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## Shirley Petty oral history interview by Andrew Huse, November 7, 2003

Shirley Petty (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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## TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

### *Introduction to USF*

Ms. Petty heard about the tuition waiver program for seniors and she took several classes. She then joined the peer advisors group, which is a group of older people advising older people and helping them get signed up for classes. This was in the 1980s. She took classes in history, botany and logic. She joined the advisory group because it seems like older people find it easier when another older person is helping them out. The peer advising helped her get the tuition waiver and while she was doing that Lee Leavengood told her about the Learning in Retirement program, which had been utilized at Harvard and William and Mary, but was not at USF. They prepared their own schedules, volunteered and would not have to take exams in classes.

In 1993 or 1994 she got involved in Senior Net, which is a program of seniors teaching other seniors how to use computers. When they first started there were only five or six computers, now they have more. Senior Net has a whole list of classes that you can take in graphics, genealogy and the Internet. They now have around twenty computers. Having older students mentor helped the other students avoid feeling uncomfortable with the technology and helped them avoid feeling like they cannot accomplish the computer learning because they are too old. This is a national program that is very beneficial to seniors.

She is also active in SNUG, the Senior Net Users Group, which is “an offshoot” of the Senior Net group that meets on the Tampa Campus. There are three supplemental offshoots of this group: a genealogy group, a graphics groups and a “Windows” group. The classes are always filled and volunteers do everything. When she first started the people in the classes were almost all men, but now the sexes are split about 50-50. They have many different course options on all different topics, whether they are liberal arts, music, or science and technology classes.

Most classes are held on campus, but there are satellite groups all over the city and there is a group all the way in Chinsegut for the people in Hernando and Pasco Counties. People in south Tampa won't all come all the way to the USF campus, so there is a nice facility in south Tampa to hold these classes, and volunteers run everything. Every study group has a study group leader and they have a social assistant because every group

continues to discuss everything even when they go to lunch. On the last day of class the class takes the instructor or instructors out to lunch.

### *Social opportunities*

The group really enjoys learning and is challenged by the topics. They have “Lunch and Learn” where special guests come in and speak over lunch. For instance, Caroline Cooley is giving a speech on Emily Dickinson and music. Ms. Cooley raised a family and then got her masters degree, then her Ph.D., then wrote a book about Emily Dickinson and will be teaching a course on Emily Dickinson this winter. There are a great variety of courses to take from anything to the American Revolution to politics to music. They avoid arguments and get into discussions. This provides a great opportunity for everyone. They have retreats sometimes as well. Last year they took a retreat to Chinsegut Hill for a weekend.

Other places to hold classes include University Village and Tampa Palms. They had a wine tasting to study wines. Unfortunately at this point there are no classes in Pinellas County. They have some at Chinsegut because there are retreats there, but they aren't holding lectures right now. Overall these classes provide a great opportunity for many older people to “continue learning and doing and really enjoy life.”

### *Activities in Chinsegut*

Ms. Petty had known for a long time about Chinsegut because she had gone there for a number of different reasons. She also knew that it was owned by USF. They started going up there for retreats before they built the new cabins. The first time the weather was very cold, but they had a great time and filled the place in subsequent years. They built the new cabins and everyone had a great time. They would have wine and cheese and everyone would get together for food after they had their meetings. They would go for walks in the mornings around the grounds, which was great. Everyone remained very active while they were up there. In the springtime they would hold a “Spring Fling” which would only last one day at the property USF owns on the river. Spring Fling involved games and lunch for participants.

The people involved in the program are interested in learning new things and are interested in other people's viewpoint. There is a great deal of respect for other people's opinion and this allows the groups to avoid arguments. There are so many classes that Ms. Petty sometimes sees an overlap in classes that she would like to take and must decide between two. Almost all the classes are held in the morning, with some in the afternoon, but most of the people involved don't like to drive at night. There is a short session in the summer time and another short session just before Christmas. In these time periods they run a four-week class.

There are a total of 600 members in Learning in Retirement and they probably have more than that in Senior Net, committee runs everything. The committees plan and look for ideas. Every few years they send out a two page sheet asking the members what they enjoyed, what could be changed, etc. Every class taught also has an evaluation sheet at the end so the committee gets a clear idea of what can be changed. This evaluation

covers everything from the room, to the instructor to the materials. Some of the committees include planning, membership, and recruitment. They just had a Halloween luncheon, which was a lot of fun; people got into costumes and judged on these costumes. They have had luncheons on music, explaining how instruments work, and they have also had luncheons on theater.

### *The Beginning of LIR*

When they first started out there were fewer people than there are now. At the time a lot of people were learning on tuition waiver and they became very interested in LIR when they heard about it. There was an open house when they started Senior Net, and interest spread through word of mouth. There is a membership fee for each group because publications to go out which must be paid for, people join and get on the mailing list. Everything runs very smoothly, because Rogers, the Director of Senior Programs, and her three assistants take care of Senior Net and LIR. They both have a Board of Directors, there is an amazing number of people involved. From coordinators to directors, it takes a lot of people to make this work.

There is also a satellite in Lakeland. Ms. Petty believes it is wonderful that so many people can work together and create something like this and she thinks that it is “marvelous” that it is a USF that they have the opportunity to have all of this.

This is different than when she was in college because there was a difference between people based on age and now that difference does not apply as much. Her membership in LIR gives her a library card for the USF library, which helps her out quite a bit. They also get notices for things that are going on in theater and the arts. Her only problem is that she just lives so far south of the school that it can be difficult to get here from time to time.

### *Ms. Petty's background*

She graduated from college in 1944, so things have changed quite a bit. She majored in biology. She wanted to major in botany, but was told that it was not practical for a woman to major in botany because she couldn't do anything except teach and Ms. Petty was not interested in teaching. She lived in New Jersey and worked with a Pharmaceutical company. Her dissertation was on consciousness in chickens. They used to do biological studies, but it came to a point that they were no longer cost efficient. When she moved to Florida she worked for Southwest Florida Blood Bank, which now does the special licensing. All her life she has been testing and analyzing.

After she retired she took tuition waiver classes and got back into botany classes. She is working with insects, and documents species in a salt marsh habitat now. She finds plenty of things there. After Ms. Petty graduated she went to Columbia University and took courses she enjoyed. Ms. Petty ended up working on her Masters, but she regrets that she didn't go back to school for graduate work.

She moved to Florida in 1951 and the state was very different at the time. USF has added “so much” to Florida and accomplished quite a bit in just fifty years. She has taken quite

a few courses over the last few years and thinks that it is great that all these opportunities are available to people. Now she has the chance to finally work in botany after about fifty years. She had been discouraged from majoring in botany at the end of her sophomore year because it was more practical to get a different degree. Despite this, she spent time as a volunteer identifying plant and animal life and really enjoyed everything related to botany.

She did some volunteer work at the Chinsegut Home Nature Center to identify plants. She does this volunteer work with a friend of hers. There are oaks at Chinsegut that are not the natural trees, they wanted to return to the long leaf pines that were the original trees in the area. In Florida they cut down all of the long leaf pines and put in slash pines. The difference between long leaf pines and slash pines is “about twenty years” because the slash pines mature faster. She used to take students up there but the drive is a bit long, where she is volunteering now is less of a trek.

Wisdom in the Woods started at a retreat to Chinsegut. They had lectures and walks. The people in the area were interested in trying out classes for everyone up there. The people from Tampa went up there to help them get started. They do a lot of lecture series at Chinsegut now. Now there is a group up there that takes care of everything, but initially the people in Tampa helped them get started.

Ms. Petty met Lisa Von Borowsky (caretaker of the Chinsegut property) up there through a mutual friend. Ms. Borowsky was talking about the private school she had gone to and found that it was the same school Ms. Petty had gone to. They had not gone at the same time, but Ms. Petty provided some information for her so she could see the changes that had occurred. Ms. Borowsky was also a “terrific botanist” and had a “beautiful piece of property” near Chinsegut. When Ms. Borowsky died she donated her 250 acres to the Autobahn society.

All the activity that goes on involves a large number of people and there is a great range of things to choose from. They do this year round, although there isn't as much activity in the summer time. They keep changing if there is a need to change, which allows the program to move forward. Change is good, the evaluation sheets help. Retired college professors help out and teach classes. They get to do “all sorts of things.” She is able to go to a class on Emily Dickenson and then learn something completely different at a later date.

Lee Leavengood started the program and her foresight was very important. If it weren't for her none of this would have happened. Ms. Leavengood just retired last year. She was a great person to volunteer for, these people make you feel good and give you something to look forward to on a weekly basis. Ms. Petty has also met many new friends through the program and they go on trips together. She has gotten a lot of pleasure out of doing this. She volunteers her time, but what she gets in return is great. She enjoys all the people who have been in the classes she taught.

She taught classes on ecology and habitats. Ms. Petty believed that people were getting to isolated. Bird people looked at birds and plant people looked at plants and they both limited themselves considerably. In the class she taught they considered an eco-system as a whole and looked at damage that has been done to it. Florida has done a good job in taking care of its property. With all the people that move into the state it seems inevitable that some property is lost, but it is important to protect some too.

There are many people that moved here from other places, so they don't understand a lot of the ecology of the area. She always asks at the beginning of class how many people are native Floridians because some people are not very knowledgeable about the area, some people don't know what poison ivy is, which is pretty important to know in Florida. People started moving to Florida in droves with the advent of air conditioning and it is amazing how much the people who move here identify with Florida as "their state." Ms. Petty considers USF "her University." The school where she got her degree is always writing her for money but she feels that USF is "her college" and she tries to explain that to everyone.

She also tries to explain their new home (Florida) to people. Some people move down here from up north and they have a hard time accepting the oak trees with small leaves, so they need to be showed the oaks with the larger leaves.

#### *Final Thoughts*

She would like to tell students to "do what you really want to do, learn what you really want." Sometimes you need to be practical, you need to get a job but it is important to study something you want to do. If you really want to learn something you will be more successful.

#### *End of Interview*