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## Paul Griscti oral history interview by Danielle Riley, April 21, 2004

Paul Griscti (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
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## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

### *Arrival to the Tampa Area*

Mr. Griscti's father was a Public Information Officer for the Army and they moved to Tampa in 1964 when he was assigned to the Strike Command (now Central Command) at MacDill Air Force Base. He was fourteen when they moved here. He went to Leto High School and they lived in the Town and Country area, which "back then was far more country than town." He still lives in the area, but now it is "far more town than country." He was happy to see the area grow over the course of time.

In high school he came to USF several times to see plays and things of that nature. USF was to the north of Tampa and everything was sparse up in the area. Also, in comparison with some of the other state schools, USF was "architecturally wanting."

People in the community thought that it was a good emerging school. He had quite a few friends that went here. Mr. Griscti started at the University of Florida and eventually came to USF, which at the time was just beginning to have an impact. The teachers, who were the first group to graduate from USF, were just beginning to teach and have an influence.

### *High School*

He graduated from high school in 1968 and always knew that college was the next step. He knew that he wanted to do something in journalism. In high school he was on the student newspaper and edited the yearbook.

### *Family*

His father was one of the pioneering public relations officers after WWII. He was a combat commander during the war. They traveled around the world when he was younger. Mr. Griscti has a sister who was born in Paris and a brother who was born in Hawaii. They were living in a lot of different places.

### *Plans for the future*

He wanted to work for a newspaper. He did not want to work in public relations. Once he entered the university he went into the field of study that would help him be a newspaperman. He interned at *The Tampa Tribune* over the summers and this grew into a full time job. He also got a job with USF's public relations department and he generated news releases about the chemistry and engineering departments. The engineering department was beginning to get a good reputation under the school's influential dean, Edgar Kopp. Covering this development helped him when he went into public relations for several large engineering companies. Even now a large part of his PR clients are engineering companies.

### *From the University of Florida to The University of South Florida*

UF was a "big party school" at the time and this is "the trap" for a lot of students who leave home for the first time. This was the late 1960s and there were a lot of social changes. Mr. Griscti had a great time at UF but his grades suffered. He almost immediately went to work at one of his two jobs once he enrolled at USF. His USF experience was one of work and practical experience. During this time he got to watch the mass communications department grow.

### *His father's involvement with USF*

His father retired from the military in 1967 and wanted to stay in the area. He did some pro-bono work with the School of Journalism, which was "basically a subset of the department of English." Mr. Griscti's father became friendly with some of the people at the school and they offered him the chance to teach. He thought that it was a good time to get out of the military and he had always wanted to stay in one area with his family rather than move every two or three years. Mr. Griscti's father became an associate professor and taught basic news writing. The school's public relations sequence would come years later under his father's watch.

His father retired from full-time work in 1983, but taught for a few years afterwards. Unfortunately, he had a "debilitating Alzheimer's-like condition" and eventually had to retire completely from teaching. Mr. Griscti took two public relations writing classes with his father. He did not get "A's" in those classes. People often asked Mr. Griscti what might be on the test but his father stayed relatively silent as to the content matter.

His father had been at USF for a couple years when Mr. Griscti transferred from UF. He viewed the situation with "trepidation" because his father was a professor in the department in which he was a student. There were a lot of parties in the department and he got to know the professors very well. He thought that USF was far easier than UF but this might also be a reflection of his change in attitude towards his studies.

### *His father as Oracle advisor*

His father was the advisor at the *Oracle* from 1967-1971. Mr. Griscti never worked under his father while at school, but many of his friends did. He never actually heard any of the students say anything bad about him. "He was always well regarded" and "always had an ear and time to listen to students." Even now, his peers in the community ask

about his father, who passed away over a decade ago. Mr. Griscti still has friends in the business that worked for the *Oracle* and they still talk about how different things were back then. His father was known to take the issues of the *Oracle* and personally distribute them around so he was “being a newsboy” while also the faculty advisor.

#### *Campus in the late 1960s and early 1970s*

He and other people who work with the Alumni Association still talk about USF being referred to as “Sandspur U.” At the time Fowler Avenue was a two-lane road that went to the just-completed Interstate. The campus was little more than the Administration Building, the old library, and a few dorms. The Chemistry Building was in existence, and one of the “starker buildings on campus” was the Life Sciences Building, which dominated a lot of the campus.

At one point one of the elephants at Busch Gardens had died and professors convinced the park to donate the body to the biology department. They kept the body on the roof of the building and they watched it decompose, which was “a little odiferous at times.”

#### *Student Protests*

Directly following the Kent State shootings USF saw the largest amount of student protests, which generally took place on the athletic fields. Everyone got a little carried away. There wasn’t any extreme violence, but there was tear gas fired at one point. Right after the Kent State shooting there was a fairly large protest right in front of the administration building. This was a little tense because the students demanded the flags be lowered to half-staff and the administration refused. Things ended peacefully that day, but it was a tense time. He was asked by the PR Bureau of the *Oracle* to observe everything and get an idea of what was going on. He thought that this experience was pretty representative of student feeling all over. People had a feeling that “it was a special time, but not in a good way, it was serious times.”

The administration “towed the line,” in that they didn’t want student protests. It was “typical” of an administration at the time. John Allen was “fairly authoritarian in nature” and he could not have seen the way the school would change, even with the introduction of sports, which he was dead set against. This early emphasis on academics has really helped the Colleges of Engineering and Education, the two schools that send the largest number of people into the community.

#### *The university area when Mr. Griscti was a student:*

##### *University Restaurant*

There was a restaurant where the Firestone currently stands by the present day University Mall. The restaurant was called the University Restaurant. Faculty, staff and students hung out there to eat some of the best food in town. Basil and Pete Scaglione owned the restaurant. They made Italian and Spanish food and “some of the best cheeseburgers in the area.” The bar was always full of staff and faculty making a quick jaunt over to have lunch at the bar and maybe a drink or two. They might return for a drink or two before heading home. Mr. Griscti heard that when the restaurant was demolished, they kept the

bar and the bar is still in storage somewhere on the university campus. He isn't sure if this is true, but it is a "very strong rumor" because he has heard it from many people.

### *Empty Keg*

This was around the same time people started "rathskellers" on college campuses. The one at USF was called the Empty Keg.

There used to be a Schlitz brewery on 40<sup>th</sup> Street and many people went there and took advantage of the hospitality house. Many of the people in his fraternity worked at the factory and they gave people two red tickets for two free beers. If you knew people you could get a few extra beers. There were lots of places in the area to get drinks. A lot of people went to Masters Pizza, which is across the street from Busch Gardens.

A Burger King on Fletcher was the first fast food restaurant.

At the time Fowler was just a two-lane road and Fletcher was a country road. Once the mall came in, the area grew considerably. When the mall went up everyone knew that things were growing in the area and everyone was very excited by this development.

Originally, Busch Gardens was a brewing facility. They eventually started a beer garden, added a bird show, and then added attractions. Students went there from time to time because of the "promise of free beer."

They had movie nights on Fridays by the College of Education. When they put in Desoto Hall (now John Knox Village) and Fontana Hall there were a lot of students living there. He spent a lot of time there.

### *Parking*

Students probably complained about the parking at the time, but in all honesty it wasn't nearly as bad as today. He was able to get some better parking because of his father, which was nice.

### *Living Arrangements*

He lived at home, but spent most of his time staying with friends and fraternity brothers in Delta Tau Delta. This was a fun experience. Most of the guys in the fraternity used to be servicemen and had been in Vietnam or the military and had come back to school. This attracted an older student who may not have been more mature, but did take his studies a little more seriously.

### *Internships*

He wrote some articles for the *Oracle*, but ended up going to work for the News Bureau. He was assigned a "beat" in the physical sciences area and the College of Engineering. Most of his work came from the College of Engineering because they were doing some exciting things. He hung around there a while and learned a bit about engineering, which has come in handy because over the years many of his public relations clients have been engineering companies.

Some of his work appeared on campus, but they were typically news releases that got picked up by the *St. Petersburg Times*, *The Tampa Tribune* or the *Tampa Times*. He doesn't remember any of his work getting picked up in a national publication, but he's sure that happened at some point.

#### *Graduation and his father's teaching awards*

A personal highlight for Mr. Griscti, and an important event for his father, was the commencement in 1972. Mr. Griscti graduated and his father was honored as professor of the year. This was a good experience for everyone in the family. His father had won many awards and was named teacher of the year in 1970 by the National Public Relations Society of America.

#### *Department becomes independent*

Around 1969 or 1970 the department went from being a part of the English department to being independent. Dr. Arthur Sanderson (aka Sandy) had started the department. He had a heart attack in the early 1970s and stepped down as department chair. Mr. Griscti's father served as the department chair after this and remained in this position for a number of years.

#### *Father starts publication relations sequence*

His father also created a Public Relations Sequence with its own curriculum and degree granting authority. He eventually started a master's degree program.

#### *Pursuing a master's degree*

Mr. Griscti went on to work towards a master's in Public Administration because he was working at Hillsborough Community College and thought that he would stay in government. He got a year into his studies and started working at a corporation. Upon beginning this work, Mr. Griscti realized that an MPA degree would not do him any good in a corporate setting. He always wanted to switch to an MBA program but got married and had kids, which didn't allow for MBA schooling.

#### *Working for The Tampa Tribune and other companies*

He also worked for a number of years with *The Tampa Tribune*, first as a student writer, then as an intern, and then as a writer. He did sports writing for a couple of years. After this, he went to Hillsborough Community College and then to work for the Sperry Corporation in Clearwater. Mr. Griscti stayed there for about fourteen years and then worked for Honeywell Space Systems in Clearwater. He now lives in Tampa, and works for Hill and Knowlton, a PR Agency.

#### *Still involved with USF*

During this period, as a public relations manager he did a good amount of community relations. Engineering companies had supported the University from the beginning because a nearby college of engineering was very important. There was a lot of work with the University in philanthropy, joint programs, or funding programs. This was an important part of his job. He worked for Honeywell in the mid-1990s, when USF broke

the \$100 million mark in research grants. Honeywell hosted the news conference and it was a very exciting time. He has worked little projects here and there over the years and recently has been involved in the Alumni Association, serving on the Public Relations sub-committee.

He graduated in 1972, but lived in the area for a long time after he graduated and still considers himself a part of the community. He moved to the Town and Country area while working in Clearwater because it was a shorter drive.

#### *USF—a family affair*

Mr. Griscti also has a daughter who will start here in the fall. His daughter may live on campus. She had a list of three or four schools that she was interested in and USF was at the top of the list. Most of her friends plan on coming here as well. She applied on-line and was accepted in two weeks, so she didn't bother sending out the paper applications to other schools. His daughter wanted to attend USF because of the family ties, the fact that her friends are coming here, and the academic regimen USF provides. She plans on going into nursing, and USF has a well-respected nursing program. Mr. Griscti also has a younger daughter who plans to come to USF. One of his two brothers came to USF for a while and Mr. Griscti's wife got her degree from USF.

#### *Significant Changes in the School*

The school has continued to evolve as a “significant area resource.” This isn't just in higher education. There are also many other ways the school helps the area. For instance, professors provide advice outside of the university to the community at large.

Seven or eight years ago, when Betty Castor was here there was a great increase in the number of buildings on campus and the area has grown considerably. Now USF is in the middle of community-wide growth rather than an area far to the north and outside of Tampa. The rise in college sports in the area has been another “very positive change” for the school.

Men's basketball was the first major program, and his father supported it, but wasn't a very big sports fan. Mr. Griscti's father did have some basketball players in class and he worked hard with them to make sure they were able to pass and keep their eligibility.

The USF story is “one of constant evolution” and now he sees the school as “a bustling college campus.” He goes to the University of Florida campus fairly regularly and there is a “general buzz” on campus that is similar to the feeling around USF. The school was a commuter school in the old days, and still is a commuter school, which makes it very different from UF. Despite this, there is a community feeling that exists on campus.

#### *USF presidents and Phyllis Marshall*

He doesn't remember any direct interaction with her, but he met her at many functions and she was the head of student affairs. She “kept everything going.”

Mr. Griscti met all the school presidents at one point or another. He knew Betty Castor especially well because she was a really good friend of Mr. Griscti's parents. They often

got together on weekends. When Mr. Griscti's wife graduated, Betty Castor gave her the diploma, which was a nice experience.

*Pride in USF*

He is most proud of the fact that the school stuck to its plans and had a "long-term vision of greatness and being of service to the community and watching those come to fruition." When he worked for engineering companies they touted the school as being one of the strengths of the area. This school is a great influence in the area and is a great place to get a degree. There are very successful people coming out of USF.

*End of Interview*