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Sara Gilbert oral history interview by Andrew Huse, October 21, 2003

Sara Corey Gilbert (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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

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Current Position: Retired; Enrolled in
classes at USF
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Ms. Gilbert came to USF in 1960 as number 242 of the charter class.

Decision to attend USF

After high school she did not consider college. Ms. Gilbert's intentions were to get married and have a family. This was right after the end of the Second World War and although she had graduated with honors from high school she had not taken college preparatory courses. She heard about the construction of USF and was interested in classes.

Campus's physical appearance

At the time her daughter was in a girl-scout troop and her camp was at the corner of what is now Bruce B. Downs and Fletcher Avenue. This was a wooded area at the time and was a day camp. Later the troop planted loblolly pine trees at the entrance of USF from east to west all along Fowler Avenue. There was almost nothing there before the girls planted these trees. She registered as the 242nd student. That was her student number at the time.

"The campus was bare." There were no trees, sidewalks or grass. They were mostly surrounded by sand. There were five buildings at the time: the administration building, the student center, the library, the chemistry building and the theater. The library was where the student services center is today. They had classes in every building at the time.

She was married with two children when she began school at USF and her youngest child, David, was entering kindergarten. She came to USF part-time initially. She only took morning classes because she did not want to leave her kids alone.

Student body at the time

There were many veterans who came because of the GI Bill. Older students were doing very well. In fact, despite the fact that she had been out of school for a few years, Ms. Gilbert was on the dean's list her first few semesters at USF. There were 1,900 students at the time and tuition was \$90 a semester. Most people took twelve to fifteen credit hours, some took as many as eighteen hours at a cost of just \$90 a semester. She wanted

to be a teacher and in order to double check that it was something she wanted to do, Ms. Gilbert began teaching a summer school class at her church and enjoyed it very much. At first she taught fourth grade and then junior high school. She decided to get an education degree to learn to teach.

The first two classes she took were English and Human Behavior. The English class was taught on the second floor of what is now the Marshall Center. Her teacher was Mrs. Valentine, and she was a very good teacher. Ms. Gilbert had excelled at English in high school but this didn't initially translate over into college. She is pretty sure that the grade on her first research paper was a "D" but Mrs. Valentine was very helpful in assisting Ms. Gilbert in writing her papers. The other class was a two-part class taught on the first floor of the chemistry building. She does not recall the teacher's name (it might have been Robertson), but the first half was a logic class and Ms. Gilbert got A's in logic. The second part was a "lesson in accepting other peoples." At that time there were no black students at the University so the teacher was emphasizing acceptance since there would be minority students arriving. This was a good experience because the federal integration laws had just been passed. In this class they talked about tolerance and she learned a lot in logic. She is pretty sure that she earned a "B" in English.

The second semester Ms. Gilbert had a class with Professor Wright, who encouraged more writing. This was a very good experience for her.

She received her degree in 1972 after working two semesters in a work-study program. She took a night class and accepted a job in the office at Madison Junior High School. She taught at Dickinson in Town and Country and ended up teaching music, which she did not know anything about. She felt that she was in a little over her head. She eventually decided not to teach because she had met Dr. William Allen, a social work professor and he really impressed and encouraged her. He was the person that counseled her more than anyone and Ms. Gilbert decided to be a social worker. He encouraged her by reminding her that she would be dealing with children in social work and she would have to go up to Tallahassee to get her master's degree in order to begin teaching. She was unable to go there. They had a social work degree program at USF. Unfortunately Dr. Allen left and the degree in social work at USF was ended, so she had to apply everything to sociology, which she did not like very much. She got a degree in sociology because there was so much invested that she couldn't change completely. She also got all her core courses for education.

Getting her degree

She had a biology class in her second semester, which met in the life science building. They had to dissect a fetal pig. The professor's name was Professor Freidel and he was allergic to the formaldehyde, so he had to direct them without touching it. This was an interesting experience. This was 1961 and DNA had just been discovered. The textbook had no information on DNA so when they needed information on DNA they had to go to the library and take out journals. She had always been impressed with genetics, but she did not have great math skills, which worked against her. Her second semester of biology the teacher sent the class out of the building and they had to walk around, take

notes and observe. They would then have to return to class and discuss what they had seen around campus, snakes or gophers or vegetation. There were so few people in the student body that they were actually able to have class at their professors' houses.

Math had changed considerably between her high school years and college (Ms. Gilbert began college at the age of thirty-two) and "it was like a new language, I didn't know what they were talking about. So I took it and I didn't understand it and I failed it." This was difficult because she had been on the dean's list. She dropped out and went to work. She never understood algebra. Humanities was different, although she did not know much about it she did enjoy it. By her second semester they had built the fine arts building and her class was in there. They took the final in the theater. She really enjoyed art and architecture and because of the humanities course she became interested in Roman history. In fact, Ms. Gilbert is taking a class in Roman history now. This opened new interests to her.

She was so discouraged by her experience with math that she went out to get a job teaching third graders in a Catholic school. She wanted to teach, but didn't "care for the bureaucracy in public schools." She enjoyed teaching and loved working with third graders. The school paid for her to take a night class, probably a psychology course. The following year she got a job teaching sixth grade at a Baptist school (Ms. Gilbert is neither Baptist nor Catholic) because they needed a teacher. They paid for her to take child psychology at night. She was still taking classes, but she decided to take math as her last course. She had decided to finish up, although she enjoyed taking courses.

There were no computers or copying machines. You would have to fill out a card to take out books from the library. When they switched to key punch cards the school required a computer the size of a room to take care of them. They had to type their papers, and though she was not a very good typist, she got by. She still has almost all of her papers. You had to footnote everything you wrote, which has changed. Every course except math had a research paper and she kept all the papers because she worked hard on them and is proud of them.

Ms. Gilbert waited until her last course to take math (it was an Algebra course). She had to stop taking courses because she wanted to get a job. She got a job working for the state at HRS, working in what is now the Department of Children and the Family. She lacked her math credit and she was hired as a social workers assistant. She was coming at night and taking another math class. The teacher assured her that if she did her homework and tried that he would not fail her, but he did. He was Dr. Lookenbach, her neighbor. He did his best but could not get around her mathematical difficulties. She took Professor Bayhill and then passed it. He was a great teacher, and is now at Hillsborough Community College.

The second semester she took a course with a graduate assistant, where she had a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory option. There was a tutor that came to her house, whom she paid \$5 an hour. He helped with the homework and she got an "S" in the class, allowing her to get her degree. Once she got the degree she got a promotion and a raise. They had

just started the year in Protective Services in Tampa, which deals with child abuse issues, so she applied for a position and got it. She really liked working with juvenile courts. She had to finish her math before anyone would hire her.

She enjoyed teaching, but when she worked at schools she had done mostly counseling.

Changes in the student body over the years

During the Vietnam War “you never knew when you were going to run into a protest.” The protests would normally go on between the administration building and the present day Marshall Center. She thought that the protests were “kind of scary” so she stayed away from them and didn’t get involved. A lot of people came to campus to speak and there was a good amount of protest. During the McCarthy period the Johns Committee in Tallahassee was “scaring everybody to death,” and she saw this go on around the University. This affected everybody. There were a lot of professionals on the campus that may not have been members of the Communist Party, but they might have some ties to communism and would have to be very careful because many people lost their jobs.

There was always construction on campus. They built the Fine Arts Building, and the original Business Building (now Human Services). She had one Seashore Biology class where they just went to the shore and collected specimens and kept a notebook. They could do these kinds of things with a small student body. It is very crowded on campus today, there was no parking problem when she first started and there was no charge for parking. She had her favorite spot, right near the chemistry building or near fine arts. Now there is no parking and everybody pays the same rates, whether they are students or they work here, because there is no parking.

After graduation in 1972

She worked for the energy program for the state and after retirement heard about a tuition waiver program for people sixty and over. She was going to try and get a teaching degree after retirement in 1989, but decided not to go that route. She reconsidered and found that she needed the core courses and internship to teach, she finished the core course but never took the internship. At the time she was sixty-one or sixty-two. She started taking classes two at a time and she is still taking them. She helps with registration every semester to keep her tuition waiver. She often wishes that she had gotten a master’s degree, she has had the hours to get it, but because her husband has had health problems she does not have the time to devote to study. She does have the necessary courses in many cases and has done the work necessary for a master’s degree.

The thing that drew her back to school was her love of learning.

She has joined the anthropology club and has been interested in anthropology. This is a field that is new to her because she didn’t have time to work in this field.

Registration assistance

She works with the people sixty and over who are working at or going to USF. She has also done a lot of substitute teaching, she enjoyed that. The older people looking to

register are “worse than kids, they never have a pencil, they never have looked at the schedule to see what they want to take, they have no idea.” Some of them know what they want, but the same few come through with no idea. She tries to give them guidance and advise them as best as she can. She usually asks what interests them when they are unsure, this is usually the first step. She usually recommends anthropology and archeology because this is what she loves. In a way she is still a counselor. The seniors don’t register over a computer, they have one day where they can come to the Marshall Center. Some check the computer to see what is open. This is a part of the “Tuition Waiver Program.” They buy the books but don’t pay any tuition.

Message to working mothers or seniors or anyone that sees this interview

“Never stop learning, there is so much out there to know and to learn. You can learn from now until the day you die and you will never learn everything.” You don’t have to do it, but some people just enjoy learning. She has a love of learning, but wishes she were better in math. She would offer the same advice for younger people, but younger people are so much different in some cases.

Young people need to keep their grades up so they can go and get their master’s degree. It is necessary to get that master’s degree now. There was time when the high school diploma was important, then it was important to get the BA, now the master’s is very important. Prepare for this when you first start college. When you keep your grades up it makes it easier to get the master’s degree. It is important, even necessary in today’s times.

Her children went to college. Her daughter went to Florida State and got two scholarships. Her grades dropped in Tallahassee and she lost the scholarships. She graduated in four years and spent six months in Italy studying. She worked in social work and is now on staff at USF, working in the Orlando area. The program she is in is administered by USF. She has now filed her retirement papers, and can retire in five years.

Her son got three chances to get his degree, but he did not get the degree in those three chances so they told him he is on his own. He is forty-seven and is trying to pass Algebra, the same course that gave his mother a hard time. He didn’t feel it was important for him to make the top grades and he is now realizing the mistake that he has made. He will never find a high paying job until he gets that BS. He has had some good jobs, but the companies he has worked for have fallen and he has been laid off. With an education he could have gotten through this.

Her husband has been very good to her. He never wanted her to work full-time and have a career, but he doesn’t mind that she goes to college. He never objected to her educational pursuits. They took one night class together, Psychology Adjustment. He might have felt bad because she got an “A” in the class and he got a lower grade, but she had a background in psychology and he did not. Their professor was Dr. Merrick.

She has had some great professors like Charles Arnade who has been teaching at USF for as long as Ms. Gilbert has been here. She saw him just the other day, and she said, "I can't believe you're still here" and Dr. Arnade said the same thing about her. She took an international studies course with him after the tuition waiver. She did not have the time to work on the humanities courses that would have interested her early on. Since she has gotten the degree she has been interested in history and anthropology courses that she could not take before.

Dean Smith in religion has been here almost as long as Ms. Gilbert. British literature was a great course and she had two religion classes with him. He is still going strong, Ms. Gilbert believes that he is stubborn like her and will "stay right here until they kick him out." He is a "great teacher" and she has "had some terrific teachers here."

The anthropology department has some great teachers, like Dr. Madrigal. Ms. Gilbert originally was not going to take her course because she is too young, but she turned out to be one of the best professors she ever had. She has taken Dr. Kleine, who is very strict. She respects him and he "insists on top quality" from his student's work. She appreciates this. She took European History and the History of Germany Under Fascism. "He is an excellent professor." There are so many other great professors, but these are just a few that immediately come to mind.

There have been many changes. Dr. John Allen was president when she first came here and she got her degree during Cecil Mackey's presidency. She had questions about Dr. Betty Castor when she came, but she turned out to be a great president. They have never stopped building. Dr. Allen did not support sports, he wanted the school to focus on academics. When they built the Sun Dome and started the football team is when she saw a big change in USF. The emphasis on sports more than academics is a big change.

She has had and continues to have great experiences at USF. She will continue to take classes as long as space is available. Now that there are more students coming in there is less and less space available in classes. She thinks that it would be advantageous for more people to get their first two years at junior college and allow the university to put a greater emphasis on the upper level courses. The community college would allow kids to get the basics out of the way as well.

End of Interview