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John Melendi oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, July 22, 2003

John Melendi (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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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

He came to USF in 1964 as a university cashier. Through the years he took several positions. In 1995 he retired as associate vice president of the health sciences center.

Circumstances that brought him to USF

He was born and raised in Tampa. He attended Florida Southern College. He was working for Century Truck Lines after graduation. They were sold out to a firm in Cleveland. In order for him to continue with the company he had to move to Cleveland. He decided against that. A friend told him to look at USF for possible jobs. He applied for a position and was hired.

What did Mr. Melendi hear about USF?

He knew it was a new up and coming university because he was born and raised in Tampa. He kept reading the papers about the university. He knew it had to be a great university because of its location. There were universities in northern Florida so he thought it was great to get one down in the Tampa Bay area.

What did USF look like in 1964?

It was a very large open area. The buildings USF had at the time were the library building, administration building, a few housing buildings, and classroom buildings. He says it was so open that sometimes during rainstorms they were afraid to go to the parking lots because they might be hit by lightning.

What was it like to work in a new university?

He says that because the university was new it was small, and therefore, they did things with a team effort.

President Allen and football

“Dr. and Mrs. Allen were unbelievably fantastic people. People thought he did not like football. He did not want it because he was afraid the funds would divert from academic to football. They were football fans, but in his mind he did not want to divert any funds from the academic setting,” states Mr. Melendi.

John Allen's vision

"I think his vision was totally academic," he states.

Responsibilities of a university cashier

As a university cashier he handled students' fees and applications for loans. He says it was like a small bank. At the time they had two tellers.

Where did the university cashiers work?

They were located in the administration building. They were a small office. He stayed there for six or seven months and then became the manager of the bookstore.

Mr. Melendi becomes manager of the bookstore

His boss wanted three workers, including Mr. Melendi, to learn the complete university administrative type work. Mr. Melendi's boss wanted to place people in a different area, and then after a little while, move them into a new work area.

Working with USF faculty

He worked with faculty because faculty from different departments came to purchasing to place their orders and tell Mr. Melendi what books they needed. The bookstore got a book list from faculty in order to have the appropriate books for students. He had that type of work relationship with faculty during his positions of director of purchasing, and manager of the bookstore.

Bookstore becomes merchandise store

The bookstore just had books. They knocked a hole in the floor and made it two stories. They put books on one floor. On the other floor they put items like records, magazines, sweatshirts, and essential items such as toothbrushes and toothpaste. Mr. Melendi says it was similar to a merchandise store at the time. He says students liked that. The bookstore then added candy. Mr. Melendi says the records were what students really loved. Mr. Melendi was manager of the bookstore for a year and a half.

Where was the first bookstore located?

The first bookstore was located in the UC in the ballroom.

Writing plans for a new library

"Each year we would write a new plan for the new bookstore we were going to build. Of course it took quite a few years to finally fund it," he says.

Mr. Melendi then becomes director of purchasing

He spent a year as director.

Major responsibilities as director

He was in charge of receiving and purchasing of all the university items.

Florida legislature proposes a medical school at USF

In 1965 the legislature decided that the state of Florida needed another state supported medical school to give students in the state an opportunity to become physicians. The legislature looked to USF to build a medical center. The legislature appointed someone to be the overseer to write the program for the college of medicine.

Why did the Florida legislature want another medical school?

Mr. Melendi says at the time there were only 150 spaces for students to go to medical school in both Miami and Gainesville. The legislature thought there should be more opportunity for students in Florida to go to medical school.

Why did the legislature choose USF?

FSU had a medical program, but they moved students after two years to UF to complete their medical education. FSU and UF are in north Florida. USF is in central Florida so the legislature thought USF was an ideal location for a new medical school.

USF Medical school plans denied accreditation

The first application for accreditation was rejected. Mr. Melendi says the reason for rejection was because the written program did not contain any plans for a full time faculty. Instead it was proposed to just use local physicians to come and teach. Mr. Melendi says those plans did not fly with the legislature. Therefore, the medical program was denied accreditation.

Medical school begins hiring people even without its accreditation

It was decided to appoint a full-time dean of the medical school. The BOR appointed someone to begin a nationwide search for a dean. Meanwhile, USF went ahead and hired a secretary for the medical school.

Mr. Melendi is hired by the medical school as assistant business manager

They were interviewing people for assistant business manager. He was asked if he would like to be assistant business manager. Mr. Melendi said yes.

Dr. Smith becomes dean

USF recruited Dr. Smith for dean. He was a very well known medical school dean. He was dean of the medical school at Louisville. He accepted the job in 1969. He arrived at USF in January of 1970. Mr. Melendi worked for Dr. Smith. Mr. Melendi says Dr. Smith served under General Patton in the service so he was very direct. When Dr. Smith first showed up at USF he had on a pair of cowboy boots and jeans. "His presence was just unbelievable. He feared no one. He held back nothing. He was totally honest," he says. Mr. Melendi says that Dr. Smith's reputation and personality helped to keep funds flowing in to the medical school. He says the legislature hardly every cut the medical school's budget. One year the legislature even asked Dr. Smith if the proposed budget would be enough for the medical school. Mr. Melendi says that is unheard of in legislative budgets. Mr. Melendi says Dr. Smith was very conscious of everyone. He would ask people what the medical school could do to improve things. He was always looking for ways to improve.

Dr. Smith had to work hard in the beginning

The medical school had to have reasonable accreditation by July of 1970 in order to meet the deadline for matching federal funds for construction. Dr. Smith arrived in January of 1970. Between January and July Dr. Smith wrote the reasons why a medical school was necessary; he did the schematic drawings; and he did projections on students, faculty, staff, and budget. Mr. Melendi says that Dr. Smith left nothing to chance. He did a lot in those six months. Dr. Smith also got funding for phases I and II of the new medical school building. Phase I cost ten million dollars, and phase II cost eighteen million dollars. Phases I and II consisted of 390,000 square feet.

Where were the medical school offices housed?

The three medical school offices were housed in the administration building.

Where were the classes taught?

The medical school got temporary quarters in the science building on the top floor, plus a room in the basement for the cadavers. Mr. Melendi says they were not the most welcomed guests since they were taking away space from a college. The medical school stayed in the science building until 1974 when construction of the medical school building was completed. The medical school received \$276,000 to build a place where the second year classes would be housed. The first year classes were held on the top floor of the science building.

Medical school receives accreditation; next step after that

The medical school received a letter of accreditation. Once the letter was received the recruiting process began. The medical school's first class started in July of 1971. By July of 1971 Dr. Smith had recruited all the basic science chairmen, faculty, and staff. Dr. Smith got all the medical books needed for the school in by July as well. Students were all set up with facilities.

What kinds of people did Dr. Smith recruit in the beginning?

Mr. Melendi says that Dr. Smith went for top people. Recruiting was not that difficult because Dr. Smith challenged people to come to USF. For example, Dr. Smith would tell recruits that they could either stay where they are and not grow or advance, or come to USF and grow and advance. The chairmen were all well known. "If your young, energetic and bright, what better future could you have in some place where you wouldn't be assistant professor for the next fifteen years, but where you would have a chance to move up very rapidly if you worked hard," he states. Dr. Smith rewarded those who worked hard. Dr. Smith was well known. Mr. Melendi says that since Dr. Smith is well known, it is possible that people came to the medical school because he was there.

First medical school class

There were twenty-four students in the first class. The students were housed in the science building on the top floor. Mr. Melendi says some of the students actually worked with them by helping to unload boxes even before they were students. He says the class was a very close class. Before class students would play hockey on the top floor. "Those

[first] students took a chance too because it [medical school] was not completely accredited when they arrived,” he states. All of the first students graduated.

Diversity among the first medical students

Dr. Smith made sure there was no bias between males and females. Mr. Melendi says there were some women in the first class of twenty-four students. He does not think there were blacks. He knows there were Hispanics.

Construction of medical school building

Construction of the medical school building was done in two phases. The architects were from Miami. They were housed where the golf course is now. The golf course had a temporary building where they stayed. The golf course had built a new pro shop so the old one was used for the architects. The first phase, which cost ten million dollars, involved construction of the basic science departments, teaching areas, library, cafeteria, and bookstore. Dr. Smith insisted that there be two patios. He wanted them to be places where students could hang out and have functions. Dr. Smith had a schematic drawing of the patios. One of the architect’s wives redesigned the patio. However, Dr. Smith made sure the original plans were used. Mr. Melendi says that the medical school building is very simple because Mr. Smith is not one for frills. It was rectangular with no dead spots in the building because they could not afford to waste space. Phase II cost eighteen million dollars. Phase II involved the construction of the clinical departments, auditorium, and additions to the library and cafeteria. The clinic was brought in during phase II.

Groundbreaking of the medical school

The medical school knew they were going to have a dedication one day, but Dr. Smith wanted a private groundbreaking ceremony. Dr. Smith passed the word to just the people of the medical school that they were going to meet the next day at 6:00 a.m. on the hill. They all arrived and used the lights of their cars to see. Dr. Smith brought a shovel, and every person dug up a piece of dirt. “When the campus came alive a few hours later, and the administration found out what we did, all hell broke loose because they wanted to have a big splash, but Dr. Smith was not the splashy type of guy. That was his way of having our groundbreaking. It meant a lot to all of us. Everybody touched the shovel. Everyone was equal,” he says.

The connections of the VA Hospital, Shriners, and Moffitt to the medical school

Most of the VA Hospital’s physicians are from USF. Shriners is a little more independent. Mr. Melendi thinks Shriners may even own the land they are sitting on. A private corporation runs the cancer center. The employees of the cancer center are not state employees. Mr. Melendi says the cancer center is dependent and independent from the medical school.

Famous ride to Tallahassee

Dr. Smith and others made a model of the medical school building. One day Dr. Smith received a call from a friend in Tallahassee who said that the legislature might not allow a medical school at USF because they were not sure if Dr. Smith and others could really

get things going there. Dr. Smith and Mr. Melendi drove up to Tallahassee with the model in the back of the station wagon. They carried the model up the steps and walked in on a meeting unexpectedly. Mr. Melendi says it surprised everyone that they had the model. The legislature began to take them more seriously after that.

How did the medical school get funded?

We submitted our own budget separate from the university. In the first few years Dr. Smith and Mr. Melendi did the entire budget and projected what the school would need. The medical school did a legislative request just like the campus did except it was a separate document. The projected budget went to Tallahassee just like UF's medical school budget did. Mr. Melendi says that as the medical school grew larger, each year each department would submit what their funds were for the following year. Then Mr. Melendi and Dr. Smith met with each department chairman. They would go over each department's request and make sure there were no unneeded items listed. Dr. Smith and Mr. Melendi and Dr. Smith then decided what the following year's percent of increase would be over the current year. If they thought it was too high they would work on it.

Cecil Mackey and the medical school

Mr. Melendi says that when Cecil Mackey became president a lot of changes were made. He thinks every dean was removed except Dr. Smith and Ed Kopp of engineering. The university had its own problems. They left the medical school alone because they knew Dr. Smith knew what he was doing. Mr. Melendi says USF had other problems besides the medical school. Dr. Mackey did not interfere much with the day-to-day operation of the medical school.

Dr. Smith's vacations

Dr. Smith would take one-month vacations each year and tell no one where he was except Mr. Melendi. Dr. Smith would go fly-fishing in Colorado. He told Mr. Melendi not to tell anyone where he was and to call him if it was an emergency. Mr. Melendi remembers Cecil Mackey calling him into his office one day. President Mackey knew that Mr. Melendi knew where Dr. Smith was. President Mackey tried to get Mr. Melendi to tell him where Dr. Smith was. Mr. Melendi did not know where he was exactly, but knew the phone number where he could be reached. He told Dr. Mackey that he did not know where he was.

Mr. Melendi believes something should be named in Dr. Smith's honor

Mr. Melendi is upset that USF has not yet named anything in Dr. Smith's honor. "They don't realize that without Dr. Smith there would be no college of medicine, nursing or public health, and no VA hospital, Shriners hospital, or cancer center. He's made an impact not just here, but in the whole state of Florida," states Mr. Melendi. Dr. Smith was in charge of the cancer center when it was being built. "Someone needs to recognize what a great man this guy was," he says.

Mr. Melendi becomes associate v.p. of the health science center

He was in charge of the budgets, fiscal administration, receiving, and the post office.

What is Mr. Melendi most proud of in his thirty-one years at USF?

He says he is very proud of the university, but the medical school is his baby. “I’m so proud of the medical school. The opportunity to be somewhere where the future physicians in this country are going to come from a place that I helped to start, I’m very proud. I had a wonderful career. Dr. Smith took someone who knew nothing about medical school and trained me,” he states.

Closing thoughts

“I think in an institution like this you only get out what you put in to it. I would say to any student who wants to be a physician, you better want to be a physician because it is not an easy life. And it is not easy on their spouses. It has just been a great place,” he says. Mr. Melendi says the interview brought back some wonderful memories.

End of Interview