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Lori Ruse-Dietrich oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, June 21, 2004

Lori Ruse-Dietrich (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Educational Background

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich grew up in Ormond Beach Florida. She went to the University of Florida for two years after graduating from high school. She received an associate's degree from UF and then got married in 1961. Her husband received a job in Tampa and Ms. Ruse-Dietrich came to USF and worked in the library. USF is the only place for which she has ever worked. She worked at the library for four and a half years, stayed home with her two children, and then came back to USF in 1976. She completed her degree with tuition waivers and graduated in 1985 with a bachelor's degree in British Literature.

The first time she heard of USF

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich moved to Tampa before she had heard of USF. She saw an ad for the library job in the paper, applied, and was hired. Personnel did not take a typing test at the time, and she was later administered a typing test which was difficult for her to pass.

Community around USF

She worked in the old library, now the Student Services Building. The University Center the Administration Building, and possibly two other buildings were on campus at that time. The area was "very barren and a lot of sand." Fowler Avenue and 56th Street were being built, so there was "nothing much out here." She and her husband lived in Lutz.

Tea with President John Allen

On one of her first days at the library, all of the staff at the library was invited to tea at USF President John Allen's house. Allen's wife Grace invited them out. This is one of her first memories. They went to the house in Old Carrollwood and all the women she worked with went there.

Working in the Library

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich was a cataloging typist in the library. She worked for Elliot Hardaway, who was the first director of the library. Eventually she became head cataloging typist, but had to resign because of her pregnancy. At the time, the library was very small. They had to type each card for the catalog. In the basement of the library

they had a large typewriter you could feed information into. It was an early version of the electric typewriter.

Social environment at work

There was a “very small family feeling” at the library. They would go up to the snack bar at the top of the library. This was one of the only snack bars on campus so many employees would meet there. They’d sometimes have birthday parties at the snack bar. It was a tightly knit community and a “nice, casual atmosphere.” They played volleyball together and spent time with one another.

Working with Russell Cooper

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich took ten years off from school. During this time, she did have a connection to the school. Russell Cooper, one of the original deans, was doing work on a book on USF’s history. She did research for him. He discovered that he had cancer and couldn’t finish the book.

Later, Dean David Smith in Arts and Letters was looking for “more mature” women for the job-sharing program so Ms. Ruse-Dietrich and Sharon Smith both job shared. One worked in the mornings and the other in the afternoons. Ms. Smith is still working. They job shared for a while, then Ms. Smith went full time and Ms Ruse-Dietrich went $\frac{3}{4}$ time. She later divorced and went full time in Arts and Letters. She worked there until 1984.

Working in College of Arts and Letters

During this time they got their first computer. Sharon Smith was good with the computer, but no one could use the computer well. They also had someone to type manuscripts for faculty. This was a different job than the library because she didn’t see students in the library. This was not the case with Arts and Letters; she got to interact with students. There were fewer students around when she later moved to administration. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich worked as secretary to the dean for a while, who at the time was Jim Strange. He was an interesting man to work with; he had a natural curiosity for the world. They also started playing softball and the dean’s office challenged the department of communications to play. They sometimes had wine receptions.

Move to the president’s office and John Lott Brown

In 1984, Ms. Ruse-Dietrich moved to the president’s office. John Lott Brown was halfway through his tenure as president at the time. It was a “small operation” with Brown, one special assistant, one faculty assistant, a receptionist, a general secretary and a secretary that worked on the president’s calendar. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich started as a general secretary and after a year moved to the calendar secretary position.

Brown was “very competitive,” and during his ten years many great programs were added to the school and the university grew precipitously. She really learned a lot under President Brown. Each president had a different managing style. Brown was old fashioned, “enormously bright,” and “sort of a renaissance man.” He dictated every letter and was a brilliant writer who wrote all his own speeches. He was interested in many things. He did a radio show for WUSF on the singer Fats Waller. He was very

competitive and impressed with people who could do many things well. They worked closely together, celebrating birthdays and having fun. He was very hardworking and had been an engineer. At the time President Brown and Lori Ruse-Dietrich both had desk calendars. Brown wanted his desk calendar to be “absolutely perfect” every day. The next president, Frank Borkowski, was a musician and he didn’t care about the calendar. Brown was a “fine” man and Ms. Ruse-Dietrich felt close to all the presidents that she worked with because they worked so closely together for so long.

Secretary’s Day with President Brown

During secretary’s day Brown asked Ms. Ruse-Dietrich what she wanted to do. There was a training class in the old gym. She took a lifetime fitness class there. She brought the president to her gym class, which was in a tiny room in the basement of the old gym. She tried to introduce him to everyone, but afterwards he went to every station and showed off. He was competitive and would do push-ups in front of all the people. He also worked out and talked to people. She was very tired, but at the end of the workout he wanted to go for a jog. She decided to do it, but it was difficult.

She and her husband went to a play one night and at the end of the play the crowd was invited on stage to dance, she was encouraged by President Brown to go up on stage and dance and the two of them were among the dancing crowd.

Her office

Her office was in a small room across the hall from the President’s office. It was difficult because they were closed offices, not glass offices so you could not see what was going on elsewhere.

President Brown’s love of chocolate

President Brown loved chocolate and once, when she went to Germany Ms. Ruse-Dietrich bought flat chocolates for President Brown and put the chocolate between his paperwork. He could tell the chocolate was there just by smell before he even found it.

President Brown’s contribution to USF

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich thinks that President Brown “put USF on the map.” She believes that each president “was special in their own way and did certain things for USF.” Brown’s ten years got the school “situated” and moved it forward.

Katie Brown

President Brown’s wife Katie was “a remarkable, wonderful woman,” who was irreverent and “spicy.” At the end of the administration she was sick of entertaining. When President Brown would have Ms. Ruse-Dietrich call Katie and tell her that they had to go to a get together, she would refuse to attend. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich would placate her and tell her that she should go because President Brown would not like to go alone. This was a regular occurrence.

The President's schedule is "always grueling" because of the nature of the work. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich was also pretty busy. By this time she had remarried. She lived twenty miles from campus. Her daughter was a student at USF, which was a lot of fun.

Getting her degree

It was difficult for Ms. Ruse-Dietrich to finish her degree. She went to the president's office with the understanding that she would finish her degree, but there is no margin for error in the job. She studied on the weekends and took some televised courses for electives. She remembers going to Greece one summer and having to study on the plane. When she graduated in 1985, she did not want to go to commencement because her nephew was graduating and she felt a little old for graduation. President Brown and Dean Jim Strange had a full graduation ceremony, wearing their full regalia, in the president's office just for Ms. Ruse-Dietrich and her family. They had champagne afterwards. They were both willing to work with her in regards to her schedule.

President Borkowski

Francis Borkowski was a "gentleman," an artist, and a musician. He and his wife Kay had "friends galore." Borkowski "started development at USF." For every \$1,000 that someone gave to the school, President Brown wrote a personal note of thanks. Borkowski started the first Capital Campaign—the first major money making campaign. They did a lot of entertaining and were heavily involved in the community. Kay Borkowski was a flutist and taught a little at the school, but was also very important in getting the entertaining done. Frank and Kay Borkowski were "wonderful people." Overall, Borkowski was "an absolutely wonderful wonderful guy with great social skills." He was a "fun-loving" person. She would go to the gym over her lunch break and one day he stole her shoes while she was at the gym.

During this time, they redid Ms. Ruse-Dietrich's office and the interior walls. She now had a glass office right next to President Borkowski. Everyone wanted her to have the glass office to help manage things. Although her official title changed often, there was an understanding that no one else at the school would have her position. During this administration Ms. Ruse-Dietrich did a lot of letter writing. They added some secretaries and redecorated the office.

Transition from one president to the next

Managing the transition of one president to the next is difficult and a lot of work. You need to learn about their whole family, including children. You need to learn things such as what they like to eat. You need to understand that they are president twenty-four hours a day. The new president doesn't know where anything is and everything is a learning experience. It is a new relationship. Even the president's wife was not sure what was expected of her. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich would always talk to the incoming president's previous office staff and try to figure out how they worked and what they liked. Everything needs to be flexible; you need to work with the new president.

Presidential living

At that time no home for the president existed. The Foundation bought the Borkowski's a condo in the Bayshore Diplomat, so that move needed to be factored in.

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich's job description

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich learned under Brown, but really became better known on campus around this time. Many people were not sure what she did because it was difficult to explain to people what exactly she did. Someone said that her office was "triage," because everyone who came in wanted something and decisions have to be made about who gets what because the president cannot see everyone.

Borkowski and football

He set up the "football feasibility committee" which ultimately led to the football team being established. He also hired Leroy Selmon to work in the athletic department. The students were excited about the prospect of a football program at USF, but some faculty didn't want a football team.

Two students demand to meet with President Borkowski over their parking tickets

Two students who had been drinking got a ticket and came demanding to see the president. The receptionist came to tell her and she told President Borkowski to not get involved because legal recourse in issues make it important for a president to stay out of some controversial matters. She went out with the calendar and gave them an appointment for February and this was December. President Borkowski thanked her for protecting him. She later called the guy in charge of parking and had him get in touch with the students; they never got to meet with the president.

Her routine

She would arrive at the office at 8:30 a.m. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich needed a few minutes to get settled before people came to her. Once she had settled in she would have a meeting with her staff to go over the calendar. She had good people working for her and never lost an employee. She appreciates that she was "empowered" by the president's support to make decisions and make a better working environment.

Security

Over the years, security has become a bigger issue. Under Brown they didn't think about security too much until there was a murder on campus in the Arts and Sciences Building. Everyone knew the victim. During Borkowski's tenure they didn't think about security too much. When Betty Castor arrived they had to think more about personal security.

Interim President Robert Bryan

Robert Bryan was an interim President between Frank Borkowski and Betty Castor. He had been the provost at the University of Florida. He was "very funny" and had a lot of character. He and his wife also lived in Bayshore. He was also a "team builder." He was only here for about six months before President Castor came.

President Castor

Betty Castor was not an academic, which upset some faculty, but she “definitely earned everyone’s admiration and respect.” Ms. Ruse-Dietrich believes that Castor was “a wonderful president” who “brought a political awareness” to the school. Because of her experience, Castor was able to give USF more influence in the state capital.

President Castor, although not as competitive as President Brown, was still very competitive. They played tennis together and president Castor always wanted to win. Castor was a state senator from Tampa and was Commissioner of Education for seven years before coming to USF. They got savvier under President Castor. Everything was different getting ready for a female president. This administration was very hardworking and President Castor was a very “hands-on person.” President Castor was a “wonderful wonderful president.” She threw a lot of university related parties and started a lot of leadership development programs. Castor had a party allowing faculty members to bring their new publications and discuss them. This was a very successful event and one, which the faculty seemed to really appreciate. She also traveled with President Castor. The president did a lot of business on the car phone, so it was nice to have someone to travel with so the other person could drive. This allowed President Castor to read the newspaper. This worked out well. President Castor had a “very diverse” staff. They would all get together after work and have pretzels and wine. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich learned a lot from this group, especially about politics. She thought that this time was a lot of fun and the people involved “were really a team.” The two didn’t jog together often, but they walked and played tennis occasionally (Ms. Ruse-Dietrich had always been athletic and interested in fitness).

Lifeseey house and social events during Castor’s presidency

The Lifeseey house—the president’s residence—had been completed and Castor’s inauguration was the first big event at the house. She lived at the Lifeseey House and would ride a bicycle around campus at night just to stay abreast of what was going on. The Lifeseey House was a security issue since it was very large. They installed a security system. Castor’s husband worked in Tallahassee and came to visit on the weekends, but other than that, President Castor lived at the house alone. One of her children got married there. They had a lot of receptions at the Lifeseey House. The first couple of parties were very spontaneous and happened before basketball games. They would just have pizza and invite people over. President Castor began having a faculty/spouse holiday social at the house, allowing people to see the inside of the Lifeseey House. They also had a big Christmas holiday get-together for staff where everyone sang Christmas Carols. They hired Laura Graham as an events manager. Ms. Graham also set up events at the Lifeseey House. The first Christmas after President Castor was inaugurated, they had a foundation brunch where many people attended. They didn’t have a Christmas tree, so vice president Cathy Stafford was selected to get a Christmas tree. She went out and bought a twenty-foot Christmas tree for the Lifeseey house.

Castor’s overnight retreats

They had overnight retreats for the president’s staff. There was an agenda to discuss goals for the following year. There was also a dinner. These were very beneficial. The

first year it was just the president's staff, but after that a lot of the deans were invited. These retreats took place at Clearwater Beach. The last year of President Castor's presidency the retreat took place at Saddlebrook. It ended up being a farewell for Castor. They jogged down the beach after the event. President Castor and Ms. Ruse-Dietrich joined the dancers on the floor while still wearing their jogging clothes.

Bomb Threat

During Betty Castor's presidency there was a bomb threat. One evening in April she received a threat stating that a building would be bombed and a female faculty member would be killed. The people who wrote the threat set a date for the attack. The police investigated the situation, but could not find from where the fax came. They closed the school the day the bomb was set to go off. Only those essential to running the university came to campus. The police traveled with President Castor to make sure nothing happened, and nothing did. They found one of the students who was responsible for the threat. This was a "very scary" event in the history of the school.

Potential firing of present staff by incoming president

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich didn't know that incoming presidents sometimes fire the present secretaries. When a new president came to USF she would often get offers from other places, but had never considered that she might lose her job. Castor was a "hard worker." Just before she started the job, Castor and Ms. Ruse-Dietrich rode to a museum for her inauguration. At the museum, when introduced to Ms. Ruse-Dietrich's husband, President Castor said that she hoped "Lori's ready to work harder than she's ever worked in her life," and this turned out to be true.

Landscaping of USF

She was also interested in establishing a campus community. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich believes that president Castor is responsible for the appearance of the campus. The campus used to be "like a desert" and they found that people wanted more landscaping and shade. Castor would even call someone when trees were dying to take care of them. She would also call a dean and tell them that she was coming over to look at the building. They would find things that needed to be fixed.

President Judy Genshaft

President Genshaft's time has been different because she has to "assimilate in the Board of Trustees," which was a new body for university governance. She did a very good job at making that happen. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich was only here for two years during Genshaft's tenure. She accomplished a lot of beautification projects that have helped the school. The buildings have been painted some beautiful colors, and the growing trees make the campus even more "exquisitely beautiful." President Genshaft called Ms. Ruse-Dietrich from the airport, and asked her to do some things that first day. Everyone really liked her from the very beginning. It was different getting to know president Genshaft because she wasn't going to live at the Lifesey House. She had small children and wanted to live in a regular neighborhood. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich was expected to learn the ins and outs of everything. She and President Genshaft got along very well. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich describes Genshaft as "a very very nice person." President Genshaft is interested in

physical fitness and Ms. Ruse-Dietrich introduced her to a trainer. President Genshaft also spends a lot of time keeping the Board of Trustees informed. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich believes that Genshaft is still “making her mark.” She is a friendly person and delegates a lot. She is doing a lot of development work because the school is so large. She spends a lot of time talking to donors.

September 11, 2001

She was here for September 11, 2001. She was on campus and watched the second plane hit the World Trade Center while in the provost’s office. Her children are in New York and this was a stressful time. President Genshaft was in David Stamps’ office.

Security changes after 9/11

There were some security changes at the president’s office after September 11th. They made the office less open and established a security code. They made the front access the only way to get into the office.

Sami Al-Arian

There was a lot of discussion of security because Professor Sami Al-Arian appeared on television and there were a lot of emails in response to his appearance. The Board of Trustees wanted Al-Arian to be fired, but instead President Genshaft placed him on leave without pay. She took this course of action because the FBI wouldn’t release evidence against Al-Arian and it is difficult to fire a faculty member without any evidence as to why this person should be fired.

E-mail and letters from the community to presidents

Under President Castor, Ms. Ruse-Dietrich wrote a lot of letters to community members. People really enjoyed getting letters from the president. During Genshaft’s term they received a lot of email and tried to answer as much of it as possible. They received a lot of email after 9/11. Ms. Ruse-Dietrich surmises that half of the emails were supportive and half were negative. They saved all of them.

Presidential Search

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich never got involved in the presidential searches because she wanted to work for whomever was hired and not have a preference.

Presidents and the different campuses

Being a university president is “an enormous job.” Under Borkowski there were problems on all the campuses. They would also have to go to convocations at all the campuses. The president had to travel quite a bit. The campuses began to have their own convocation ceremonies and the presidents no longer had to attend every convocation.

Retirement

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich retired in 2002. She decided to retire when she had worked for thirty years at USF. She worked until the age of sixty-one. Her job, as “the person that represents the president,” was a lot of responsibility. Her job had a high level of visibility and everything she did reflected on the president. She was very tired and ready to retire.

Her husband said she needed “a convalescent home, not a holiday.” Her husband, Richard Dietrich, is a distinguished faculty member in the English Department. Now that she has retired they have time to travel together.

Final Thoughts

Ms. Ruse-Dietrich would like to say that USF “is a fine institution” and she had a “wonderful career.” The presidents “were all wonderful,” the job was “exciting and challenging” and she “met lots of wonderful, interesting people.” When she comes to campus, Ms. Ruse-Dietrich is stunned by how “amazingly beautiful” the campus is. It went from “a drab and bland, hot campus” to a “very exciting place.” She is “very happy to have been a part of it.” She is glad that the campus can meet the city’s needs. She is happy to have spent her life in an education environment.

End of Interview