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Lee Leavengood oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, July 28, 2003

Lee Leavengood (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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

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For the Institute on Aging
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TRANSCRIPTION

G: Today is Monday, July 28, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, oral history program assistant for the USF Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews here in our studio in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni in order to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today we will be interviewing Lee Leavengood who came to USF in 1973 as a student. Lee retired in June this year, 2003, as the assistant director for the Institute on Aging. Good morning, Lee.

L: Good morning.

G: Let's begin by you taking us to the year you arrived in Tampa and what circumstances brought you to the University of South Florida.

L: We moved to Tampa in 1960. My husband was with the *Tampa Tribune* and we moved here as a family. Because he had worked at the University of Florida and I had gone to the University of Florida, we knew many of the people who came here. We moved to Tampa about the same time the university was born. I remember coming to the groundbreaking out here, which is now Collins Drive. There was a grandstand and the governor was here and they shoveled dirt. They had it like eight o'clock or nine o'clock in the morning because it was so hot. I had to get a babysitter to come that early. We

knew many of the people who were instrumental or who were the first pioneers of the university. [We] have been here for all of the openings of the buildings and the groundbreaking for the buildings just because we like being a part of the university.

G: Being that you were here in the early formation of the university, what kinds of things were you hearing about the university as it was becoming established, as John Allen was working throughout the community to try to get the university literally from the sand on up?

L: I was not part of the women who helped on this because I was too new on Tampa, but I have friends who were very much involved in helping, particularly the wives, in getting the faculty and administration people settled. They formed the Committee of Women who were hostesses so to speak. [They] were instrumental in making Tampa a gracious place for the university to be. Elizabeth Himes was one of those women. My friend Mary Ellen Germany has scrapbooks of all these early activities. There's a woman in our neighborhood who was involved with all of the flower arrangements for the university happenings. She's Mrs. Young, Dr. Young's wife. Because the university didn't have an alumni group, we were asked to chaperone dances when you would have chaperones at dances. I remember coming to a dance in the ballroom, which is now the Phyllis Marshal Center, because that was the first building that was here. I felt like Tampa was very open and gracious and wanted to be involved in the university. I know the Chamber of Commerce was involved in helping to get them here. Scott Christopher was very involved in this. I think that Tampa was very open and willing to be a part of the university and wanted it to succeed.

G: I know you said you remember the groundbreaking ceremony. Who was here on the

groundbreaking ceremony? What was the actual ceremony, what did it entail?

L: It entailed lots of shovels for one thing. I remember that Lee Roy Collins was here. John Allen [was here]. I don't remember all the details of it and a lot has happened since then. It was a significant part of the opening. The community reacted and came.

G: Once the university was built the first classes began coming in, in September of 1960, how soon did you become involved with the university?

L: I became involved with the university on the foundation board. I think I was the first woman on the foundation board and served as the secretary, which put me on the executive board. The executive board would meet at the old Florida hotel for breakfast at seven o'clock in the mornings, which was a little awkward for a mother of three children to get a sitter, to come to breakfast to help with the foundation. Because we knew the Allen's, we were involved early on. It was fun to serve on the foundation. It was come to all of the buildings as they opened and had open houses and groundbreakings and so forth.

G: Did you know the Allen's at the University of Florida? Was that the first time you had met them or did you meet them through coming to Tampa?

L: We knew them at the University of Florida, and they lived somewhat in our neighborhood at that time. So we've known them for a long time.

G: What kind of a person was John Allen?

L: John Allen was a very kind gentle man who had a plan. He knew what he wanted the university to be. I don't think that he ever envisioned that it would be what it is today. He had a plan of he wanted all the students to read the same books so that they could discuss them together. He was a scientist and he had a very organized mind. Grace, his

counterpart, was just as important as he was.

G: What was Grace's role? We hear a lot about John Allen certainly with getting the university going, but I've heard a lot about Grace working with other local groups and some of the professors. What was Grace's role in the early days of the university?

L: Grace was always the grace note of the beginning. She got the faculty wives organized, she was very much a part of welcoming the university, and she was the hostess so to speak.

G: You mention that in 1973, even before that, you were volunteering, you were becoming part of the USF Foundation. How did you become involved in taking classes at the university?

L: I always was involved in taking some of the continuing education programs here. Because they didn't have an alumni association that was real active, people were very involved in what went on down here. Before I became a student here, I under Cecil Mackey, at his request, initiated the Friends of the Library, which is now the Library Associates. Again, Lee Roy Collins came down to kick this off. I can remember having programs here and receptions and so forth to get people in the community involved in the library because, as you know, John Allen was very much involved in the library. That was one of his great interests. We would have programs. We had Gloria Jehoda come down as one of our speakers. So we would have speakers and we would invite the community to come in and bring a book that might go into the special collections. That was one of my volunteer things that I did before I came here as a student. I was on the first Florida Commission Status of Women. I became interested in women continuing their education, and I knew that if I were to be affected I would have to continue my own.

So I came back as a student and sort of wondered around at the university trying to find a place that I felt was the place I needed to be to do what I wanted to do. I ended up in the master's program in guidance and counseling in the College of Education.

G: I want to go back to a couple things you said, particularly your involvement with the status of women in those early days. Were there many women who were attending the university in the early 1970s? Were they moms? Were they early students? What was the general makeup of women who attended the university in those days?

L: In those days there were women who wanted to get back into the labor market. There were women who hadn't completed their education and wanted to. Some of the first graduates here were women who still live in the community. I'm sure you have their names and will interview them. It was a time when women were beginning to realize we did have a status and we wanted to be more involved.

G: Was USF an amiable place for women in those early days?

L: I think it was because it was new. There were no rituals or no traditions, so the university always was involved or welcomed non-traditional students because it was very accepting of students of all ages from the very beginning. Because it was a state university without dormitories at that time, these were commuting students; these were people who worked who came here as well as the traditional aged students. From the beginning there were lots of non-traditional aged students here.

G: You mentioned that you came in as a student under Cecil Mackey. How was Cecil Mackey different from John Allen?

L: Cecil Mackey, because he was younger, had newer thoughts about the university. He was more of a business type person. He realized that the university had people here who

were very much involved with the beginning, but you needed other people to come in to take it to the next step. He brought about many changes. Some of them were not happy changes, but it took us to a different level. It took different to get to that level.

G: You mentioned that you were receiving a master's in guidance. What kind of classes were you taking in those early days in the College of Education?

L: The classes were small. I was usually the only adult, and I was in my mid-forties at that time. I was usually the only adult in the class. I either took the freedom or I had the freedom to design my programs. If I had a research paper to do, I did it on adults because I was interested in adults returning to school. If I had a project, it was with adults. Now, I had to do some sort of grub work also. When I interned I interned in a junior high school because that's where they could place me, but I also did some projects in the adult high schools. I always knew that I wanted to help adults continue their education.

G: Who were some of the professors that you remember that stand out in your mind in those early days?

L: Oh, you caught me. I have not had time to reflect on this really. I felt like the professors were very interested in what I was doing. They were always very helpful. I felt that they were very competent professors. You always get maybe one or two that are not as competent as others, but I was pleased by my professors because I felt that they were interested in me as a student and helped me. They were very helpful to what I wanted to come out with. One of the interesting parts of this is that when I finished several of the professors asked if I would meet with their wives in a program to help them get back into the educational field, so that was a very rewarding thing for me when I was asked to help with their wives. I met with, there must have been it ended up, fifteen wives in the

College of Education.

G: Having an interest in adults continuing their education, how did you become involved with becoming a pre-admission advisor for mature students?

L: When I finished my work I went to the dean of students at that time and I said you really need me to help other adults come to this university. I made my way, but not everybody was as familiar. I was familiar with the university. I was familiar with the people here. At that time Joe Howell was vice-president of Student Affairs. I knew Joe on a social basis and he knew that I was a student here. I was able to persuade him that I was needed here, and so he said why don't we give you a try as a part time person. I said no, if I'm going to do it I want to do it full time. He had just made some changes and he had a pre-admission advisor for traditional students, for veterans, and so a position was created for me. I worked in that area for probably four years. I would go into the community and have programs for people to tell them what was available for them out here, and then I would come back to be sure it was available. So I did lots of community work there. I would speak at clubs and I usually got up to the early morning Rotary's and Kiwanis and so forth. I spoke to civic groups and then we had a program Re-Focus. There was a program for traditional students called Focus. They would come in and I would have an orientation, and so I had Re-Focus programs in the community. We would advertise and we would have 150 people come to a Re-Focus program to get information on the University of South Florida.

G: What kinds of people were interested in taking courses? I'm talking about these mature students. What were some of their typical characteristics if you will? Were there more men than women? Were they traditional age?

L: There were more women than men. As a pre-admission advisor I had appointments. I would see people on an individual basis. I would see women who said I want to come back to school so I can get a job. Well, they were coming back because they were getting a divorce or needed a job. Men who majored in football and fraternities realized they needed to finish a degree, so you'd have a man coming in with a three-piece suit on who was scared to death to come back to college because he'd been out for a while. So they needed lots of tender love and care and encouragement. Meanwhile, there were programs here that were helpful to them. We had continuing education courses that they could ease into a class with. We had the Bachelor of Independent Studies program that they could come in part time or study independently. They just simply didn't know how to get through the registration process, what was required. I simply had the regulations that they needed and the steps that they needed to take.

G: I assume that once many of these people became involved in the university and comfortable with the university that many of them pursued full degrees.

L: Yes, that was usually the reason they were coming. Although, we did have some people who came just because they wanted to take, say, anthropology or history or whatever they were interested in. They were mainly coming back to pursue a career for a specific reason.

G: Why was the University of South Florida, particularly in those early days, why do you think they were interested in starting a program for mature students?

L: Because it was a new university and this is not typical Tampa. Adults were beginning to come back to college, and it was beginning to be alright to go back as an adult. There was a feeling nationally that adults can continue to learn and look as we were, new and

non-traditional. We didn't have any of the barriers that many colleges have. It was open and up for grabs so to speak. Because we were new, we encouraged students of all ages to come.

G: You said you were a pre-admission advisor for about four years. What did you do next for the university?

L: I moved into Continuing Education because I felt that there were things that I could do there. For example, I was doing lots of one on one advising, and in Continuing Education I could set up programs to work with groups of people coming back. I could help preparatory classes for the GRE or the SAT or whatever. I felt that was a reasonable place for me to be. There were changes in Continuing Education at that time, and so I became director of Lifelong Learning and conferences and institutes. I was able to create programs for adults that would help them become a regular student or just enrich their lives or prepare [them] in their professions. There are many professions who require Continuing Education units.

G: When did you become the director of Lifelong Learning?

L: I'll have to look at my dates here. I will have to come back to that when my mind takes me back to that. I was there for many years, until 1980. I was sixty-five years old myself and I said we need to have a program for senior citizens. Richard Taylor was interim dean of Continuing Education, and he said we'll give it a try. That was when I set up the division of senior programs.

G: Having gone from mature students to educating students and now moving to senior citizens, why did you feel it was important to initiate a program for senior citizens at the university?

L: Well, let me go back to 1980 when the legislature passed a law saying that universities in the state system could allow Florida residents age sixty and older to attend any regular credit class on the space available basis. I initiated that program here at the university when I was a pre-admission advisor for mature students because it was a good thing and it would just come about. So I've always been involved with that program since the beginning. We've had as many as 300 senior citizens taking our regular classes. It was a never-ending funding for that program, so what I did I considered part of my job and something I wanted to do. The registration office did it. Everyone was very cooperative in that program and welcomed seniors. I had always done the program for seniors, and when I became a bona-fide senior myself I was interested in setting up a more organized program. At the same time, there were programs nationally, Senior Net being one of them. Senior Net is a program of seniors teaching seniors how to use computers. This was a national program. We had a grant to get that program started, and it's been a gangbuster program. I had always done elder hostels here at the university, even in as a pre-admission advisor for mature students. I had started Elderhostel programs. I had been involved in the tuition waiver program, I had been involved in Elderhostel and had organized Elderhostel programs, and then Elderhostel started a program called Learning in Retirement that was a program for seniors in place. For instance, a senior would go to an Elderhostel and come home and say gosh that was so much fun, why can't I continue to do this at home? So the Learning in Retirement event is seniors teaching seniors. It's part of a national program. We have retired attorneys who teach Shakespeare, we have doctors who teach history, and we have retired university professors who have taught in it. Senior Net and the Learning in Retirement program were all about on volunteer

power; I just organized it into a division. Senior Net was one of the flagship programs in the United States. The Learning Retirement program, the first time we had a reception to tell people about it traffic was lined up on Fowler Avenue of seniors that wanted to come in and take that program. That program has gone on to almost 600 members.

G: With the 1980 legislature allowing seniors to come in to the university, I imagine that there's been, since the 1980s, a real influx of seniors who come to the University of South Florida.

L: Yes, with the tuition waiver program it started out with a big bang and it was the largest program in the state and still is. We had someone who was taking care of it and the university was interested in it, so we had a program set up that they could come to. If you went to another university you would really have to scout around to get in. We welcomed the seniors here and they loved being here. One of the problems was that many times there was not space in a class. We've gone through times when there were just not enough spaces for our regular students. Sometimes it's hard to say you can come and take classes when there might not be a class for you. That was also run on volunteer power, and we had a group of seniors who were the advisement committee for that. They have added a lot to the classes I think. I always said you may not get the class you want at the time you want at the time you want it, on the day you want it, but there's a class here that you would be interested in and enjoy.

G: How have younger students, if you will, reacted to senior citizens taking classes alongside them? Has it been a positive experience for the majority of our seniors here at the university?

L: I think it has. I can think of one of the seniors taking the class and she became ill, and

she said she looked out her window one day and there were six young women who rode their bicycles to her house because they were concerned about her. Seniors always had to take the initiative with younger students because they're more mature [and] they're probably a little more at ease, but if seniors made an effort to get to know the regular students they made some good friends. We even had a man here who took a class with a young man that he became interested in because the young man was having a hard time with his math classes. He had worked with him through a fraternity here. He took a math class with this young student so he could help him get through that math class. There are lots of wonderful stories of seniors who were certainly enriched by making younger friends, and younger friends [have been] enriched by seniors. Just last year we started a program with the honors program of seniors who are in the tuition waiver program to become involved in the honors program. We had a committee of seniors who came up with some of the ideas and rules that they wanted. Then, of course the honors program had their standards. We ended up with two seniors in most of the honors classes and that was last spring. This was a very successful program. We had an orientation for the students so that they would not monopolize in the classes. They were there to be mentors if they were approached, and in many cases it was a very successful thing. They sort of sat back and didn't intrude upon the students but were there if they could add to the situation or on an informal basis be helpful in any way.

G: What kind of challenges, if you will, does the university have in having seniors attend the university?

L: Space is probably the biggest problem, not only in the tuition waiver program for space in class, and they don't get credit for these courses, but the other classes they're always

fighting for space. Everyone is fighting for space out here. Our senior programs are mainly in the daytime and very often in the mornings. For example, the College of Public Health classes are usually in the afternoons so we had space in there, in that college for courses. We have two computer labs in that area, but space is probably the biggest problem with senior programs and parking is the second. We have tried to encourage seniors to ride the shuttle.

G: In terms of funding, you mentioned that the majority of senior programs at USF has really been done through the efforts of volunteers. Does the university give the senior programs any financial support?

L: No, the tuition waiver program is just part of what people do as their jobs now, as the extra part. The Learning in Retirement is funded by a membership and they have their advisory committee and their curriculum committee, so it's funded through membership and a cost for the classes. The Senior Net program, again, is funded through class funds. The seniors must pay for those classes, although they're volunteer run and the university does provide space there is no funding. I have always felt that the university was very supportive in these programs. The seniors I think have been welcomed and the university has supported it in many ways other than financially. When I was director of the program my salary was funded by the university, so that was the funding for the senior program.

G: When did you become involved with the Institute on Aging as well as becoming ultimately the assistant director of the Institute on Aging?

L: I have been on the starting committee to set up the Institute on Aging and I had served on the executive board since the beginning. They were looking for an assistant director and

I had been involved in the planning of the missions and the goals of the institute. I had become very excited about what the potential was. I had even interviewed candidates for the position and we never found anyone that really was right for the job, and so I thought I can do that, I'd like to do that. I thought well, I can make a late-life career change. So, I applied for the position. I knew that I had two more years before retirement, so I was not a threat to anybody. I was interested in the program [and] excited about what could happen, so I enjoyed creating programs there. My forte I think is in creation of programs, and I enjoyed being there for two years.

G: What kind of initiatives did you initiate, if you will, as the director of the Institute on Aging?

L: I put together the first year focus groups of our membership to find out what they were interested in doing and how they could become more involved in the institute. The second year we called them not focus groups but planning groups. So we were able to bring the members of the institute from university wide [from areas such as] medicine, nursing, public health, humanities, arts. There are members from many of the units on campus. Another thing that I did was to call on many of the directors of programs saying this is what the institute is about, what can you do to bring in programs on gerontology to your group? For example, the College of Arts and Sciences is very involved with programs for seniors. In their English department, if they were going to have a research paper assigned they might say is anyone interested in authors over the age of sixty-five say, or older artists? So we try to inspire them to become more involved with aging, and not only accepting students in their programs but putting it as part of their programs.

This is psychology, sociology, and of course the gerontology department here is very

active, but we were trying to get other units involved in gerontology also because it's a part of life.

G: In your many years of service to the university what are you most proud of?

L: That's a hard one. Right now, I am still very involved with a program called Distinguished Master Artists Series. This is a program that we started, and it was a result of our first focus group so to speak of Institute on Aging members. This is a program that we will bring in nationally known artists sixty-five or older who are still active in contributing, to bring them in to teach master classes because they have the experience and the know how to show people in the community that seniors can still be creative, and to also show seniors that they can still be creative. We had our first artist last spring. It was Dick Hyman who was a jazz pianist. He was a wonderful selection because the jazz department here really pushed it and made it work. We had a performance for the community; we had the community advisory board who did some master classes. We did a performance for seniors that were bussed in. We worked with all of the retirement homes around and they bussed the seniors in for that program. Dick Hyman played for them, talked with them, had some of the younger students from his classes play with him. It was a very informal kind of thing, but it was to show seniors that they can still be creative as they age. They might not be able to play jazz music, but I think that creativity can be in many ways. We are working on our next program, which will be in spring of 2004. We have our artist selected. I think this is a way to show students that aging is a part of life, and it's to show that the university is interested in aging. We're in the right place to really make a difference with not only seniors in the area but to be a showplace for what seniors can do and how they can be a vital part of the university.

G: Where do you see the university in the next decade, if you had a crystal ball? Where do you see the university, being that you have this unique history in literally seeing the university from the ground up to its development, to what we have today, this large-urban university? Where do you see it in ten years?

L: In ten years I see it as a research university, and part of that research I feel will be in the field of gerontology. That's where the action is internationally because there are simply going to be more seniors alive in this world than we have ever had in all our past experience. This has to be addressed and there are people here who are doing exciting research in the area of aging. Aging will be a part of that research. I think probably the main emphasis will be on economics, however, and the scientific advancement in research. Certainly aging has to be a part of that research.

G: This is my final question and it is something that I have asked all of my interviewees. If you could leave a final thought either to the previous administration, faculty, students, and staff that you've worked with or to future faculty and students what would you want to say about the University of South Florida?

L: I would want to say be open and kind to diversity, of age and race and so forth. I'd want to say look back at what has happened and move forward.

G: Lee, thank you very much.

L: Thank you, I've enjoyed chatting with you and being here. I've enjoyed being a part of the university.

End of Interview