

7-28-2003

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

Victor Leavengood (Interviewee)

Yael V. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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Leavengood, Victor (Interviewee) and Greenberg, Yael V. (Interviewer), "Victor Leavengood oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, July 28, 2003" (2003). *Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 132.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/usfhinfo_oh/132

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

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Date of Interview: July 28, 2003
Transcriber: University of Florida
Audit Editor: Danielle E. Riley
Date Audit Edit Completed: December 18, 2003

Interviewer: Yael V. Greenberg (G)
Location of Interview: Tampa Campus
Library
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

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, staff, students, friends, and alumni, in order to commemorate fifty years of the university history. Today we will be interviewing Victor Leavengood, who came to the Tampa area in 1959. Good afternoon Mr. Leavengood.

L: Good afternoon Yael.

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: I had an interest in South Florida [because I had] been on staff at the University of Florida when John Allen was on staff [as] a professor and I was in the Dean of Men's office. I also knew the business manager, Bob Denard, who John brought here as the business manager for the university. Denard and I had belonged to the same naval reserve officer unit in Gainesville and therefore we met each week. We were not close friends, but it was interesting. My first experience with the University of South Florida was the day that Governor Collins came to break ground, a very, very hot day among the

sandspurs, and the publisher of the newspaper, Jim Council, was on the podium. Since I worked for the *Tribune* he said, Vic, I would like for you to be there. I worked directly for Mr. Counsel as sort of assistant to the publisher, and I ultimately ended up negotiating labor contracts for the Tribune Company. That was an extremely hot day. The governor turned the shovel [and] we all had lemonade under a tent. So that was my first exposure. The *Tribune* itself was very pleased. It had spent a great deal of editorial opinion in trying to bring the university to Tampa [and] it won the battle between whether it should be in Tampa or St. Petersburg. At that time, in 1959, there were more Republicans in St. Petersburg and the legislature was basically Democratic. Hillsborough County, being a large blue-collar community, was mainly Democratic. So that battle ended between where the location would be. The *Tribune* said what can we do to help the university, and the first thing that came up was Dollars for Dorms. We ran a columnar promotion asking everybody to contribute Dollars for Dorms because I don't believe the first appropriation included having any dollars for the dormitories. This was a Grass Roots, local citizen effect. My memory doesn't help me out much with what we raised. If we raised \$50,000 it would be amazing, but we asked everybody to contribute only \$1. It made the community aware that the university was coming here and all these people were going to be here. Of course the original idea, and I'm not putting words in John Allen's mouth, but John Allen thought of the university as being an extremely fine liberal arts school of maybe 5,000, possibly 8,000 students. It would be a community. Has anyone told you about the university book, the adoption of a novel or something to be read by everybody in the first year so they could discuss it over lunch? Of course it really didn't exist here though. Another participation along the lines of the university, as we got students, and in

1960 we had our first students [was the alumni]. I was interested in the foundation; I was interested in the Alumni Association, which I was not a member. Dr. Allen said, you know we haven't got any alumni [and] that's where money comes from. Nobody [is] committed. So a small group of us would just kind of meet, [it was] Denard and John and several other people, [and] we came up with the idea of honorary alumni. Anybody who paid \$10 to be an honorary alumni became an alumni of the university, and that's how the first gathering together of people [occurred], the alumni of the university. Along came the foundation, the idea of raising money. Again I said, hey, we were successful with the alumni, let's make [it so that] anybody that gives us \$50 automatically belongs to the foundation, like a membership. That was very successful in gathering 400-500 people together. We then became aware that this was a democratic type organization, and anybody that was a member could vote. Carrying it to the ultimate extremes, we might have an election [that would] throw out the foundation board, take over, and take over the money of the university foundation. So the foundation was reorganized into having a perpetual, self-propitiating board of directors, which it now has, so that there would be no raid on the treasury so to speak. Of course there was very little money in the treasury at that time. So again, this first investment committee of course was a little small. There were six of us. I can't remember where it was, but I remember meeting and drinking coffee in a restaurant. We had a given amount of money that we should invest and about eight different opinions and about eight different stocks or securities, which is a very invalid way to invest money. The investment committee now, of course, is extremely professionalized and has professional investment people, but the university took on some things that were not necessarily good. There was a gentleman who had gas rights,

theoretically, in Arizona, and property in California. [He] said, I will turn over all my assets and I want a contract that you will perpetually pay me so much a year or so much a month. Amusingly, the man did not lie to us except for the value of the assets. I investigated the California property that he had some five or six years later when I worked for GTE because GTE has a company in California. The real estate department of GTE of California, upon contacting them, made the investigation of the property to which we held the deed [of this] very valuable piece of land. [It was] ten feet wide and three hundred feet long running alongside a railroad track. So we did not always really check into things correctly. Of course those things don't exist anymore, but those are the interesting little side issues that we had.

G: I want to go back a little bit if I can.

L: You can back up anytime you want to.

G: You said some important things that I want to check. Being that you knew John Allen at the University of Florida, and now seeing him as president of a new institution, what kind of a man was John Allen?

L: John Allen was most articulate, a gentleman, a scholar. You had to be careful to clean up your language in front of John, and Grace too. John was a man of even temperament. He was a Quaker by religion. In fact we have had two Quaker presidents. [Are you] aware of that?

G: Who was the second Quaker president?

L: Brown. John Lott Brown [was the second Quaker president]. I don't know the Quaker religion that well, but they had certain standards [they lived by], particularly John. During John's administration, when Charles Johns, or better known as Charlie Johns, was

president of the senate and became governor when Dan McCarty died, [he] held a great homosexual investigation at the university. John Allen never responded to any of the charges. He somewhat turned the other cheek. Perhaps that was best, I don't know. He infuriated some of the supporters of the university by not responding back about academic freedom, etc. He confirmed what the people who were opposed to gay professors thought originally. So I think he lost some grounds there, but be that as it may the university progressed. John was a very delightful man, particularly talking about astronomy. He made it come alive for you.

G: What do you think John Allen's vision of the university was in those early years?

L: [What his vision was in] 1959?

G: Yes.

L: John Allen had a vision of a high-class liberal arts, emphasis on the arts, 5,000-8,000 students [school]. What does our logo say?

G: Accent on learning.

L: Accent on learning, that was John. I will deal with this I guess now. John wanted a weekly campus newspaper. I suggested to him that he had a mimeograph machine and I'm sure operators could run it. This was right when the students were beginning to come in 1960. He said, no Vic, I want more than that. I said, well what's our budget? He says, well it's in student funds and probably very slim, I really don't know. I at the time was working for the Tribune Company, which published both the *Tampa Tribune* in the morning and the *Tampa Times* in the evening. The *Tampa Times* was a sick newspaper because history was just taking the light away from afternoon newspapers. So I came up with the idea [that] we needed paid circulation on both papers, but particularly on the

Times. So I talked with the audit bureau of circulation, known as ABC, and I said, what about wholesale sales? He said, well you really have to get some money out of wholesale sales. So I worked it out for the company that John Allen, or the University of South Florida, would take the *Tampa Times* and re-plate the front page of the *Tampa Times* with the campus edition of the *Tampa Times* and call it the *Oracle*. [Then we would] have a campus newspaper once a week [and] there would be a jump page inside that any of the stories that were long [would] jump to the jump page. We'd do this for two cents a copy and he would have to guarantee us 3,000 copies. Three thousand times two cents equaled \$60, but it was paid circulation and went into the *Oracle*. It started in September 1960 and George Miller was the academic man, or the man from the university, who put the first one together. That presents an administrative problem within the Board of Control. Are you aware of this problem? Some years before that while working for the *Ocala Star Banner*, the University of Florida School of Journalism, mainly fighting off a school of journalism at Florida State University, the Board of Regents held hearings and included the press, the Florida Daily Newspaper Association, which I was a member. The board of regents said after the investigation that journalism can be taught only at the University of Florida. There shall be only a school of journalism at the University of Florida. Well here we are having journalism classes here [at the University of South Florida]. The dean of the school of journalism at Florida was Ray Weimer [at the time]. With the help of John Allen, Ray Weimer, myself, Miller, and three or four others, we came to an arrangement that journalism could be taught here, one class [only], in the school of communications. There would not be [a school of journalism]. The Board of Regents had become much wiser than they used to be and that's no longer a problem, but that was very interesting

negotiations. So we opened with the first edition on September 26. I just went into the library and looked at [it] today to be sure of my date. The most interesting thing in the paper was a picture of John Allen on the right hand side of the page and a story: Football has been postponed at the University of South Florida. John Allen was somewhat opposed to intercollegiate athletics, but he was more really interested in the liberal arts being taught. That was his concept. After two or three years we much exceeded the enrollment that he thought was available and we went on to greater and grander numbers of people. Of course John was succeeded by Cecil Mackey, who was much more an administrative type. He brought Albert Hartley in as business manager and several other[s]. [He brought] Joe Howell as dean. Did anybody tell the story about the shirt fairy? We had pre-registration where the families would come to the university [with] new students. Joe Howell told the story [to the parents], he said, I know you're worried about your children and what they eat. We have a cafeteria and we have a few spaces for them to live in, and probably the most important thing is laundry and cleaning. He said, your son or daughter will slip on [the] clean shirts that they brought and it will probably last for five days and all of a sudden they're going to discover that the shirt fairy did not show up and bring any more clean clothes. He says, we're prepared to show them how the shirt fairy works, which you have [probably] not told them about at home. So he was known as the speaker for the shirt fairy, which is not very academic but is an amusing story. During that time we had the first dance, and at that time even some people danced together. John Allen said, we should have chaperones at the dance and this is a chance to extend ourselves into the community. So we put together three or four couples to chaperone the first dance, Lee Leavengood and Victor Leavengood were one of those

chaperones. The next dance they decided the chaperones weren't necessary. As they say in the academic field, the university does not stand in local parents, so that was the great end of the chaperones. About the same time we were concerned about beer on the campus. The legislative delegation had been very, very protective of the university. You could not sell beer within a certain distance of the university, and students wanted beer. My position was let them drink beer on campus. We got the delegation to authorize a special pact, a special beer permit, for on campus beer. John was very unsettled with that. He said, here they've created a special district not to have beer close to the university. I said, isn't it better to have the students on campus drinking beer than going a half a mile down the road? I said at least you can control it some, and I think that ended the question right then. I thought that was interesting. I'm more interested in community participation because I was working in that field. I left the Tribune Company in November 1964 and moved to GTE Florida as the legislative lobbyist, and therefore I still continued to have an interest in the university. About that time my bride decided she needed a second degree, having raised three children, and she tackled the university. About the same time we were very interested in the arts too. Pablo Picasso Ruiz was on the scene, better known as Pablo Picasso, or a gentleman among ladies, and he had designed a large sculpture. I can't check it, but it was to be in concrete and it was to be approximately fifty feet high sitting on the hill behind the present student center. Theoretically you could see it from anywhere in town at any time, [but] I'm not sure that you could. This was about the 1970s and the president appointed George Gage, president of GTE, and George Jenkins, president of an engineering company, as co-chairman to raise \$250,000 to build it. Since I was then treasurer of GTE, George Gage said, I'd like to have my own

treasurer on this task so I can keep watch over it, [and] I am the guy who ended up as treasurer of the committee. We gathered from a lot of different people. [We had] lots of \$2,000 or \$3,000 [donations], [and] one \$5,000 check I remember. [But] the economic conditions had turned on us, so finally there was a meeting of the committee with the president stating this is not the time to build a Picasso. [Then the question was asked], what shall we do with the money? It was decided that it would be returned to anybody that wanted their funds returned. Now that was a problem in itself. If you were a corporation and you had sent in \$300, you charged that off against your tax returns. To reverse it would take more explanation than it was worth. Or you could leave the money with the university and we would put it into the general scholarship fund. We had between \$50,000-60,000. To the best of my memory only one corporation had asked for a return of the money, and I have it ingrained in my memory but I don't plan to discuss it.

G: Over the years you've seen the university grow literally from the sandspurs all the way to these beautiful buildings. What has been to you the biggest change over the last thirty years of the University of South Florida?

L: Wow. First of all, we had no name for the university initially. I think the *St. Pete Times* joined the *Tribune* in a Dollars for Dorms [campaign]. I believe the *St. Pete Times* joined the *Tribune* also in naming the university. We asked the public to send in their names. This is backing up to when I was still on the *Tribune*. We had tremendous [response]. Letting people respond to what stuff should be done is always exciting. The two names, and they were both foolish, that were the most popular among the populace submitted to the committee was Bottle Cap U, because of the two breweries Schlitz and Budweiser that were across the street in the industrial development park, [and] the second was

Sandspur U. Then the Board of Regents said the name of the university is the University of South Florida. There was editorial comment [that] we're not South Florida, but that didn't particularly disturb the regents. So that was another participation. Now you asked me a question?

G: What is the most significant change or changes that you've seen in the last thirty years of your history being affiliated with the University of South Florida?

L: [There are] two or three of course. The first is that the faculty was well chosen. The initial faculty seemed to be well chosen. Of course we've had some bad choices at different times, and are in the middle of evidently a questionable choice at this time. The faculty were teaching in probably the provost's [guidance], although we've never had a provost until recently. But the dean of academic affairs, one of them being Carl Riggs who just recently died, really worked on what is the core curriculum, what courses must we have. Some of the earlier deans were men of vision, and the deans of today are men of vision too. But we changed presidents five or six times. There was John Allen, there was Cecil Mackey, there was John Lott Brown. There was [also] interim presidents. There was Frank Borkowski, Betty Castor, [and] there's Judy now. This changed leadership. Each of them brought something to the university. Academics, by all means, was very, very important to John Allen. Administrative operating unit was Cecil Mackey's strong suit, and is one in which he irritated many, many people. Then Brown came in and started soothing people over. Betty Castor brought to the university an outward look, or community look, or a political look. Yes we understood politics was important, but Betty consolidated all the effort and really made it possible. First of all, she had run twice or three times statewide, had been commissioner of education, knew how the system

worked, had lots of chits out in government, she belonged to the right party, and she used every facility at her beck and call to make the state equalize a great deal between universities. She also is one of the wiser people. She knew when the tide turned and she left with the tide. That's how I've seen it go. The great war department at the university has been the med school. Initially John Allen, bless his heart, brought in an academic Ph.D. to be the first dean of the med school and then the accrediting agency turned it down because the dean should be an M.D. Then he brought in Smith. Whatever Dean Smith's given name is, who had been in the Veterans Administration. Dean Smith knew how the system worked and he made it work. The med school has always had academic and personality problems. I don't consider it any different than any other university that has a med school. When I was a lowly assistant dean of men at the University of Florida was the year that Florida got a med school; it also got co-education in 1945. My boss, the Dean of Men, Robert Colter Beatty, I'm sorry to see the med school come to Florida. I said, Bob, you've been out in the sunshine too long. Why? Why do you say that? He said, the tail always wags the dog has been my experience at many other universities. He said, the med school will suck more money out of the state and academic programs will suffer. Now I don't think that's totally true, but it does take a great deal of money to run a med school.

G: In terms of how other universities, the University of Florida and Florida State for example, felt about USF in those early days, how did they feel about the university coming and taking their money?

L: The University of Florida and Florida State University were at least fifty years old each, and I don't think they really concerned themselves. We had a constitutional amendment

in 1968 which said one man, one vote, and it's no fair counting pine stumps and cows. Every county in the state of Florida basically had their own senator representing some 7,000 souls and some pine trees and cows. [This was] compared to Hillsborough County representing 300,000 people with one senator. So we had the equalization of representation as one person, one vote in the 1968 constitutional revision. So that placed the political power back into the centers of population, and we were very fortunate in having some very dynamic people. Two of them come to mind in the delegation. Sam Gibbons, Moffitt, Terrell Sessums, [and] Bob Mann [were] the people who knew how to play the political system and were representing power structures in the population. They made it really possible for the University of South Florida to be funded. At one time we passed out buttons that just said 'Equity,' meaning equity in appropriation [and] equity in pay. You know a professor of economics at South Florida was paid considerably less than a professor of economics at Florida or FSU.

G: I want to go back to the *Oracle* for a second. Where did the idea of the name the *Oracle* come from? Do you know anything about that?

L: No, but there is a man alive today, Miller, [who would know].

G: What are you most proud of in your thirty years affiliated with the university and working with the university?

L: [I can tell you] what was the greatest fun, [but] it may not have been an accomplishment. I became treasurer of the foundation for five or six years. Then Joe, who was the vice president in charge of the foundation, [told me to be president]. He left and went to Auburn. He's in the books somewhere. He said, Vic, if you're ever going to be president you better take it this year. So in the 1980s, I don't really remember when, I became

president of the foundation. Those two things meant a lot to me. We tried to move ahead.

The one single thing that Lee Leavengood and Vic Leavengood have created is the Leavengood Fund for the contemporary art museum. That fund, and a few little other funds, have now reached over \$1,000,000. That was sort of a personal goal. When Lee joined the faculty I said we ought to put some money back into the university [because] they've been so good to you.

G: Where do you see the University of South Florida in the next ten, twenty, thirty years if you had a crystal ball?

L: The strength of numbers in the population will accrue to the betterment of the University of South Florida. [That is] if we don't stub our toe on something. I was not a debut of the football team. I was not a debut of the Bucs either. I was a debut of the Gators, but I have stopped that too and joined the Bulls. I think as far as students go it gives more cohesion to the campus to have a football team. That is not the majority of the students or the reason they're here, but that's a cohesive effect on them. I see the university one day surpassing the other two universities [and] probably [being] the largest. Because we're into Sarasota, St. Pete, and Tampa, yes, there are division lines there. There may be some changes [needed] there, but I still think it could be the leading university in the state. We have the industrial background [and] the industrial core [of support]. I'm a little surprised that Central Florida has not really caught on, but in dealing with entertainment, the entertainment [industry is] mainly interested in entertainment, not education. So I see tremendous [potential]. I think we will change presidents, and I don't mean Dr. Jim Chaff is in trouble or anything else, but as we move along the president in the past seven or eight years is qualified and each one will bring something new or some different

emphasis. We have a new provost who is dedicated to the academic program and will turn up everything possible to make it work. So I'm very positive. I realize that this is a year in which we have been cut back, [but] we'll change companies too.

G: This is my final question and something that I've asked all of my interviewees. If you could leave a final thought or sentiment on camera about the University of South Florida either to colleagues or friends that you've worked with over the past thirty years, or to future students, colleagues, and staff, what would you want to say about the University of South Florida?

L: First of all it's a state school, and state schools are in the job of educating the greatest number of citizens it can. Therefore, it's going to need financial support from the state. I've seen figures and I'm worried about it a bit. Only a percent comes from state dollars. We're going to have to find new ways of being innovative, participating, getting businesses to participate [and be more innovative in] our research ideas, our research cooker idea and that sort of thing, if we're going to be the number one university. So I think we need to solicit the community.

G: Mr. Leavengood, thank you very much.

L: Good.

End of Interview