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Elaine Shimberg oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, May 7, 2004

Elaine Fantle Shimberg (Interviewee)

Mark I. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Biographical Information

Mrs. Shimberg was born in South Dakota, in the same town where Tom Brokaw grew up. She grew up in Iowa. She got her Bachelor's of Science in Speech at Northwestern University. In 1959 she moved to Tampa because her parents were living here when she graduated and in "those days girls went where their parents were." She was still single at the time and got a job with a rock radio station. She worked there for a year and then went to WFLA radio.

In College Mrs. Shimberg started as a theater major, but then realized that she had always enjoyed writing. In the speech school students wrote copy and then got to produce it. She wrote an adaptation of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" which was on WBBM. While living near Chicago there were a lot of opportunities. She minored in psychology and always figured that she would be a writer, which is what she ended up doing.

Her father retired from the department store business. They vacationed in St. Petersburg and had always like Florida. Her father felt that Tampa was a growing community with a lot of business opportunities, so they moved here and he went into the real estate business.

Impressions of Tampa upon arrival

Mrs. Shimberg was in her early twenties when she arrived and there were not a lot of opportunities for the arts around. She got into acting at the Tampa Community Theater, which was the only option for theater at the time. Most of her work was with the radio stations. It was a nice and slow community, which received rain every day at about 4:00. The rain really cooled everything off. There were a few movie theaters downtown. The Britton Plaza Movie Theater opened in 1960, which was a big event (Mrs. Shimberg even wrote a commercial for it that said "The British are coming."). All in all it was "just a much slower time."

University area and campus conditions

In those days, the area where the university sits was considered "way out of town, way way far away." She took a course in the early to mid seventies in photojournalism and

people wondered why she went “all the way out there” when the University of Tampa was an option. On her first day, Mrs. Shimberg asked someone where the LET building was and the person replied that it was the “modern building,” but all the buildings looked identical and modern. The course was enjoyable and only twenty minutes from her home. It wasn’t as far away as others would lead you to believe. She doesn’t recall exactly how she got here, but Mrs. Shimberg is pretty sure that she took the interstate. There was very little around the campus except fire-ant mounds. The library was opened, but there weren’t very many buildings at all. It was a commuter school and to people from south Tampa it seemed far away from town.

Attending USF basketball games

Mrs. Shimberg got married in 1961 and they started going to basketball games as soon as USF fielded a team. She remembers going to the “Rose garden,” when Lee Rose was the coach.

They always had an affinity for the school and she always loved colleges. Her dream had been to retire and teach at a “small, New England school.” Since she is a writer, Mrs. Shimberg has always loved education and research and thought that a campus community was where she should be.

Her Husband

They met on a blind date on December 23, 1960. His girlfriend asked the future Mrs. Shimberg to come to a party because he had two friends coming in from Chicago. She didn’t see any future with them because they were going to go back to Chicago. She went to the party anyway and she was immediately interested in him. She was in the community theater and convinced him to take a part in a play. He played a cigar-smoking boxing coach. He doesn’t smoke, so they had to wrap the end of the cigar. They got married the following October.

Her husband is chairman of the USF Foundation. Hinks has three passions: family, sports and the arts. He listens and doesn’t mind being behind the scenes. He does a lot of work for which others take credit. Mrs. Shimberg believes that her husband is “a unique individual. I’m very fortunate to have shared almost forty-three years with him.”

Her husband’s business

He took her out to Town and Country when they were dating. It was just dairy land. When they went out there he pointed to the dairy farm and showed her where the various things were going to go. Everything he said would happen came to be. He and his partners were “environmentalists long before it was required.” They built the sidewalk around a beautiful oak and donated land for schools long before developers had to do that. They had a conscience about these things and she believes this is why they are so well respected because they are very moral and upstanding members of the community. Now Mr. and Mrs. Shimberg’s son is in the business and he has built in Largo and Brandon.

He has always loved theater and she was involved in community theater so being in that play together brought them together, even though she was dating someone else in the theater at the time.

Her husband's name is Mandell, but people call him Hinks. His father is also Mandell and he has no middle name, so the nurse who cared for him felt that the two Mandell's in the house was confusing. They say that she found the name in the phone book, but no one knows for sure where the name came from. He was born in Syracuse and went to Wisconsin for his undergraduate work and Columbia for his graduate work. He served in the Marines in the Korean War. He came here to look at property with a business partner from New York. They didn't like what they saw in Sarasota but they saw a dairy farm in Northwestern Hillsborough County that became Town and Country Park. As the two were dating and she was at the radio station, she scheduled and wrote some of his commercials. Writing commercials was more difficult than it seemed.

He produced a number of shows in New York.

USF theater department

In 1974-5 the head of the theater department asked them to fund a scholarship. They did and it became the department's first scholarship. The scholarship was originally for two freshman students. The scholarship has been ongoing since then. This was her second involvement with the university.

Other USF involvement

Besides the class she took, she had been asked to serve as community representative when the medical school was having its self-analysis. She doesn't recall the year this occurred but it was interesting and they found that the school didn't have enough research or storage space. She got involved because she is a medical writer.

Career

She started off as a copywriter for the radio station, which means she wrote the commercials. She did some PR plans for the station. When she got pregnant she "quit work, went home, got bored and started writing magazine articles." At the time *The Tampa Tribune* and the *St. Petersburg Times* accepted freelance work so she wrote for them also. She also wrote greeting cards for Hallmark.

Writing her first book

Her first book was published in 1979, entitled, "How to be a Successful Housewife Writer." When she sent the proposal in the male editor rejected it because he felt that women had the same problems that male writers had. She thought there might be some validity to that. She asked an English male playwright friend how he writes and he said that he found writing at home to be very easy because he gets up and his wife makes his breakfast. Then he writes while she watches the kids. She calls him for lunchtime, tea, and dinner and then he takes some time to play with the kids. She decided that she would need a wife in order to write at home. Mrs. Shimberg sent the same proposal back the following year and a female editor read it and bought the book.

Writing about medical issues, particularly IBS

Mrs. Shimberg has also written on family issues and an editor told her that they were doing a medical series. The editor wanted to know if there were any medical issues Mrs. Shimberg could write about. She produced a list of ten things. Mrs. Shimberg wanted to be a doctor when she was younger (although women were discouraged from taking this route at the time) and had always had an ability to understand medicine well. She was largely self-taught and in her “curiosity about medicine” she found that she could “make it understandable.” The tenth potential item was Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and the editor said that she would like a book on that because there hadn’t been much written on that for ordinary people. Her kids were “very upset” that she was writing about IBS. She wrote the book and there were many people who stopped her and discussed it with her. The book is still in print to this day.

She didn’t know too much about the topic before she sat down to work on it. She was in Baltimore because Hinks was there with a play called “Teddy and Alice,” which was on the road before the play went to New York. This was a musical about Teddy Roosevelt. She was bored at the time and called Johns Hopkins University, asking if there was anyone there who specialized in IBS. They did have a specialist and she went to talk to a world-renowned doctor on the topic. He sent her to talk to a psychologist who works with his patients and she went and got a “stack of information” on the topic. He also sent her to a gastro-neurologist at the University of North Carolina. They had a son at Duke at the time, so she was able to visit him and go see the doctor at UNC. She was able to see two of the best-known people in the field. She wrote the manuscript, interviewed many people who had IBS and then sent the manuscript back to the doctors for accuracy. Gastro-neurologists often recommend the book to their patients so it “was a good book.” Once you’ve written the first book, the others are a little easier.

She wrote one book on Acid Reflux, one on COPD (emphysema and chronic bronchitis), and one called “How to Get Out of the Hospital Alive” which “tells patients how to be an advocate for their own health.” She had her twentieth book released, entitled “Another Transferred Love: Finding a Partner Later in Life.” This book has “touched a lot of people” because many older people are lonely but are not looking to get married. They are looking for “someone to travel with, someone to have dinner with, go to a movie with.”

How did her writing career bring her into contact with USF?

USF was critical to her success as a writer. When she does books doctors and professors in the medical school here check them for accuracy. These professors are also very helpful in providing contacts and information.

Producing theater

Her husband’s uncle was a partner of the Schuberts and when Hinks was a sophomore in college he wanted to quit school and work with his uncle. Hinks always had a love of theater. When they were in London he met with John Gale, a producer, and Hinks started investing in John’s shows. One of the shows was “Tomfoolery” with Cameron

McIntosh. The show was coming to the United States and Hinks produced it with Cameron. Two of his shows were nominated for Tonys.

The Shimberg Health Sciences Library

The Medical Sciences Library was always very helpful to Mrs. Shimberg and she was able to donate to them and say “thank you.” She wants the school to be able to produce the best physicians and they need the best resources to do that.

What makes USF different

Mrs. Shimberg feels that she and her husband have “grown with” the university. They came here shortly after it began and they have seen it grow. She compares it to seeing your kids grow. They have enjoyed the lectures. They enjoy the sporting events and have season tickets to basketball and football. She used to judge plays when the high school conferences were held here. It adds a “wonderful dimension to this community.” There are still people that say the school is so far away from much of Tampa, but it is closer than the beach and you get less sand in your shoes. She loves what has happened on campus, “it is beginning to get a lot of character” and has changed a lot since it was “four buildings and a lot of fire-ant mounds.” She feels that it has “been fun to see it grow up.”

There was a sense at the time that the school was going to grow significantly. The other state universities in Florida are in less major cities than Tampa. “We knew it was going to succeed, we knew way back then.” She has a lot of pride in the community.

USF Presidents

She feels privileged to know most of the presidents of the school and it is exciting to see the campus change. She didn’t know John Allen very well. they had some interaction with Cecil Mackey. They knew John Lott Brown very well. President Brown “wasn’t much of a ‘Trivial Pursuit’ player but he was a very fine president.” They used to hold a New Year’s Eve party, and have teams play one another in Trivial Pursuit. President Brown was an ophthalmologist; he would have long explanations for his answers, which turned out to be wrong. They also knew President Frank Borkowski very well.

Green Jacket Club

When someone joins the “Green Jackets,” a support group for the Basketball program, the men get jackets. Mrs. Shimberg said to President Brown’s wife Katie that the men should not be the only ones who get the green jackets. They decided to get their own green jackets and had patches made that said “Green Jackette.” They went to the basketball game with the jackets. Now anyone who joins gets a jacket, regardless of gender.

British International Theatre Program

When the producer John Gale retired at sixty-five, Hinks thought that was too young. They told Gale that he knew too many wonderful people from his time in the London theater, including Christopher Fry and Maggie Smith, to just retire. They decided to start the British International Theatre Program (BRIT) which would bring “classical actors,

directors, voice teachers over to our theater department for a brief time, work with the students and teach them some of the basics that the British actors get that our actors don't." They brought over some "outstanding" people. Christopher Fry came over and directed one of his own plays. The experience looked good on some of the student's resumes and helped them find work. The Shimbergs provided some of the money, and Dan Doyle and Sir Cameron Mackintosh put up the rest of the money. The program is still in existence today. According to Mrs. Shimberg, "it's a wonderful program."

Honorary Degrees

Mrs. Shimberg received an honorary degree from USF in Doctor of Humane Letters. He got an honorary doctorate at the same time Mrs. Shimberg got one. It was the first time a husband and wife got one at the same time.

Recruiting program for USF College of Nursing

She and Hinks came up with ideas for programs. The College of Nursing was having a hard time getting people interested in the program. There was a series that got Mrs. Shimberg interested in nursing and medicine when she was young. She thought that a seventh grade level program to get people interested in nursing would probably be a big help since by the time they are freshmen in high school, kids begin to think about which courses they want to take and this program might get them interested in nursing. Mrs. Shimberg volunteered to write a book called "The Egan Twins: Student Nurses." They were twins, a boy and girl and they go to the USF College of Nursing. They find things missing throughout their day and look for the things and try to figure out who took them. This shows them a lot about nursing and it is written to a seventh grade level. They give the books away for free and she autographs them for the kids. Mrs. Shimberg really enjoys helping out in this capacity because she is Chairman of St. Joseph's Hospital and she understands how important the nursing staff is.

Focus on values at USF not just sports

The school has a football team now, which president John Allen did not want the school to have. But in today's society, a school needs a football team to get recognition. Once people found out about the team they focused on the other aspects of the school and other advances the school has made. She does not believe this is wrong, but it is important that student athletes remember that they are students as well as athletes. Mrs. Shimberg believes that a university needs to teach values that students may not have gotten at home. While many coaches are only interested in winning, others are interested in helping the school teach people "a sense of purpose, a sense of values, a sense of right and wrong." She thinks this is important and maybe more important than just winning. She thinks that people need to learn responsibility.

Leadership at USF

She believes that the right leaders have been here at the school, even though they are all different in one way or another. A good leader can "listen to all sides and then have the guts to make a decision. They may not always be popular decisions." This might apply to a university president or a provost or any leader in general. With the position of

leadership comes a measure of responsibility and in many cases there isn't a clearly defined correct answer.

USF's diversity

USF is very diverse and has stayed that way. The school has had students of all ages and Mrs. Shimberg hopes to become the oldest Ph.D. recipient in school history.

Getting a Ph.D. program

She isn't sure which program she would try to get one in, but she has said since John Lott Brown's tenure that the school needs a Medical Communications Degree for medical writers and people who read the medical writers' work. She was once president of Florida Chapter of the American Medical Writers Association and the chapter spoke in depth about the issue that the statistics we see are subject to interpretation. She hopes that they will have a degree, or even a certificate in this kind of field because everything is subject to interpretation and opinion. Medicine is so complicated that many people don't understand it and doctors don't have the time to explain it.

The importance of learning different languages and accepting different cultures

She also hopes that the university can become more aware that "we're part of the world." She thinks that everyone should be fluent in another language when they graduate from a university. Graduation means that you are "another notch above the average and you should speak another language." Many European schools teach English, their native language and another language so from childhood many people learn three languages. This makes it easier for them and difficult for everyone from the United States. She believes that we need to learn to become better citizens of the world. Maybe if we understood the world better "we wouldn't be in the mess we are in Iraq now if we understood Muslim emotions and their mentality. They are good people but they don't trust us and I can't say right now that I blame them, and that's sad." She believes that the university has a responsibility to teach us about different people and different cultures. Even inside America there are different cultures and we need to have an understanding. You need a better understanding of the way people work, whether they are gay or straight or young or old.

The government speaks about caring for American kids, but tax cuts are cutting into aid to dependent children, preschools and childcare. "How can a woman get off handouts if she can't have daycare for her child? If you want her to work, you need to have a place for her kids that is a safe environment." She is sure that most people would rather "earn a living than be getting handouts, but we have to make it possible." Mrs. Shimberg believes that we need to sit down and ask ourselves if we really care about the elderly, because if so, then we should look into nursing homes and make sure that they are treating their patients well and not stealing from them. We need to provide medical care and daycare for kids so a single mother can go out for lunch or dinner with a friend and know that the kids are safe. "It's all a part of 'love thy neighbor as thyself'" and a university can have a part in teaching this.

What's better: budget cuts or private money in university funding?

There are two ways to answer this. We would have more money if the legislators weren't using money for "their own roads that go nowhere, these private little things that each of them want for their community." If they worked together and prioritized for the entire state and understood their needs they might understand that education all through life is important. But also private funding is important because it provides a "buy-in" for the university. People who pay money care what the university is doing. Everyone takes an interest in it. It bothers her when she sees legislators "horsing around, doing nothing and then we pay for special sessions." Mrs. Shimberg thinks that they should pay for the special sessions with their own money and there "is no reason they can't get their work done if they stop some of the foolishness they do."

Branch campuses

Mrs. Shimberg thinks that the campus is spreading a little thin with all the branch campuses. She compares it to the University of Florida, which has just one campus and everything runs well. If you have multiple campuses you need libraries and student unions at all the campuses, which costs a lot. Mrs. Shimberg grew up in Iowa and when she was growing up if you went to a state school your choices were Iowa State or the University of Iowa. USF being spread out so thin is hurting the university because if there were only two campuses everyone would save money on the duplication that went to other campuses. Mrs. Shimberg doesn't think that we need any more state universities in Florida. Everyone does not need a school "in their backyard." Part of the whole college experience is going away to school and living with strangers, then learning to get along and "just being on your own." This way you learn to take care of yourself and be responsible for yourself. When every community has a state university you lose some of that interaction and independence.

What if she could change one thing at USF?

"I would be queen" (said in jest). If she could change one thing about USF she would like to build another parking garage because a lot of kids get frustrated and spend a lot of precious time to park and get to class. "It's a hassle and it's really not fair to them." She would also build more dorms because the living situation is so important.

One thing they would like to do to make a better place

She would ask the legislature to "give our professors the money they're worth so we don't lose good professors to other universities. I think it's a crime."

End of Interview