting experience on a daily basis. “That was an adjustment,” she says. There was no smoking allowed in the dorms. In the center of each floor there was a trash shoot where residents went to empty their trash. The shoots went all the way down to the first floor so the trash could get collected. Dr. Fox says that at least twice a week a fire alarm would go off in the early morning because someone had put her half smoked cigarette in the trash shoot causing the alarm to go off. She says Gamma Hall had a problem because some of the residents did not want to get up anymore because they knew why the fire alarm went off. “Our RA’s would always come by and bang on the door to make sure we were out of the room,” she says.

The dorms were single sex.

Dorm curfews

Dr. Fox says the curfew was 11 p.m. during the week and 12 a.m. on the weekends.

Getting in and out of dorms

Dr. Fox says residents signed out when they left and signed in when they came back. If you didn’t get back by 11:00 or 12:00 on the dot, the door was locked and then the residents had a lot of extra things to go through in order to get back inside. Dr. Fox says there was always a way to get back in the dorm. Someone would leave the door cracked or put a slipper in there or something so residents could get in through the back door. “But, this did not happen that much because our RA’s were pretty much on the ball,” she says.

Were residents in Gamma Hall local or from other areas?

Dr. Fox says that residents were from all over. “That was one of the best things that happened to me,” she says. Dr. Fox’s group from home stayed pretty close and shared pretty much the same experiences already. After she spent the first year living with her friend’s sister, the next year she moved in with a friend, Jane Duke, that she had met on the floor. She was from Kissimmee, Florida. Dr. Fox had never heard of Kissimmee before. She says they had the greatest time. “She taught me about okra and tomatoes, and I taught her about black beans and rice,” states Dr. Fox.

How did Dr. Fox get interested in studying mathematics education?

She knew she wanted to teach. She had two younger brothers and she was always pretending to teach them when they were all young. The two subjects that she liked the best were mathematics and Spanish. It was a toss up between the two. She chose mathematics.

Dr. Fox has trouble in mathematics with professors’ lack of support and coursework

At first she really regretted choosing mathematics because there were not many women in that field. The professors were not encouraging to women in mathematics at the time. She also struggled at first because she came from an all-girl Catholic school with only twenty-five girls in her graduating class. When Dr. Fox came to USF she realized that

she was not as prepared in math as the students that went to public schools. She had a lot of catching up to do. Dr. Fox says her grades as an undergraduate were not terrific. She says it was partly because of a lack of foundation, and partly because she was involved in many social activities on campus.

Phyllis Marshall and fraternities and sororities

“Phyllis Marshall was just absolutely wonderful,” she says. Phyllis Marshall was director of the University Center at the time. USF had fraternities and sororities, but they were really just social clubs. The fraternities and sororities were not nationally recognized. Dr. Fox says Phyllis Marshall did a great job at directing the clubs to become national. “She wanted everyone to become national. She did not want any club to be left behind or to be considered undesirable by any national organization. So, until every single local club had a national affiliation, none of us could go national,” states Dr. Fox.

Phyllis Marshall gets students involved

“She took all of us and made sure that we were not just involved, but in charge of running the UC, deciding what the activities would be and how they would go, and directing us to where we needed to go to lobby for any support we needed. She made sure there were leadership opportunities for all of us,” states Dr. Fox. She says it was a great character-building experience. “We were learning not just in the classroom, but we were learning what it was like to be university students,” she says. Dr. Fox says the UC had a family atmosphere and everyone looked out for each other.

Kinds of activities Dr. Fox was involved with

Dr. Fox was in a sorority called Tri Sis. Sis stands for service, integrity, and sociability. Tri Sis went national when Phyllis Marshall directed the clubs to become national. Dr. Fox’s group entered everything that was available at the UC. There was always some sort of contest or homecoming activity to be involved with. USF had an event called Hoot N’ Nanny every year, which was a big folk music contest and festival. Groups could enter the contest and awards were given out at the event.

Homecoming in the early days

Homecoming was very low key. There were no floats, just people driving their cars.

Professors

Dr. Fox says the professors were fantastic. “The professors on campus that were here in the 1960s and are still here are just starting to retire. It is a great time of reflection both for us as we attend their retirement parties and for them,” she says. The professors seemed very professional. There was a distance between the professors and the students. Some freshmen classes were large in numbers.

President Allen’s tone for USF

Dr. Fox says President Allen set the tone that everything was going to be very respectful. She cites his stumps on no football and no intercollegiate athletics as examples. Dr. Fox says the president and the administration were very intent on first making the academic

name for USF. She says the rest has come later. "USF is well on its way to being a well-rounded university," she states.

Did USF students care about not having sports?

She says there was talk on campus about not having sports. She thinks students finally came to an acceptance that USF was in its baby steps stage of building a university.

Student demonstrations on campus in the early days

She does not recall any protests. There were sit-ins. She did not take part in them.

Diversity in math classes

She was one of few females in mathematics courses. She recalls it was generally white males.

Diversity on campus

She does not recall a significant number of blacks on campus in the early 1960s.

Dr. Fox decides to transfer to FSU

One of the reasons that Dr. Fox was open to her fiancé's idea that she transfer to FSU for her senior year was that USF was still in the early stage of building a university. She wanted to see what an older, traditional university was like.

USF versus FSU

She says the experience she had at USF could never compare to FSU in the late 1960s. "What we had at USF was a place that was welcoming, warm, and inclusive," Dr. Fox says. As far as she knew no one really felt left out or unwanted. She says at FSU, partly because it was so much larger, and so many years of tradition built in certain things, students had to carve their own niche. She says even with a fiancé there it was difficult to move there and immediately become part of campus life. She found it especially difficult with the sororities. She expected the type of warmth that she experienced at USF. She decided to not affiliate with a sorority.

Dr. Fox returns to USF in 1977 to pursue a master's degree

Dr. Fox came back to USF in 1977 and received her master's degree in 1980.

How had the campus changed in her decade-long absence?

She says there were many physical changes to the campus. She noticed new buildings, nice grass, and sidewalks. She says USF waited to see where the paths were when students walked from building to building. Then they decided to put the sidewalks where students had carved-out paths.

Age and diversity of master's students

The major difference was the composition of the classes themselves. When she came back as a master's student the classes were very diverse. There were blacks in her classes. Males were majoring in education. It was primarily females going into education in the early 1960s. She says the master's degree students were older than what

you would find at another university. At other universities, many students finish their bachelor's degree and then roll right in to their master's degree. Dr. Fox says many people she knew that graduated with their bachelor's degree when she did were coming back at the same time as her to get a master's degree.

Dr. Fox begins teaching at HCC and USF (from 1980-1995)

Once Dr. Fox received her master's degree, she was hired as an assistant instructor at Hillsborough Community College. After the first semester of teaching at HCC she received a temporary appointment from HCC to come to USF and teach community college math courses for university students who struggled with math courses. Dr. Fox taught intermediate algebra and college prep algebra to students at USF that were not quite qualified to begin their calculus sequence. From 1980 to 1995 she was teaching at USF for Hillsborough Community College. The program between USF and HCC still exists.

After fifteen years she decided to go back to HCC.

Dr. Fox begins a Ph.D. program in 1992; receives her Ph.D. in 1998

She majored in curriculum and instruction. Within the major there is a concentration in the student's particular subject area. Dr. Fox's subject area was mathematics education. She never started out wanting a Ph.D., and says it was not a life goal for her. The community college does not require you to be a certified teacher. "You have to have a master's degree and then eighteen graduate credit hours in whatever field you're going to teach," she says. It was not required of Dr. Fox to renew her certificate after she left high school teaching, but it is something that she always wanted and that she keeps active to this day. "I'm very proud to have an active teaching certificate in the state of Florida. So as I was accumulating hours and recertifying, I thought why don't I put this towards something?" states Dr. Fox. She decided to look into the admission requirements for a doctoral program. She was convinced to apply, and was accepted.

Master's degree experience

She found her graduate experience very different from her undergraduate experience. Dr. Fox's professors in the master's degree program were very interested in her personally and in her personal needs in her discipline. "In the master's degree program professors were very interested in where you were professionally; where you wanted to go, what courses could fill in [your] needs, and what courses might need to be created to fill in those needs. She says the Ph.D. program was even better than that.

Ph.D. experience

She says receiving her Ph.D. was an entirely different experience than receiving her master's and undergraduate degrees. "It was an experience where not only were the professors genuinely interested in your program, but your colleagues in the classes with you were all struggling with the same kind of issues and needs. It was a wonderful camaraderie that developed among the Ph.D. students," she states. Dr. Fox says she still keeps in touch with some Ph.D. colleagues.

National president of the USF Alumni Association

The husband of a friend of Dr. Fox from Tri Sis was on the homecoming committee at USF. Phyllis Marshall wanted to have a return to the 1960s homecoming theme. Her friend's husband told her what a great time they were having planning the event. He thought she might want to get involved and invited her to the next meeting. Dr. Fox went to the meeting and had a wonderful time. "It was great to see Phyllis again and hookup with some of the folks that went to school here in the 1960s. We invited the past student government presidents. We had a wonderful homecoming experience," she states. At the same time, Dr. Fox was president of the League of Women Voters of Hillsborough County. She was serving on a committee for the greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce. Her task was to chair Hob-Knob in the Park, which is a big political picnic that is held by the chamber during election years. When she was chairing that committee one of the people interested in being on the committee was Lauren Taylor, who was the director of the Alumni Association at USF. He approached her and invited her to become a member of the board of directors of the Alumni Association. A year after that he asked her to be president. "I was extremely flattered and very surprised," she states. She worked hard and had the best time during her year as president.

Dr. Fox receives alumni award

Dr. Fox says the Alumni Association has always had distinguished service awards. She was the first recipient of the award after it was renamed in honor of Don Gifford in 2000. He was a friend of Dr. Fox and a student in the 1960s.

What is Dr. Fox most proud of in her many years at USF?

She is so proud of the students she has helped at USF. Students tell her they never would have made it through USF without her class. She says it is very rewarding. "It is a great feeling to know that not just your course [helped], but there was an obstacle that students felt was so huge that they would not be able to go on if they couldn't overcome it," she says. One of her defining moments occurred when she was alumni president. "You're standing in front of commencement and there's 12,000 people in front of you, students, families, professors, and then the entire administration is behind you. You're speaking to them and welcoming them to your university knowing full well that the people standing behind you will come and go, but you as alumni and those future alumni sitting in the audience are going to be there forever. It is really our place," she says.

Last words that Dr. Fox would like to leave behind

She believes the core of this University and the biggest determining factor in its future success remains the bedrock upon which it was founded, and that is the access and the affordability that it has offered not just to the community of Tampa and Hillsborough County, but all the surrounding counties in this part of Florida. "This particular university has served the community of Tampa in a way that universities around the state have not served any other city. If the decision makers continue to keep that foremost in their minds, it will be the most successful university in this state," she says.

End of Interview