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Dick Puglisi oral history interview by Yael V. Greenberg, May 21, 2003

Dick Puglisi (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

Dr. Puglisi came to USF as a charter class member in September of 1960.

Circumstances that brought Dr. Puglisi to USF

He was born in Tampa, Florida. His family came in the late 1800s as immigrants. They were from Sicily. His family settled in Ybor City. They were part of the cigar industry. Since he grew up in Tampa and went to high school in Tampa, he thought USF was the right choice for college.

Dr. Puglisi describes his and other immigrant families' excitement upon hearing about USF's opening

Describing his feeling when he heard about USF opening, Dr. Puglisi says, "It was an exciting period. So many of us who were raised in Ybor city or from immigrant families, and we did not have the financial resources to even think about going away to college," he says. Dr. Puglisi says that University of Tampa was a vibrant place, but it was too expensive. Dr. Puglisi says that when he and his friends found out about a new university opening in their city, they were so excited. His uncle at the time was mayor of Tampa. There was a lot of talk at Dr. Puglisi's house about his uncle's involvement in trying to get USF located in Tampa. Dr. Puglisi says the opening of USF not only gave him, but his friends, members of his family, and other children of immigrants, a great opportunity. "If USF had not been available to us I would hate to think of the limited opportunities that would have been available in our lives," he states.

USF has advantages for immigrant families upon its opening

Dr. Puglisi says immigrant fathers felt more secure in sending their children, especially daughters, to a university that was in their city. He says a student could attend during the day, but return home at night and be in the protective environment of the family and home. Dr. Puglisi says this was a very important variable not only in the lives of females, but also in everyone's lives. "We could attend class at an extremely reasonable tuition rate. Then got home and find a part time job and still live at home," says Dr. Puglisi.

The importance of education for immigrant families

“Education was always talked about in the family as being the way to access opportunities in this country. When USF opened its doors, it was just a wonderful opportunity for so many of us,” Dr. Puglisi says.

Feelings of apprehension about beginning to attend USF

“Well, as me and my friends approached USF there was a lot of anxiety because we had lived and experienced a protective environment in high school and within the family. And all of a sudden we were out on our own at a place out in the woods. There was excitement and anxiety. We were in awe of it, but also anxious about the journey we were embarking upon,” he says.

Dr. Puglisi describes what he saw and experienced when arriving at USF for the first time

Dr. Puglisi says there were two or three buildings on campus in 1960. He says there was not a blade of grass to be seen anywhere, and it was a desert of white sand. During the first week of classes there was an opening ceremony. Dr. Puglisi and other students met at the administration building for an address given by President Allen. Along with the president, members of the staff and some political officials greeted students.

What did the surrounding areas look like?

Dr. Puglisi says Fowler Avenue was a tiny access road to the university. “The University Restaurant was a classic fixture on Fowler that we all eventually found and sought refuge at because it was a nice place to have lunch and relax,” says Dr. Puglisi. He says that even though USF was not far from downtown it seemed like a million miles away because people never ventured out to the area or had any reason to. He says it was a land to be explored.

What does he remember about the first day of classes at USF?

“It was very strange because we were coming from a high school environment where you knew everybody. It was a neighborhood school. The faculty was either Italian or Spanish. So there was this feeling of familiarity,” he says. Dr. Puglisi says that he was anxious about coming to USF. He had a class in the chemistry lecture hall. He remembers walking in and being one of several hundred students looking down at a faculty member who had doctor in front of his name. “We had heard that we had wonderful professors that were coming to start USF. And that they were senior members from other faculties and all had their doctorates,” states Dr. Puglisi.

How registration worked in 1960

Dr. Puglisi comments on the registration process by saying, “If we could get through registration we knew we could get through any academic program or challenge that the campus confronted us with.” The students went to a large area and lined up in front of the appropriate table where a course they needed was being offered. On the table were boxes of cards. Students would receive cards for their particular classes. Dr. Puglisi says

students had to hope that a card was left by the time they reached the table. “It would take forever. It was a test of perseverance,” he says.

Food service at USF in 1960

Dr. Puglisi says there was not a cafeteria or restaurant on campus. There was a university center. The students would have lunch off campus quite a bit.

Recreation room on campus in 1960

He remembers that in the basement of the university center was a recreational area with pool tables and other things. Dr. Puglisi says that those students who would spend a lot of time there were not very disciplined.

College students learning to manage their time wisely

“We had to learn how to use our time wisely. That was a key component of our success. We came from an environment where everything was structured. We did not have to think about managing our time. And then all of sudden you were on your own,” he states.

Where did students study in 1960?

He remembers spending a lot of time studying in the library. Dr. Puglisi says most students would study at the library because there were only four buildings on campus. He says students would also study in their cars. Dr. Puglisi says students had to remember to roll up their windows on windy days because the white sand would completely cover the exterior and interior of cars.

Parking in 1960

Dr. Puglisi says parking was not an issue in 1960.

Diversity on campus

Dr. Puglisi says there were many Italian and Hispanic women on campus. He says there were hardly any black students on campus in 1960. His only relocation of blacks on campus is of one black man. As far as the immigrant population, Dr. Puglisi says they were very present since Tampa is an area where many immigrant families had settled.

Socialization with different cultures at USF in 1960

“One of the great pleasures of coming to the university was its diversity. Many of us came from a closed society in high school where most of the teachers and students were Italian or Spanish. At USF, students were from other high schools around Tampa and from other states. People were of different religious and ethnic groups. It was wonderful. It was a way of exposing ourselves to new and different people,” states Dr. Puglisi.

Professors in 1960

“We were very impressed with our professors. The ones that I came into contact with all had Ph.D.’s. They seemed to be very knowledgeable in their disciplines and very experienced. They were seasoned and credentialed. We were struck by that,” says Dr. Puglisi.

Johns Committee

Professors were requiring readings that some leaders did not consider appropriate. There was a legislative committee headed by Charles Johns. The committee came down to investigate faculty members. In describing the Johns era, Dr. Puglisi says, “It sent a chill through the whole university. Faculty and students were wondering what was going on. Could USF continue to grow and prosper?”

Hearing about the embargo on Cuba in the 60s

Dr. Puglisi remembers watching TV in the lounge of the University Center and listening to President Kennedy stating an embargo on Cuba. Troops stationed in Tampa were mobilizing and heading to south Florida. “You could hear troops at night driving through the streets of Tampa as they headed south,” states Dr. Puglisi.

JFK is assassinated

“JFK’s assassination affected all of us at USF. You couldn’t be detached from the events,” says Dr. Puglisi.

The 1960s at USF

“It was an interesting time because of all the changes that were going on in terms of the counter-culture and more freedom in terms of thought and expression. Young people were breaking out a little more. Coming to USF in the early 1960s was a wonderful time because it was also a time when things were changing in the United States,” he says.

Dr. Puglisi’s further education at USF

He graduated with his B.A. in Political Science in 1964. He then became certified to teach. He taught at a high school in Hillsborough County. While he was teaching he was also working on his master’s degree. He received his master’s degree in social science education in August of 1969. After receiving his master’s degree, Dr. Puglisi was asked to take a one-year’s leave of absence from teaching to help with a new teaching program in the College of Education. The program invited young teachers to USF to give their opinions about the way the new teaching program was done. After the one year at USF, Dr. Puglisi was asked to stay.

Dr. Puglisi gets his doctorate

Dr. Puglisi got his doctorate in secondary education with an emphasis in social studies education from Georgia State University.

Post-doctorate time

He returned to the College of Education at USF. In 1973 he received promotion to assistant professor.

Transition from student to faculty member

Dr. Puglisi says it was very challenging and interesting to return to USF as a faculty member.

What did Dr. Puglisi do as a faculty member?

From 1973 to 1980 he was a faculty member in social studies education. He taught courses that helped those students interested in being social studies teachers know how to teach social studies. In 1980 he was invited by the dean to be the director of what was then called the Center for Economic Education. Dr. Puglisi says the center, now called the Gus A. Stavros Center for Free Enterprise and Economic Education, has been his passion since 1980.

What is the Gus A. Stavros Center for Free Enterprise and Economic Education?

Dr. Puglisi says the mission of the center is to help teachers, counselors, and other people employed by school districts to learn about business, economics, and entrepreneurship. Dr. Puglisi says educators usually have no direct experience in business. Dr. Puglisi says, “How do you prepare students for the world of work? You have people who are preparing them that don’t have a direct understanding of business or economics.” The concept of the center is to provide professional development programs for educators. Dr. Puglisi says the center has had a lot of business people involved with the programs. The center offers courses and business people share part of the teaching responsibility with the center. “Over the last twenty-two years we have had hundreds of business people who have taught teachers about business. We direct a program based on bringing the community in to the university and being a vital part of program delivery. Any given semester we have ten to thirty business people working with us. We help teachers translate what the business community has taught them to take back to their classrooms. We have had a wonderful run, wonderful relationships with business community and with the school community,” he says. The center has its own facility on campus.

Any changes that really stand out to Dr. Puglisi over his thirty-four years at USF?

Dr. Puglisi says many changes have taken place at USF over the last thirty-four years. The one significant change he has seen is the blossoming of the relationship between the community and the university. We are now a part of the community

Where does Dr. Puglisi see USF going in the future?

Dr. Puglisi says he is proud of USF for becoming a Research I institution. However, he is also cautious about it. “I don’t want us to ever forget that we have a responsibility to nurture and to help grow the quality of life in our own environment, Tampa Bay. I would be very disappointed if ten years from now USF is totally focused on things beyond this area. There needs to be a blend—looking toward that national recognition, but never forgetting our roots and our origin,” states Dr. Puglisi.

Dr. Puglisi comments on the different presidents of USF over his thirty-four years

“There is so many presidents that I have had the pleasure of experiencing. Each brought their own uniqueness and helped USF grow because of their special gifts. President Borkowski had a very human touch to him. He had a wonderful way of dealing with people. John Allen was a pioneer when it wasn’t easy to be a pioneer in those days. Betty Castor did a wonderful job in transforming this place into a place that now looks like a campus. She helped USF to look like the way a university is supposed to look with

trees and housing. Everyone wants to contribute based on their vision and attributes. We have been blessed with good leadership. But we can't forget the faculty and the students that have helped USF grow," states Dr. Puglisi.

What is Dr. Puglisi most proud of at USF

He is most proud of the opportunity to provide leadership in the Stavros program. "Gus has allowed me and others to build a building on the campus that is state of the art. It is a quality facility for public school educators who very rarely get a first class experience. When they come to the Stavros Center they get a first class experience at a first class facility. Our program is of top quality. We provide educators, K-12, with a quality professional experience. That is what I am most proud of," he says.

Anything Dr. Puglisi would like to leave behind at USF?

This university is a great treasure, but it is a treasure that needs to be protected and nurtured. It needs to continue to prosper. USF needs to give to future generations the opportunity that it provided to me, my friends, and my family. It should always be a beacon of opportunity. If it does that it will stay true to its mission," states Dr. Puglisi.

End of Interview