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Juel Smith oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, February 20, 2004

Juel S. Smith (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Background

Dr. Smith grew up in a large family in rural Oklahoma, “A wonderful place, needless to say.” Being both Native American and African American, she reflects that she grew up in a “truly diverse culture ... things were really wonderful for me.” Though her parents did not have access to college educations, it was always expected that she would pursue academics. “It was always stressed that education was the key.”

Undergraduate studies

Dr. Smith attended Langston University, “The only African-American school in the state of Oklahoma.” She wanted foremost to be a professional, though her dreams for the future also involved art, creativity, and the desire to help other people; “Those were areas that I spent a lot of time thinking about.” As an undergraduate, her first inclination was to study nursing, though later art became “very, very much an interest.” She will never forget a particular occasion when she visited with her undergraduate advisor in order to determine the major best suited for her interests, when he asked her how she would make a living as an artist, suggesting instead that she consider education. As a result she decided to combine the two and study both elementary and art education.

Early teaching experience in Oklahoma

Dr. Smith was enrolled at the university as a non-traditional student after having married and decided to return to her studies, “something very rare at the time.” Following completion of her degree, she moved into teaching “for a short period of time,” at a school on the Langston University campus in Oklahoma.

Continuing education at USF

She came to Florida as a result of her husband’s recruitment by the College of Fine Arts at USF as a musician. When she tried to find a teaching position in the area, Dr. Smith was told by county officials that she would need additional credit hours to satisfy state requirements. She decided that since she needed to take additional classes, she might as well pursue an advanced degree at the university.

Impressions of USF

Her first impression of USF, Dr. Smith recalls, was that “it was very large ... when you come from a small state school like Langston ... it just seemed to be very, very massive.” The shift from a smaller, more familiar school to a larger, more impersonal one also required certain adjustments; “It was definitely a different environment.” At the time, USF also had a predominantly Caucasian demographic, in contrast to her experiences with a predominantly African American student body at the college in Oklahoma. “I reflected on that after having been [at USF] for a period of time ... I really learned to appreciate [my] rearing at home [in Oklahoma] ... our environment was Native American children, poor, Caucasians – because we were kind of all poor together, but we worked together.” As a result of those experiences, Dr. Smith feels that she has never had any problems reaching out and relating to other cultures. “I’m appreciative of having those experiences early on.”

Diversity and progress at USF

Over the years, she feels there have been “major changes” in diversity at USF. Though some areas have improved significantly, she reflects that the growth is not always consistent. “When we look at the growth in one area, seemingly at times we decrease in another. But I think that’s wonderful, because we are about change.”

Leadership

“When I think about change, it takes leadership. Students are here to learn, and so we must be role models for all of our students. If we do not put leadership in place ... it’s very difficult to go into a classroom then and teach that. So, we need to show that ... because we are about preparing students for the future, we will not do our job unless that becomes a part of it. And I think, yes, we are moving in that direction, but we need to keep [continuing].”

Counseling Center at USF

Following completion of her master’s degree in Counselor Education, Dr. Smith took a position in the Counseling Center for Human Development at USF. “It was a wonderful experience in some instances, the university was not ready for me – but that was ok too.” When she first started working at the Center, she recalls that the director was under the assumption that her position only dealt with African-American students. “I then had to make him aware that ... I counseled all of the USF students ... it wasn’t taken too kindly, but we got along.” In recent years, she feels that they “have really created a wonderful, very powerful team there in the counseling center.”

Counseling issues

As a counselor, she feels that, “At times, we deal strongly with racial and cultural tension that, I feel, probably in our classrooms we could do a little bit more.” Primarily, students that come to the Center are concerned with making the right career decisions, as well as addressing more personal issues such as difficult relationships or drug problems.

Community involvement

After counseling for some time, Dr. Smith began to get more involved at the community level, dealing with racial issues and civil unrest. “We were in a time [where] we could not see much integration . . . not just to be here, but to be a part of the decision making process.” African-American people from the local community began to pressure the university to become more involved in community issues. On the other hand, as a counselor, she was seeing a number of black students who could not afford to continue attending classes at the university. “So, we’d all get on the phone and we’d try to help, and so it was kind of due to that, that I started asking the African-American community to give, to do more, to help more students here on campus.” As a result, Dr. Smith and her colleagues began working to establish the foundation for the Institute on Black Life at USF.

Institute on Black Life

Dr. Smith left the Counseling Center and served as Acting Director for the Institute on Black Life for approximately two years. “It was a lot of work! I would describe it as a real awesome experience.” The Center worked with the university population as well as that of the surrounding community in promoting African-American culture and the value of diversity. “I think for me, it was really pulling together people that had not come to the table before.” Dr. Smith feels that the Institute was the first interdisciplinary organization on campus at USF, and it continues to thrive at the university since she left the Directorship in 1999. “The beauty of that was to be able to see faculty come together, whereas otherwise they were in their own little area of discipline.”

The Center for Africa and the Diaspora

As a result of her experiences and at the behest of some of her colleagues, Dr. Smith helped establish the Center for Africa and the Diaspora, an extension of the Institute on Black Life. Through the Center, she became involved with various organizations and departments within the University as well as in the surrounding community. They were even able to organize a number of excursions to various countries on the African continent in conjunction with the International Studies Center at USF. “I think it’s those kinds of experiences that we can’t really get out of a book.”

Fisk University

Dr. Smith resigned from her position in at the Institute in 1999 when her husband was appointed president of Fisk University. While supporting her husband in Nashville, she also got “very involved” with various women’s groups, working toward bridging Fisk University with other schools and organizations in the area. “What becomes the driving part is the fact that I’m helping someone else.”

Proudest accomplishments

Dr. Smith is most proud of “just helping and giving to people.” She is also particularly pleased by the successes of the Institute on Black Life and the Center for Africa and the Diaspora. “I’m very proud of where the university is.”

Currently, Dr. Smith is the Director for Institutional Development at USF, focused on the overall mission of reaching out into the community while continuing to promote students and organizations at the university. She is also in the process of developing a “Women in Leadership” program at USF, an area that she believes is in particular need of work.

“It is a wonderful environment, and it is a wonderful university. I think it’s going to take good people to keep the university moving forward.”

End of Interview