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Sonja Garcia oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, January 28, 2004

Sonja Garcia (Interviewee)

Mark I. Greeberg (Interviewer)

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

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Current Position: Retired Curator of Natural
Sciences and Director of the Planetarium
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TRANSCRIPTION

Gr: This is Mark Greenberg, the director of the Special Collections department and the Florida Studies Center at the University of South Florida. Today is January 28, 2004 and I'm with Sonja W. Garcia in the USF Tampa library. We are continuing a series of oral history interviews to commemorate fifty years of USF history. Sonja, thank you for being here. I appreciate you coming in this morning.

Ga: I appreciate being included in what I consider to be really a history event here at the university.

Gr: I want to start with a little bit of biographical information, some questions to talk about where you grew up and where you went to school. Can you tell me about your childhood and your early education?

Ga: It's sort of a mixed bag. I'm one of those rare, native Floridians, which means I was born here in Florida. My family moved during my early childhood to upstate New York. There's a good place outside Rochester, New York called Williamson. We spent most of my childhood there. We returned to Orange County, Florida for high school. I attended Jones High School [and] graduated there in Orlando. [I] went on to Florida A&M

University where I matriculated [in] four years. That was pretty common during those days, now it seems like it's a rarity to complete in four years.

Gr: Let me ask for a little bit, how was it that your family got to Florida? It is rare to be a native Floridian. Less than one third of people living in Florida today were born here.

Ga: I was born in Florida. My grandparents were originally from North Carolina up around Fayetteville. To take care of the family, my grandfather came to Florida to be able to take care of the family. From seven children, my mom being the second oldest daughter, and that's where he ended up, in the citrus industry around Orlando, in Winter Garden, to be more exact. My father was from the Ocala area in West Marion County. They met, got married, and the rest is history. With regard to our family, there are three girls, no brothers. My two sisters still live here in Florida.

Gr: What took the family to go up to Williamson?

Ga: Williamson, New York. My father was seeking work. He was a laborer. When work wasn't as forthcoming as necessary to care for the family, then he accepted an opportunity to move us to Williamson, where he worked with an agency there. After several years of snow and the birth of my younger sister, opportunities presented themselves and we came back home. This is where his family was, my mom's family [also was], etc. We returned to Orange County, Florida.

Gr: How old were you when you came back to Florida?

Ga: I was sixteen. I had finished high school, I just turned seventeen. I was exposed to quite a bit there in Orlando in terms of the teachers at Jones High who had indicated that they saw something in me that they wanted to pursue. I was offered a number of scholarships including, believe it or not, a basketball scholarship. I chose the academic scholarship,

however, and went to Florida A&M University, where I majored in business education and a minor in economics.

Gr: Was college an expectation on the part of your parents?

Ga: Absolutely. There was never any doubt that I would go to college. It was just a matter of where. Again, we chose the academic scholarship because it offered more and my aunt, who of course, is my mother's youngest sister, had gone to Florida A&M University. She was the first in our family to finish college. That's where she went, and of course, that's what I was most familiar with. Coupled with the scholarship, that was our choice.

Gr: You spent four years [there]?

Ga: I spent four years there.

Gr: Tell me a little bit about campus life and the kinds of things you got interested in. As you're working on your college degree, what are you thinking about in terms of a career?

Ga: You know Mark, when I went to college to major in business education, my entire outlook was to teach. That was so traditional in those days for African-American women, just in general. That is the path that I expected to take. This was 1955 through 1959 when I was there. This was in the middle of the civil rights upheaval. We were boycotting buses. So my experience, during those days, I never got to see Tallahassee. Today it amazes me when I drive through the lovely hills of Tallahassee and go through some of those residential areas and see the growth there. It's so lovely. I never saw that when I was there in college because we were boycotting the buses. During those days the dean did not allow us to ride in cars. Can you believe that? The girls couldn't ride in cars. I was pretty much relegated to campus life. That meant classes and the lecturers that came to campus. It was the campus that shaped my experience there in Tallahassee

during those days.

Gr: I'd like to know more about the classes that you took and the way in which your experience at FAMU and the time that you were there shaped your thinking. You're right, these are extremely important times. You're at one of the earlier land grant schools here in Florida that is educating the best and brightest in the African-American community. As you're a student, thinking back in the 1950s, how do you see the future for yourself and the African-American community in Florida? What are your professors telling you? What's your engagement with the community in addition to boycotting the buses? I'm just interested in how those years there have influenced you in an informative experience.

Ga: When I arrived on campus and we were given our schedules, I was immediately thrust into a group of high-achieving women and men. Jones High had a reputation of really producing excellent students in English. I was put into an advanced English class. That professor was so encouraging. She had us feel that we could accomplish anything. This is what we used to write about. This is what actually generated my interest and love for writing. Dr. Thorpe at Florida A&M University instilled that in us. She allowed us to write a lot about what was going on around us. I don't remember her ever expressing views one way or the other as to what we were involved with, but we were allowed to write about it. I remember those essays on experiences that we would write and discuss in her class. With regard to my classes in the College of Business, I believe that it was there that I developed an interest in some of the tenants of librarianship, though librarianship really was not on my mind at the undergraduate level. It was there that I learned the value of organization, research, fact finding, that kind of thing in the real, real

world. I think that it was there that it was planted. Again, it was not librarianship. In fact, I really did not give librarianship a thought until I came to this university.

Gr: While you were on campus, did the changes that were going on in Florida's society lead you to see a brighter future? [Did you see] a future that was still kind of filled with some real issues facing the African-American community? I'm just thinking about the tone on campus and the ways students saw what the future brought for them.

Ga: There was such hope and such resolve among those students. I was never a leader, of course, but we recognized the importance to show support and to be there and to follow the teachings of these people who we felt had strong reasons for our walking. I developed probably my stature because we walked so much up and down those hills in Tallahassee. It was because we thought there was a future in what we were about. For us, having a seat at a lunch counter meant so much [more] than having a sandwich there. It really meant that you can be your own person. You can go wherever your dreams and abilities and resources take you without the constraints that are being imposed upon you. Therefore, it's important that you sacrifice, [that you] walk more, [that you] show up when we need to cheer somewhere or jeer somewhere. That was important. I recall once the students got involved in throwing rocks at a bus. My mom got a hold of that. I received this call. [She said] Sonja, I will not have you involved in what's going on on that campus! I explained to her [that] of course, I would never be involved with throwing rocks, but yes mom, I am going to march with them and going to be a part. She was concerned, but supportive of my decision.

Gr: Is it Reverend Steele [Civil Rights Activist, 1914-1980]?... I know he was a leader in the activities that were going on in the community. I know a great deal has been written

about the Tallahassee bus boycott. You're associating, as we look back on history, with some fairly important and really significant events. I'll ask you to comment with some of the people that you interacted with and memories of people like Reverend Steele.

Ga: Actually, the dean of boys on campus, Reverend Miles, was very instrumental in pulling students together for support of rallies, etc. I don't remember most student activists. These were your student council presidents and your presidents of classes that would actually get to you; that would come to the dorms and let us know when rallies were going to occur. They would be the ones that would circulate fliers. They were more aware of the things that we could and could not do. During those days, you really didn't have free reign to leave campus. We really did not want to get in trouble with our own university administration. We had to plan our activities. As a freshman, I had to be in the dorm at eight o'clock. That's unheard of [now]. When I tell my children that they go, oh mom, you're kidding. Yes. It was daylight oftentimes and we were peering out of the windows. We had to plan our activities around some of the constraints here at the university. We did rally behind student leaders as well as the likes of Dr. Steele.

Gr: As you were getting ready to graduate, what did you look to do? We talked about teaching. The fact that you had also began thinking about librarianship, is there a period between FAMU and USF in terms of your activities?

Ga: Actually, when I was about to graduate, during those days you had an extensive internship. I taught under a teacher at Hungerford High School. This is in Eatonville. This is the infamous, historic Eatonville. It was there that I really devoured everything I could find on Zora Neale Hurston, because I was in that environment and I visited the post office there and I did a lot of those things. Teaching was what I intended to do upon

graduation from college.

Gr: Tell me about your teaching career, the dates, in terms of your graduation and when you came to USF. I don't know, so I want to bring us towards your arriving at USF, but I don't want to ignore the in between.

Ga: Immediately after graduation I remained on campus at FAMU. I worked as secretary to the dean to the College of Agriculture, Dr. Walker for a few months. I took a couple graduate courses. I then accepted a position as business education teacher and editor of the newspaper there in Osceola County at Kissimmee High School in 1961. I taught there for two years. Actually, I met my husband the summer before, who worked at Kissimmee High School, but that's where the relationship developed there at Kissimmee High School. He was from Tampa. He received an appointment to a teaching position here in Tampa. Of course, I wanted to follow. I came to Tampa with him, totally expecting to teach business education at either Middleton High School or Blake High School. When I arrived, both of those positions were filled with other teachers. They weren't about to go anywhere. During those days, those were the only high schools I could work at. I was, by then, pregnant with our first son and didn't want to sit home for nine months. During those days there were these breakthroughs in Tampa. Every now and then you would see an African American out front working in certain positions that traditionally you didn't see them. So I thought, well I felt it's my responsibility, and besides, I need a job. I applied for work at Montgomery Ward, [I] counseled people on credit there at Ward's. The good part about that is that I was in the right place when President Kennedy came to Tampa. Ward's closed the doors and allowed us to go stand outside and see the president. I saw President Kennedy really up-close when he came to

Tampa. I resigned from Ward's and the baby was born. After five or six months, I decided I wanted to continue work towards a master's degree. What better place to do that than right here in Tampa at the University of South Florida. Perhaps I could get a job there and be accepted in the graduate program.

Gr: What were you thinking? Which graduate program were you thinking?

Ga: [I was thinking about] the College of Education. [I was] still [thinking about] a master's in education. During those days you interviewed generally. There was a lady and I interviewed with her. She said that there was a secretarial position in the library. I had done that before. I was looking for something that I thought that my skills were a little bit more than just being secretary. I thought I had been teaching, etc. Again, I wanted to get onto campus. I was sent to the library and interviewed with Mr. Hardaway. I interviewed Mary Lou Harkness and with a couple of other folk. In fact, I came out two or three times and I was offered the position. At the time, I did not realize the magnitude of what had just occurred, but learned about a month later that I was the only African-American person on this campus who sat in an office. Every other African-American person on this campus was a custodian. I didn't realize that. I just needed a job. I was hired as a secretary in the acquisitions department. After three months I was promoted to bibliographer. That's what we called those people who searched the inter-library loans to verify inter-library loans. I did that for, I think, three or four months. Then I was promoted to library assistant. As I moved up and all of this occurred within the first year or so I was here. I kind of like being in this atmosphere. I like the orderliness here. I like being in the midst of the students, watching them come and go. Obviously, some of the librarians liked my work and started talking about, have you ever considered

librarianship? Again, during those days, there were these stereotypes of librarians. It was something that I didn't embrace readily. The person who really convinced me, or the persons, I would say, that I had a future in librarianship was Dennis Robison, he was then the head of the reference department and Marilyn Taylor, who I'm sure you've heard Marilyn was just an outstanding woman in all aspects. She was witty and smart and engaging and just a wonderful person. She didn't fit any of those stereotypes of librarians. [I said] you know, I think I can do this. I took a few courses, and this was before library school was accredited, so I took lots of courses and learned later that they couldn't accept those. Then Dennis and Marilyn starting working toward encouraging me to go to FSU. By then, my young son was an age that he needed a lot of... In fact, I had a second son by then.

Gr: Are we talking 1966, 1967? I'm trying to think of the time frame.

Ga: When we were talking about going to FSU, I'm thinking we're talking 1968, 1969, around that time. My second son was born in 1969. In fact, I was given, from this university, the very first maternity leave. They didn't know how to do it. [They said] you mean, you want to come back to work? I said, of course I do! Somebody found out how to give me five months off maternity leave. The rest is history in terms of that kind of thing for other women.

Gr: Before we get up to FSU, let me ask a little bit about campus. You're here, you arrived in 1963 on campus?

Ga: [I arrived in] 1964.

Gr: [You arrived in] 1964 to campus, so we're just getting ready to graduate the first class.

The university is still very young. What did it look like on campus?

Ga: There was the administration building [and there was] the library.

Gr: Which [the library] of course, was what's now SVC [student services].

Ga: That's true. Then [there was] a pile of dirt where we were going to build the first faculty office building over to the right. I distinctly remember this pile of dirt because we were a one-car family at the time. When my husband would come to pick me up my young son would run up and down this dirt waiting for us there. The campus was two buildings. [There was] space, just lots of space. [There were] no trees, just lots and lots of space.

Gr: [What about] the students? What kind of backgrounds did they come from? Who did you see in the library?

Ga: I saw, of course, mostly white students. [It was] overwhelmingly white students. Every now and then you would see an African-American student. I really remember very few Asian students. This was, of course, overwhelmingly a white campus, if you will. Of course, that's what the faculty and staff was. I was the one person on campus that everybody knew. I would get into an elevator and everyone said, hi Sonja! Of course they knew who I was. It was a welcoming environment. I believe much of that was because I wanted to be here. Everybody had a focus and a mission. A young person here, we're making our mark and that's what the focus was. We're trying to move forward. Again, they knew who I was, but that was not a focus.

Gr: In the late 1960s, then, there was the opportunity to pursue an MLS degree at FSU?

Ga: There was an opportunity to pursue that, but family ties just did not permit. Dennis went to all lengths to get scholarships, contacts with faculty there, etc. It was through that that I really knew how serious he was about my future with the library. I knew that I wanted, by then, to remain here at the university and that I wanted to be a librarian. In later years,

in 1972 or so, I had a conference with Jean Gates. She was always such a model for me. I always thought she was just the epitome of culture and grace and elegance, and she was a librarian! That was wonderful. There are a few others too, of course, but Mrs. Gates always stood out as being the librarian I wanted to be like. I was accepted into that program to assist me in terms of moving forward at a faster pace. I was awarded a grant in aid, which permitted me to work part-time and go full-time to classes. Then my aid was extended for a semester and I was able to work full-time. What I failed to say was it was well paid. I was still being paid while I was allowed to get courses. That's the way I completed my library degree here.

Gr: You did it here and it was after the program here became accredited by the American Library Association?

Ga: Yes, the second time around. After it was accredited, I then went back. I was given credit, only six or eight hours credit because of my work here at the library and some of the former courses I had taken.

Gr: What were you doing in the library at this time? Had you continued to move up in terms of responsibility and positions as you worked here?

Ga: I had. I was given the responsibility of supervising the reserve area of the library. I did that for more than ten years. I was the head of reserve. It gave me such an opportunity to grow here. I arranged it the way I saw fit. Of course, there were guidelines, but I had a lot of flexibility there in terms of having this program support other programs going on here in the library. There really was a period where I feel like that was the position that allowed me to think independently, to grow in respect for the printed word and how you made it available to students and faculty. It allowed me to establish relationships with

faculty here. I knew that there was actually a need for my services and that I could and there was confidence in the job that I was doing.

Gr: When did you complete the library degree? Do you remember your graduation?

Ga: I completed the library degree in 1977. [I] was not offered a position as librarian immediately. One of the problems was by 1977, my salary had exceeded that of beginning librarians. My dilemma was accept a librarian position and a cut in pay, or remain in your position as a paraprofessional. I was not in a position in that time to receive a pay cut. Again, the head of the reference department was very, very understanding and gave me many professional responsibilities of which I was very grateful. I was allowed to work with librarians so that I continued to grow and develop my librarian skills, but still, I did not have the title.

Gr: I guess it would have been just before you began your library program, but certainly while you were working in the library, that the library moved. Do you have memories of the move across what was, I guess it wasn't a parking lot at that time...

Ga: Oh yes it was [a parking lot].

Gr: It had been a parking lot? So you moved south about several hundred yards.

Ga: Of course I remember that. Marilyn Taylor masterminded that entire move. There is not a time that I walk on this campus that I don't look up at that window. We had these old moving vans positioned just right. We had a caravan of book trucks that came out of that window, down a ramp, and right across the parking lot into a designated door in this building and right onto the shelf. It was masterful. I've never witnessed anything [quite like it]. I said to her, you know, you really need to write a book about this. It was incredible. But yes, I was around for that move.

Gr: Was there a lot of excitement about the new building? You saw it going up. They opened it in 1972.

Ga: We moved in here, I believe, in 1975. Of course, we were totally excited. We would come over months ahead of time to just position things mentally. It was a very exciting time here on campus. Our campus was excited for the possibilities of this wonderful structure.

Gr: When you moved in, was there lots of extra room? Did you think you'd ever outgrow the space?

Ga: I really don't recall there being a lot of extra room when we moved in, actually. As the years went on and we became tighter and tighter in this building, it was obvious that we had outgrown the building. There's hope, as there was before, that we would, in fact, receive some additional space. It's encouraging how the space is being utilized here. One of the things, too, with moving into this building is that we moved with some other programs. The building was not totally ours. It was always, where we loved our neighbors, always our goal to have this library to ourselves for the libraries programs. As this came about over the years we have spread and utilized these areas in a very useful way.

Gr: If I recall correctly, when we moved into this building, one or two of the floors were completely unused. Someone told me that maybe it was the fifth floor [that] remained completely empty and it's only in the 1980s that there was movement of materials onto additional floors. Does that ring a bell?

Ga: It does, but I can't really comment with regard to what I would consider credibility. I think I do remember that. We probably separated the stacks from third and fourth to

expand there as we grew. That sounds logical. I can't say that I remember that.

Gr: I wondered if you ever remembered being on one of the floors and it just being completely empty?

Ga: You would think that I would.

Gr: Or maybe it didn't happen. Maybe that's just one of the tales about this building.

Ga: I can remember so many of these shifts. Whether we shifted to a floor that had been completely empty, I can't really verify that, but there are those whose memories are a lot sharper than mine.

Gr: I wanted to ask you a little bit about the people that you worked with, especially the directors, Elliot Hardaway stayed for some ways. Then Mary Lou Harkness was director, I think, for about twenty-one years. Then others, of course, followed her. There's changes in leadership at the top and obviously at the department levels, too.

Librarianship is changing as technology becomes more and more important. I want to cover both of those, but let me ask you about the people you worked with. Do you have specific memories or stories of Elliot or Mary Lou or directors that followed?

Ga: I remember Mr. Hardaway. Of course, my first memory is his hiring me. While he understood what he was doing, I did not. I think it was a historic step for him. He was placing a lot of confidence in an African-American woman that he only knew about through a piece of paper. While that might be form towards those that are viewing this at this time, in 1964, it was not. It was a giant step he took. I admired him for that. I admired him after I learned what the situation was here, to actually have the courage to take that step. I remember he was a real disciplinarian here. He did things around the library that would be just unheard of now. I think about, shortly before he retired, how much

time we would spend to make sure that a sign we would post in the library was correct so it's not to hurt anyone's feelings, if you will, to be politically correct. Mr. Hardaway would walk through the library and if a student had his feet on a desk, he'd just walk by and push them off. It was that kind of thing, don't maul furniture. He was in charge. This was a man who would take his glasses off and look deep into your eyes and make a statement and you believed it. You knew that he was a man of his word. In terms of working with him directly, academically or with my charges in the library, I don't recall ever having to interact with him in that way. With Mary Lou Harkness, I worked more closely with her because my position had changed over the years, being responsible for the reserve. Of course, I reported to the head of the reference department, but I had many opportunities to work with her through that. I found Mary Lou to be very supportive. She always wanted your opinion. It was during her administration that we were really encouraged to participate in the governance of the library. Your opinion mattered. That, of course, always gave librarians a boost because you thought you had a future in shaping what was going on here. Librarianship, in general, we were encouraged to participate with the state and national associations. In fact, I think I was more active with the Reference Caucus during Mary Lou's administration than ever before. [I was active] with the USPS Senate, it may have been called something else during those days. To be active participants in the library and what's going on around you in the university.

Gr: Before I ask the question, let me get a better sense of the chronology. When did you leave the library?

Ga: I never did until I retired.

Gr: That's what I meant.

Ga: I'm sorry. I retired in December, 2000.

Gr: There's lots to talk about, then because we're moving from card catalogues to online.

The other part of the question that I had asked a few minutes ago was the change in technology. How did your job in the library change? How did campus change as computers came in and things started to go online. WEB LUIS came in its early stages in the mid-1980s. What did all that mean?

Ga: It just seemed that the library became more of a focus. I always had interests beyond just the reference desk. Some of that had to do with my extensive involvement in the community. I was always accustomed to doing other things. When the opportunity presented itself to promote LUIS, I chaired the PR aspect of bringing LUIS to campus. That was such a celebration. We had the sheiks of Bush Gardens to start a trek from somewhere across campus playing music that brought students and long lines of interested people all the way to the doors of the library. It was a big celebration when we transitioned from the card catalog to the electronic access. That was major here in the library. It really did allow faculty and staff to focus more on the library.

Gr: Did the transition go smoothly? Were you involved in moving or had a role in getting all the records from the card catalog onto the online system? We're getting ready to do that again as we move from what's now WEB LUIS to an Ex Libris system, so there's been a lot of discussion here in the library, migrating all of the catalogs. Did it go smoothly?

Ga: I'm sure that there were some hitches, and each of us had a responsibility. Shortly after the event of WEB LUIS, my focus went to development. We had a development librarian here that left the university at that time. She left the library, I'll put it that way. I'm not sure she left the university. I was appointed as the interim director for

development. I then had the responsibility to sell the library if you will. What I recall as being a contribution to that entire effort was to secure funding for something as basic as cabinets for our new equipment. I was transitioning, then, to other responsibilities within the library. That was a real challenge. Most often, as I worked to find dollars to support library efforts, I was faced with the first ten minutes of sitting into a corporate office and explaining, how is it a librarian is out here doing this kind of work. It was a non-traditional approach to librarianship during those days.

Gr: How did you get moved in the direction of development?

Ga: Again, it had a lot to do with my community ties. Through my sorority and some other involvements, I had experience doing that kind of thing: soliciting, funding for programs for the community. It just seems kind of natural. I spent a lot of years in the library in various areas: acquisitions, reserve, reference. I thought that I then had the background to actually promote what we're doing here at USF, at the library and encourage the corporate world to support us. I was interim development library for about five years.

Gr: Were there some particular successes that you recall? [Were there] things that we're now thankful for as a result of your activities in development?

Ga: I hope so. We did acquire some significant collections that did remain here and provide a major resource for research. I think we brought about an awareness that here's a library with all these resources out there. Of course, we are primarily responsible to our students, but we are open to our community. I think that was a major breakthrough as well. There's that giant resource sitting up there on Fowler Avenue that needs your support as well as, we're here to support what's going on in Tampa.

Gr: When you retired in 2000, what position did you hold? You mentioned being the acting

director, but you didn't keep it permanent?

Ga: When I retired, I retired as assistant library director. My focus was human resources. When Sam Fustukjian, our library director, met with that untimely situation and ultimately his death, while the other newly-named assistant directors and I co-directed the library for several months, during that interim. That was an experience that provided opportunities to get more involved with what was going on in campus. We had to represent the library in meetings with the deans. It opened another whole world to the two of us that, of course, had been supporting as Sam's assistants, but not directly involved with. That was a time of great learning and desire to make sure that we could, in fact, hold this library together until the university administration made some permanent moves in terms of putting a person in here that would serve in that capacity.

Gr: Let's go back a little bit as we try to move you along in your career. You were, at one point, the acting director for the development. We talked about that. Did you ever become the permanent director of development before moving over with Sam?

Ga: We joke about that because I think that we acted so long that we could start ourselves a little performing arts center here. It was a relatively new position to the library. The library administration really was not certain of the direction for that position. We knew that it was needed, but there was a reluctance on the part of the administration to make that permanent. I never really received official training in development. I attended conferences and this kind of thing, and I brought experience with me, but I was not trained in development. I was a librarian. From there, and because of my relationship that I had cultivated with the staff. Central personnel handled human resources for a while. Then that office determined that units would handle their own. It was then that it

was determined [that] we needed a human resource librarian. We had the first human resource librarian in the person of Jean McNier. Jean passed away and I was appointed to that position as a human resources librarian and then promoted to assistant library director with responsibility in human resources.

Gr: It was during Sam Fustukjian's term as director that there were enormous strides in what he called or what the library at the time called the virtual library. [There were] lots of electronic journals and other sorts of things. Tell me about Sam's vision for the library and how that was articulated and your relationship with him.

Ga: Sam was probably the most visionary person I've ever encountered. He was one with one idea after another. First thing in the morning he had a great idea and when you left at night there was still another great idea. He was a person who never stopped dreaming. He was capable of making it happen. He always made it happen. He was the one that would not accept no. We had a vision that something should occur. He put resources and what ever it took into place so that it would. He listened, but ultimately, he did what he thought was best for whatever the issue we all were involved with. Sam always believed that you could do more. It didn't matter that you had less. He always believed that you could do more. While you're into that situation, it can be mentally, and sometimes physically challenging, and one might resist it. Ultimately, there's a real lesson in that. It's a lesson that, in my view, builds a lot of character. We had a lot of discussions, and I know that Sam's a very compassionate man, but he knew where we could all go with this library. He was not going to accept no from anybody. That's from the library to the university administration to anybody to impair his vision. He achieved it at all lengths.

Gr: What precipitated your leaving the library in 2000? You're still going strong. Were there other things you wanted to do? What was magical about 2000 as a year to retire from the library position?

Ga: Of course, I had completed thirty-six years with the library. Early on in my career, particularly when I was accepted into the EXCEL program, and we didn't talk about that, but that was a program that was funded by the legislature and I was selected among the first seven to go through an internship. I think EXCEL was excellence in educational leadership or something of that nature, where you were paired with a university administrator here. You actually shadowed that person. You worked in their office. I was paired with the vice president for advancement. I really was interested in moving forward with those programs. My focus really had shifted somewhat from the library to other challenges. I returned to my extensive involvement in the community. I had received some pretty major positions with organizations that really took me away from the library quite a bit.

Gr: What were you doing? Who were you involved with?

Ga: My sorority is Alpha Kappa Alpha. I was elected regional director of that sorority, which meant that I had responsibility for the membership of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, which involved about 36,000 women. When I say sorority, I don't want the audience to misunderstand what this is all about. Alumni sororities are all about service. We're a service organization. What these women are about is giving back to the community [through] youth development, political action, opening doors for young people who never thought they would have the ability [or the] resources to move forward. It was my responsibility to keep those kinds of initiatives going. That post, for maybe

half of a year, took me away from the library probably every Friday through sometimes Monday morning for quite a while. I was two years into that. I had two more years. I thought about it long and hard. I really wanted to give it my full attention. Again, because I had, in fact, fulfilled all the requirements for retirement, I thought, you know, I think this is the time. I feel good about my tenure at the library. I want to do some other things, so why not. I had two additional years as regional director. That was my focus from 2000 to 2002.

[End of Side A]

Gr: We're back. This is Mark Greenberg, director of Special Collections in the Florida Studies Center at the University of South Florida, continuing an interview with Sonja W. Garcia on Wednesday, January 28, 2004. Sonja, one of the things that we missed, and we should have talked about before we got to your 2000 retirement from the library, is a trip you took in 1999, where you went with a number of faculty members to South Africa. How did that trip come about, and tell me about the trip and what you saw and learned while you were there.

Ga: That was really an outstanding opportunity. It came about under Derrie Perez's leadership and administration. There was a campus-wide opportunity to apply to join a nineteen-member faculty group to South Africa post-apartheid. The mission of the group was to establish partnerships with universities and higher education in South Africa. I was selected, which was a great honor. One of the reasons I was selected was because I had gone to South Africa a couple years prior to that. I had some experience with the country. I had gone there with a community group. We were building schools there. So I certainly had an edge there. The trip with the faculty here was truly, truly an

outstanding experience. I met with librarians from the University of Cape Town and some of the others and was delightfully surprised at the advancement there in the libraries there. I didn't expect that. I established relationships we continued through emails. Since then, a couple of them have come to this country and we've had some conversations. It was a very worthwhile endeavor on the part of this university. I really applaud the University of South Florida for taking that initiative and for all those professors that actually created ties and partnerships so that they might reach out across the world to countries. I'm not remembering the name right now, but what was particularly awesome was the Internet action between one of our professors here at USF and a professor there in Johannesburg who was working on an AIDS project. There was so much to share there that we took from this university. That, I consider, is one of the major highlights of my term here at the university, to be able to participate at that level.

Gr: Did you travel all over the country with the faculty? You mentioned Johannesburg and Cape Town.

Ga: [We went to] Cape Town, just around that area is where we concentrated, for the most part. There was another university, we stopped off there. We would spend a couple hours with the president and the deans and then we would just fan out over campus. Of course, I was taken to the library, and that's where I would spend most of my time. We would compare resources and the technologies with our own interests. That was a learning experience on both sides.

Gr: Moving forward again back to your retirement in 2000, you continued that for two years as the regional director of the sorority. That ended in 2002, is that right?

Ga: That ended in 2002. I was very pleased with the term there. We made some significant

strides. We established some endowments that many students at USF enjoy as well. We established an endowment that has provided scholarships for some of our students here. It has provided some resources for students all over the country. Under my administration we built still another school in South Africa. We interact frequently with them in terms of sending black dolls and school supplies. These are women that I'm talking about in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. This is only one region of ten regions that work towards this same goal, and that is youth development, total community involvement. It's a very powerful group that has dedicated lots of their time and resources to making life better for a lot of folk. We have a presence all over the world. It was also, we can move back just a little bit, to our group here in Tampa, actually bringing the chapter to USF in 1972. We have a student chapter here. We've got fifty such chapters all over this region. These are women who are pulling together and working that oftentimes the public at large have no knowledge about. They don't get a lot of visibility [or] a lot of press, but there's a lot going on in terms of working for the betterment of our communities and the role in general. I was real pleased to be able to focus on that for those last two years.

Gr: [Let me ask] just a couple things about the organization. When we talk about chapters, these are active chapters of students on this campus that then go on to become alumni?

Ga: That's correct. We have an active chapter here that's been here since 1972. These students, once graduated, have the opportunity to move into the graduate experience. They complete lots of service projects while on campus, but once you become a graduate, you're more involved with planned service activities. One of the focuses of the group, at this time, is developing reading skills among first and second graders. Tampa has one

demonstration site, one of nine, across the country. Our program is located right now over at West Tampa Elementary School. We're working with first and second graders to make sure that by the time they exit third grade that they're reading on that level. We have received a federal grant to do this. As you know, the governor and the president are very much focused on reading first here in this state, as well as across the country. We feel that we're really in sync with moving forward with the national initiatives with our reading programs.

Gr: Before we go on to talk about your Board of Trustees activities, I have to ask you about several amazing awards. There's a Sonja W. Garcia Day that was proclaimed by Atlanta's mayor, Bill Campbell, in 1999 and then I see another Sonja Garcia day proclaimed by U.S. Congressman, Alcee Hastings.

Ga: That was the first one I'd ever received. I was stunned.

Gr: How does one have a day named after them?

Ga: I can't really take total credit for that. It's the work we do. It had to do with the sorority. What they're doing is acknowledging the work that Alpha Kappa Alpha women do within their communities. I just happened to be the leadership of that organization. When they name a Sonja W. Garcia Day, it really is in appreciation for these women, and my name just happened to be on the top.

Gr: How did you get to be on the Board of Trustees? How did that come about, and are there other activities that you're currently involved in that we should talk about?

Ga: It really is such an honor to serve at that level for this university. I feel that I sort of grew up here at the university. To be able to serve this university and students at this level was never expected, but I'm very grateful, and I take it very seriously, my service, there on

this Board. I think it came about because there are those in Tallahassee who recognize the work that I had done with the same. It goes right back to my community involvement, Mark. I had no special relationships with the governor. Through organizations, when you make an impact in other avenues ... I guess there was this knowledge of my having completed this thirty-six year tenure at the university, because of my interest in reading, I know that was one of the governor's focuses. He knew that had been a prize of our work with young people. He had this K through twenty system-wide focus. I assume that's how I caught his interest. I'm appreciative of the appointment and I work daily, literally daily, to be deserving. To sit there and work on behalf of the faculty and staff and students here at this university where I grew up, it's an awesome honor. It really, really is.

Gr: Are there particular concerns that you have? I know, obviously, that the Board of Trustees oversees all operations of the university, but people come in with their own backgrounds and their own expertise and interest. Do you bring to the Board of Trustees particular issues or concerns that you would like to see addressed? Have there been some changes been made as a result of some of the issues you've brought forth?

Ga: There were initiatives in place when I joined the Board that directly addressed my concerns and issues and interests with regard to sitting on that board. The Board is comprised of work groups: the academic and environment work group, and the university engagement work group are the two that I selected. In fact, I was told, that generally a trustee selects one, but I couldn't choose. I was warned that it would be very time consuming, but I was very interested in those two work groups. Those were in place. That's where my interest is. I'm very much interested in having this university continue

to partner with the community. This university is such a tremendous resource. Whenever there is a major issue here in this city of Tampa, it is rare that a professor or an administrator or somebody at this university is not closely involved, either as a consultant, or they're sitting on that committee. There's a tremendous exchange. That's so valuable. I cannot imagine what Tampa would be without the University of South Florida. I know we're not even fifty years old. When you watch the news every night or when you pick up one of the newspapers, you see the involvement of the university. It's my position that that has to continue and it has to escalate. There's so many community groups out there that really can benefit from the resources here at this university. Even if it's just student interaction. [Someone asks] lend us your students to help us through this project. Help us write a grant to do what we need to do. There are some strong backs out there, but too often, there's not the funding to get things done. When the university comes to the aid of community group, they bring that level of expertise. I know how to write a grant, I have this connection in Washington, or this connection in Tallahassee. We could help them do this. The members of that committee, sure, they can do all the leg- work, but sometimes they just need the expertise that we have here at this university to realize what they're doing. That was important with me. The academic and campus environment group is especially close to my heart because there in lies the library. Of course, I know how long we've worked for the highest status for libraries. We ought to be there. I know that we're getting close. If there's anything that I can do to assist in our achieving that status, then of course, I'm there to do it. I'm real interested in continuing and maintaining a real wholesome atmosphere and environment for these students. I was so pleased to see that new housing over there. We have really come of age. It's

wonderful to see those additions to campus. With all the building and parking garages going up, it's heartwarming to see the growth here. While many of the strategies were in place when I came to the board, they certainly were those strategies that I can buy into and hopefully can contribute to. It was in place, Mark. It's not as though I brought any issues with me, but I see the road map that's there, and I certainly hope that I can contribute to achieving those strategies that are in place.

Gr: I know the Board has had some difficult issues to deal with. Were you on the Board when it had to think about and deal with the Sami Al-Arian situation?

Ga: I had just come onto the Board when all of this occurred. I am fully aware and been briefed of the situation. That was very difficult. Of course, the Board of Trustees has a responsibility to the entire campus. No one professor, student, nor administrator has the right to threaten or be a threat to any part of our ability to move forward.

Gr: There's been changes at the state level: the Board of Regions becoming [the] Board of Trustees, collective bargaining agreements in and out. As a member of the Board of Trustees, is there a vision on your part or for the board as a whole as it deals with some of the legislative issues that affect the governance of universities and how that affects faculty? Are there some things you'd like to see happen that would improve or stabilize some of these issues?

Ga: As a long-time person here, I have watched my colleagues and been a part of all kinds of initiatives that have moved us forward. I think we're going to have a proud fiftieth anniversary. There are things that are going on here that are unprecedented across the nation. I guess this is not new, but the bottom line is funding. If there was anything that we could, as members of that board, achieve, is to stabilize some kind of formula so that

we are funded to support the initiatives that we have the intellect and the resources to work toward. One of the major things is faculty salaries. I understand because I was a part of it. We have got to address the woefully low faculty salaries. I guess if there was a major issue out there, that we want address, it would be the overall funding for the university so that we can, in fact, soar comparable to the abilities that have been assembled here at this great university.

Gr: If you could look in your crystal ball five years out or even ten years out, where will you be? Do you have goals and visions for some things you have yet to accomplish that you want to do?

Ga: I guess certain points in your life you don't think about visions of five to ten years pass. At least, I don't. Those were the kinds of visions you had before you retired and those kinds of things. I guess my vision for me personally; I have to say that probably the only thing that I would want to be involved with is to focus more on my writing. That's a goal of mine, but I have to be honest and say that I've really not gotten very far. I have, up here, a children's book that talks about three women that I hold dear in my heart in terms of who they are, who they were. I believe that it would be such an inspiring story for third and fourth graders. I'm holding that here. I jot down a few notes now and then. I'd like to be involved with more writing. I want to continue working with the community. This, I'm sure, is cliché, but there's so much energy and potential among groups that have never been heard of. Groups that could really breach the gap between the university and communities. I'd like to be more effective in terms of just assisting people to achieve their potential. I know that's very general. It's pie in the sky. When I work with young people, that's always my goal. To say, you know, these are your circumstances.

The same thing is true with the community group. This is now your circumstance, and here is the way that we can do this together to have you achieve it. That's always in my mind as I work. Whether that's where I want to be five years from now, I don't know. I want to write and I want to continue working with people to let them know that you can be all you want to be and you have to do that for your communities.

Gr: I want to thank you very much. I really appreciate you being here today.

End of Interview