

2-2-2004

Laurey Stryker oral history interview by Andrew Huse, February 2, 2004

Laurey T. Stryker (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
USF 50th History Anniversary Project

Narrator: Dr. Laurey T. Stryker (S)

Current Position: CEO of USF

Sarasota Campus

Date of Interview: February 12, 2004

Audit Editor: Danielle E. Riley

Date Audit Edit Complete: May 11, 2004

Interviewer: Andrew Huse (H)

Location of Interview: Tampa

Campus Library

Transcriber: University of Florida

Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TRANSCRIPTION

H: Today is February 12, 2004. My name is Andrew Huse, program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. Today we continue a series of interviews at our studio here on the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni in order to commemorate fifty years of university history. Today we'll be interviewing the CEO of the Sarasota campus, Laurey Stryker, who came some years ago and is currently the vice president CEO. Good morning.

S: Good morning.

H: Thanks for being with us today. I guess we'll just start with, how did you first become introduced to USF? How did you first hear about it and apply for appointment?

S: Actually, I started my involvement with the campus back in the 1960s. I was a charter faculty member with Hillsborough Community College in political science. During those days, I became an adjunct professor out here. I taught under Dr. Bauman in the political science department. [I] taught basically urban politics, state and local government; those were my specialties. I came out here and taught. I knew it from the 1960s, but of course, it was a long way out from town in the 1960s.

H: Your involvement goes way back. What was that like, teaching as an adjunct? Was that

new for you?

S: I had been teaching for several years here with the community college, but now I was teaching in the upper level. I was struck, at that time, our students were much more non-traditional. We didn't have many students that lived on campus. Many of the students worked in the community. Since I was teaching urban government [and] state and local government, there was a lot of connection with the community. I think that element has stayed. There's been people who have started their career here or moved here and found USF to finish their studies and are very fond of the university because it was here and it helped them advance in their career.

H: That's one of the things that I do want to talk about because USF is so integrated with the community. The branch campuses really have helped that along, too. How long did you teach here?

S: I taught here probably for just a few years. Then I left and went to Tallahassee for a number of years. While I was here, the last few years of my community college career, in the community, I spent several semesters out here. That was my first on-campus experience.

H: We could probably devote one or several interviews to your public service and your time in the private sectors. I guess we'll just fast-forward to what brought you back to USF.

S: I had gotten my degree in higher education management. [I] decided I wanted to stay in higher education [and get] my doctorate in that field. When Betty Castor came here, she had been my boss in Tallahassee in my time as assistant commissioner of education. When she came here, then there was an opening for finance and technology and human resources and some of the areas that I had worked with her in Tallahassee. I applied and

was selected for the job. I just passed my ninth anniversary with the university. That was originally how I came. It was basically to return to a community that I knew very well, the Tampa community, and also to continue working with her. I was very excited about the university's role in the community. What I had seen as an adjunct professor years and years before had really continued. I also did a lot of work with all the higher education institutions in my state job. I was very aware of USF. To me, there was always this dynamic part of it that is really Tampa. The people of Tampa and the Tampa Bay area is a very dynamic area and the university reflected that. Sometimes you can have a very severe town, a town where the university is standoffish or very different in personality. I didn't see that here. That was through my involvement in my various jobs when I would come here for various meetings or assignments to work with people here. I always saw that spark, that energy, that dynamic. Sometimes it could be rough-and-tumble and a lot of conflict. You always knew there was energy there.

H: Working under Betty Castor for some time before that, that affected your decision to come? You wanted to continue to work with her?

S: I wanted to make a mark in higher education. I wanted to go someplace where there was an opportunity to do that. I think both USF and what I knew of President Castor's leadership style, and the team she put together here, I was privileged to serve with some really outstanding people and continue to get that opportunity.

H: You talked a little bit about you worked with the community, but tell us more about your duties in that first position for technology and finance.

S: The money is, of course, very important to what a university is going to do. The assignment of taking care of the money gave me a great education about the strengths and

the needs of the university. When I first came, money was pretty good. Then we hit the doldrums and we hit the ups and downs of the state finances and economy and different politics of how the state was viewing higher education. It was hot and cold. Sometimes they're really into universities are our key, and then others, it's too expensive and they're doing the wrong thing. I went through both of those. Actually, during the time I was here, our budget went to almost a billion dollars. That was a big move for the university. That was a consequence of doing better on research, doing better all the way around: state funding and research. The funding in the state was mostly because we were growing.

H: Let's talk a little bit about the hot and cold aspect. Anyone that's been either in public service or higher education for any amount of time knows that at least every decade there's this cycle of the hot and cold. You were in a special position then, and still now, to be able to tell us, how do universities cope with that?

S: [They have] to know that's how it's going to be. I think you plan for the ups and downs. Just like in our own household, you have to have a contingency plan. That's how you do it. Also, [you have to] get the word out. The communication, and I know my own community and here and especially now with the local boards, I think there's more of an opportunity to have a voice that puts a face on what higher education really means. I think that communication and connection along with planning for there's going to be some down times. That's just going to be part of it.

H: Working in that first position then, who were some of the people that you worked with that stood out in your mind? Obviously, you had a tall order and lots of things to do. Who were some of the people, whether they be in local or state government, or here at

the university? Who were some of the people that stand out in your mind as really being a big help for you?

S: Obviously, the provost's role is always a very important role. When I first came, Mike Kovak was the acting provost and then Tom Tighe was the provost, and then more recently with David Stamps. I've had the privilege to work with people that had different styles but were committed to put this university on the map. That's what I saw; people who said, USF is already a national power research-wise. We're doing some things that are unique. We're what a metropolitan urban research center should be. That's the energy that I saw when Kathy Stafford, who was the development officer. Dr. Nixon was great because he had been in urban areas and universities. He connected very well with the diversity and the need to recruit a broad section of students and staff. What I saw, too, [is] we had a lot of fun. We had a lot of fun, in fact, as I was just recently talking to Renu about her new appointment as the provost, she was a faculty assistant to the president at the time when I came. One of the things we were doing was a program called Excel, which was recruiting under-represented people on the campus: women, minorities, in a leadership program to try to identify who's going to be the next generation. Renu had been part of that early, one of the first people selected for that program. Then she became a faculty assistant and then took on many other duties in the university. We used to spend a lot of time together. [We would spend] a lot of time after hours talking about the future of the campus and what we needed to do. We had fun. We really had a lot of fun together. I think that's what makes universities a better place than a lot of work places because you're working with students. You're working with positives. You're working with challenges, but it's just so gratifying to see what happens

to students and young faculty who become tenured and staff who develop and take on new jobs. We were laughing about the fun we had and the informal ways of working in the university. That's just some of the personnel issues. Also, Burt Hartley was here as the administrative V.P. for a number of years. He and I had been in school together at Florida State. It was good to reconnect with him. Certainly, he had been a big part in building this university. A lot of the early days he and Rick Fender... those were people who were all part of their team.

H: Is the Excel program still active today?

S: It just got discontinued about two years ago [because of] budget cuts. What happened [was that] the state used to put in a good part of the money and we put in money. The state cut their money [and] we held the program for an additional maybe two years. In the browns of budget cuts in the last few years, it got discontinued.

H: It's the hot and cold we were talking about.

S: It's the hot and cold.

H: A couple of decades went by between your teaching experience here and then coming back. What was your impression coming back after all that time, the way the campus looked, the programs that you were hearing about? What were your impressions?

S: The programs here were always very good. The academic programs were always very good. The academic programs were very strong. I know when I came in the mid- 1990s, the campus didn't look like it looks today at all. Some people say it was a woman's touch. When President Castor came in she said, clean up this place, make it more attractive and all of that. That was a big goal for her. [It was] a big priority. I remember she would tell all the people in the facilities areas and all over, I know we're supposed to

fix the pipes, but let's get this front entrance done. I remember when we put over a million dollars in the front entrance or the whole MLK Plaza came under her leadership. When Steve Gipp came, who had a really good eye for connecting what had been what they call an industrial architecture. [It] looked like some kind of an industrial park out here. The beautification of the campus, the change in the goal of having people live on campus... [finish thought]. When I first came, I think we had 2,500 students live on campus. Now it's up over 5,000. That was very important to that group of leaders. That's what they told the president is important, and that was her sensibility. When I came, the programs were in tact. [There was] a great faculty, good programs, this was never a place that had great big classes. Now we do have them in the movie theater. When I came at that time I think we had maybe only a dozen classes with over a hundred students which was very different than our sister larger universities. We didn't have the ambiance. We didn't have the pride in how the campus looked. Remember, at that time, the bookstore wasn't there. It used be in a trailer in the back. Look what's happened to the medical center and Moffitt's development. The change in the on-campus life and the way it looks and pride that people now have, that was a challenge that we had and that's something that I'm very proud to have been a little teeny part of.

H: It's funny, any time they come out with a campus directory, anything that needs a feature photo on the cover, it's always the entrance, it's MLK.

S: We didn't have those places. They used to have a picture of the administration building or something, which doesn't convey to a student what they really want to see.

H: What were some of the other things you were involved in before we move to Sarasota?

S: My major assignment was the implementation of all the new business systems. At that

time, the state was saying, we're not going to develop a system for state-wide. We're going to let each campus go in it's own way. We were getting things. We were the first ones to decide to replace all our business systems, the first one was the student system, the OASIS system. We almost hit our wrist on that one. It was a huge, huge undertaking. Then we had one that dealt with personnel. That whole implementation was campus-wide. It was tough; it was messy. It took a lot of pulling together. Among the leadership team, they pulled together, they hung with it; they stayed with it. We were the first university with online registration. [We were] the university that decided to purchase systems opposed to build our own because frankly, at the time we were doing this, was the year 2000. You couldn't find technology professionals. They would be walking out the door with double the salary so that was a real challenge. One of the things the president and that team wanted to emphasize was technology, that this university would be a leader. We were the first university in the Internet to support our research. That was important. I was also involved with the research foundation when we acquired all this front property. That had been a separate research park that the county had. We decided, no, we want to own that long-term. We made some big moves to get that in the permanent university footprint. Given now the biotech buildings and things that are going there, and the demand for land in this part of the county, I think that was a smart move. Again, the team made these decisions. We had a lot of debate over what the priorities were. Really, during those days, the two priorities were increase our first-time students because we were heavily, heavily transfer. We only had, when I first came, 2,600 freshmen started here. We now have 6,000. That says several things: one, we could see the growth in high school graduates, that's one, and the other thing is making a

campus that is attractive. The dorms, now what's culminated in the Marshall Center renovation and all this remake. All those things, people like Dr. Nixon would say, these are important if you want to attract these students. That's what students told us.

H: These are huge, major changes. Actually, I came along just in time to see the old change to the new. All these changes, you can't downplay any of them. They're all huge changes that have big implications for the future. When you were talking about the property there, the biotech center that just broke ground on it. These are all big investments for the future. If you spent a million dollars on the front entrance, that's worth ten million in a couple of years. It's the kind of thing that pays dividends, it really does.

S: It does. Where we are, a million people drive to Busch Gardens. A lot of them pass our entrance every day as they go down the street, and they'd be saying, what is that over there? The elementary school that came on campus, thinking about our role in local public education, and now the charter school. Another thing I worked on was bringing day care to campus, the day care center. When I came here, we had day care, but we had the ERDC that had a little older children, three and up. What we saw was a lot of our staff had babies or students. We did it in a way that students could drop in. The campus came together in that. I remember the art department did a big mural in there. They decided that this center should have this special emphasis on I don't take advantage of the artists we have on campus. I've seen that so much on projects that the university gets behind and people decide, let's make it happen. When I first came, the two real issues were one, to get that on campus attract those freshmen, being competitive, being, we used to call it, we want to be the first choice of students, faculty, and staff. That was our

message. We didn't want students to say, well, I really want to go to Florida, but I'll go to USF. We wanted them to say, no, I want to go to USF. We wanted to change that mindset. Then the other thing was to build a research portfolio. We did. We had to put money into that. A lot of that was tied to being more competitive for federal funds and getting representation at the federal level. Of course, we had help from Congressman Young, of course, and his delegation has been very friendly to having us be more competitive. The facts with the medical school and with Moffitt, we had the research assets here, it's just very competitive. The older institutions are just used to getting those grants over and over again. Two of the most important regents meetings that were ever held here, there was one, that was when Adam Herbert was slating the different universities in whether they were teaching or research one, and USF was put in that research one. Our people were out in force. It was a big, big meeting at the Marshall Center in the ballroom. That was a big move. There were many people that said, well, no, there's only two flagships, and some said there was only one flagship in this state. Getting included in that was very, very important. Then it led to the Carnegie I designation. The other very important meeting was on the opposite end of the scale in some ways is when the Board of Regents allowed us to start our football program. I remember going to Tallahassee because I was going the financial piece with then, Paul Griffin, the athletic director who was doing the team and the Title IX and all of the athletic issues. We had to go to Tallahassee and lay out our case. Frankly, the Board of Regents did not want to expand football. They did not want to do it. But, the fund raising that was done here, the community support, and they had the meeting here on campus and they approved it. I remember, we had this parade of witnesses, which

included one of the priests in town, Father Higgins, from St. Lawrence Church, I believe that's who it was. He came, and whoever was chairing the Board of Regents said, now you've even got [God on] your side. Then, of course, we had that first game and that season. We had Freddy Soloman from the University of Tampa, their star quarterback start the game. I think he threw out the ball or something. He was out there, that connection to the Tampa college football dynasty that had been here and that people really wanted back. I remember, we put together a group of about thirty or forty people and we had our bulls-eye club. We all came in shirts. People like Pat Reardon and George Newcomb, the former VP of research, and Renu and Suresh [were there], and we all had our shirts. We did that a few years and had a block. Everyone shifted with their own trends, but that was a lot of fun. Those two decisions, research one, and the decision about our having a football team were huge decisions.

H: Like you said, at opposite ends of the spectrum, but really both about equally important. One, especially with the community, and the other, with money and putting USF on its proper status. That's been USF's problem from day one, being the redheaded stepchild of the state university system. That's just a great story about the beginning of the football team and everything. That's one of those behind-the-scene things that you just don't get too often. Everything you've mentioned [like] OASIS [was] a huge, huge difference. Students that have the nerve to complain about registration, all they have to do is go back in time fifteen years or something and they just have no idea, no conception of what it was like.

S: We had the precursor. We had the telephone one. You had to do all those reference numbers. It could be very frustration. Now going on line, and now we pay on line, and

check your grades on line, and that's made a difference. Of course, students today increasingly expect those services, but it wasn't too long ago when it was very, very different.

H: [It's the] same thing with the dorms. The dorms all being upgraded, even the older halls having been gutted out and redone is now keeping up with student standards, whereas before they were staying in the same room that people were staying in twenty years before.

S: That was part of the partnership. One of the first financial duties that the president gave me was to work with Howard Nixon on financing a plan for the dorm. We went out and we did these variable bonds and the state was going, oh, this doesn't sound right. In a lot of issues, USF has pushed out there and had to demonstrate that these were good, innovative ideas. It takes both the team and the leadership to do it.

H: That's part of USF's role, too, as not only the redheaded stepchild for lack of a better way to put it, but also the fact that it's the up-start, the one that's always pushing a little farther and trying to get that much more progress, whereas some of the other places farther north can [know that] it's going to come to them as a matter of course. USF has to struggle for that, in a good way, when I say struggle.

S: That's when the next chapter, when President Genshaft came in, she has the similar priorities with the research, but even taking it a higher level [and] becoming a true national player. I think with her experience at Ohio State and the SUNY, she brought that national perspective that could communicate to follow top-tier universities that USF was a player. [With] that research, she's gotten to move that even farther. We've even done better in our federal research area. The other thing that was a change, and maybe

this goes into a regional role, is that the regional campuses were hoisted upon USF over the years. Some legislature would say, oh, well I think this would be good, or I think this would be good, or I think this would be good. In some cases, I think USF was very supportive of setting up the branch campuses. We have the oldest branches in the state. The other universities, UCF, especially, and FAU and FIU have various branches. USF had the oldest branches. St. Petersburg, I think, is probably forty years old now because they just had their thirty-fifth anniversary. We're just coming up on our thirtieth anniversary.

H: One of the perceptions that people had is that USF is somehow going out and looking for these branch campuses when in fact, it's usually a legislative decision and somebody decides this would be good and USF often doesn't have much of a choice. They make the best.

S: I think it's a combination. Often, there's always a tension to say, when you start a new branch, how is that going to affect the resources on the Tampa campus or the university as a whole. What's really happened in Florida, and I've spent my whole career in Florida and grew up in south Florida, is that the state has grown so rapidly that we have to find a way to serve these urban areas. In the Tampa Bay region, when people come here from other states, they're just amazed that we are only one public university and three million people compared to say Boston or Chicago or some other large cities that have dozens and dozens and dozens of both public universities and private universities, all types of universities. In Florida, we only have eleven universities, and New College is one of them, which is a very small one. If you look at comprehensive universities, you've got ten universities trying to serve a 16,000,000 population. Over the years, communities

like Sarasota, Manatee, or St. Petersburg or Lakeland have said, we really need our own programs here. We really need our own part of USF. USF has responded to that over the years. It was only in the last five years, and particularly with President Genshaft, who had had experiences with regional campuses. Especially in Ohio, she could see the benefits. When you have vibrant parts of your university that have the autonomy to really serve that community, you add to the story. Just this week, I was at two different meetings, two crazy meetings. One was at the circus, Sarasota, where the head of the circus Sarasota talked about the circus and then he said, and we have a partnership with USF because we're doing research on juggling and clawing for treatment of and involvement of older citizens. We actually have a research project with them. I thought, here USF is being mentioned to thousands of people at the circus. Earlier in the week there had been a session with one of the large foundations there that they were doing this program on social isolation around a book called *Bowling Alone*, a very popular political science book that's going around the nation. Our professor had done the research that was being reported that day. There was a big USF sign there. Again, [there were] hundreds of people from the community, and USF as a matter of course is part of that discussion and part of that resource. I think what President Genshaft knew and our legislatures demanded is that these areas get more attention. Because of the need to serve this growing high school graduate population, it worked out. They just love USF down there. I often meet people and they say, I went there, my child is going there, and there, to them, the USF they may have gone to Tampa, they may have gone to my campus, they may have gone to St. Petersburg, but to them, they went to USF. I have almost 10,000 [alumni] down there in those two counties. Half of them graduated from the campus, but

a lot of them started or did partial degrees between the two places. It was a bold move by the university. We are the only university in the state that's really worked with the regional campuses to give them the level of autonomy, their own campus boards, and that connection to the community. I think that's a level of maturity because we're farther along. Some other branches are much younger and much smaller.

H: We have a lot of experience, a lot of trial and error there.

S: We're now at 3,000 students a year down there. When I came there three years ago, there were less than 2,000.

H: How did you get to Sarasota from where you were at?

S: I had finished the implementation of two out of the three business systems. I wanted to get back into the educational part of it, the academic part of it. Managing the money part of it and the HR is fine, but I wanted to get back into working with students and working with the academic programs. When the president had decided to invest in these regional campuses, I went down first as an interim on assignment and then decided to stay. I said to her, there's just such opportunity and such good-will. I think this is a big move for USF. She agreed, and so that's how I went.

H: Obviously, you already had some impressions that you shared with the president, but settling into the job there, you're always seeing things with fresh eyes. What did you see?

S: I saw opportunity, but I saw very little. We had maybe a dozen full-time faculty there. [There were] too many part-time [faculty], too many adjunct faculty. Now we have thirty-seven faculty in two-and-a-half years. I saw a potential, but I saw that we needed to add full programs. The physical plant, so many times people come down there and

they see the beautiful bay or they see the historic buildings, but as far as facilities, there really hasn't been a lot of investment in facilities. We've grown in enrollment, now we need to get the facilities. We have a major project on the drawing board. I saw the community loved us, although, they often did not know they were there. They'd say, USF, that's Tampa, or USF, where is that? I saw potential, but I also saw a lot of work. There were people to help. The alumni there are very active. In fact, our alumni have won the outstanding alumni chapter two or three times in a row. I just saw good will. President Genshaft spent a lot of time down there with me to start. That was extremely important to the community. She still comes down and they always say, she came here more than the last person in the last ten years. She made it a priority. Now, we do a major event called Brunch on the Bay that brings 1,000 people to the campus. We raise scholarship money, somewhere between \$100,000 to \$250,000 in scholarship money from one event. That's grown. I saw potential, but I saw enthusiasm. Meeting different people in the community has been a joy because a lot of people have come from other places. They're getting connected with the university, they're getting connected with the university and us. The great thing has been the team I have down there, Peter French, my academic officer, Pam Door, who's student affairs, but she's been there thirteen years so she's my longest standing person.

H: In addition to working with students and faculty, the public is a huge part of what you do.

S: Absolutely. The public and the legislative delegation and then the staff and students [are all extremely important]. Because we're small enough, I get to both do a lot on campus and off campus. I think that's a real value. We call our place a small campus big degree.

You get the same USF degree, but you get it in a smaller setting. We do our spring

graduation on the bay. We have a big tent and 2,500 people come for just a few hundred graduates. When they first told me I said, how could that be? Everybody's bringing ten or fifteen people? Half of them are first-time-in-college families. It's huge. They bring everybody in the family. We have the outdoor graduation as a big event. That always brings them out on the bay.

H: I've seen pictures. It's very pretty. It's so great that you have all these first-time-in-college people. That really shows how that branch campus really fulfills that mission. For the uninitiated, a little history lesson, when did New College break away again from USF and become its' own entity again?

S: [They broke away in] the summer of 2001. The legislature's part of the whole food basket they did with the whole change in governance. They did separate New College. That's worked out for them. I think USF's view with them, I remember the president met with their faculty and said, if this is what you want, I'll support you. I'd like you to stay with USF. It wasn't something that USF really fought. They said, if this is what you want. We knew our mission because we do junior senior graduate students, we knew that our partnership was with the community college primarily or people that are coming to the community and finishing their degree. It was in that summer of 2001.

H: That presents some challenges, I guess, because you're sharing some facilities, am I right? The library for one.

S: We're sharing a lot of facilities. I remember a funny story. Jim Curious, who does our federal relations, he called down and he said, I'll be meeting with Laurey Stryker for going over some federal priorities. He wrote a note to Mike Michaelson, who's the president of New College. He said, where do I need to drive to get to your office? He's

literally down the other end of the hall. Everybody got a big kick and a big laugh out of that. I always say, we share the same bathroom facilities and conference rooms. It's very much a shared campus. The goal is for us to build new facilities that will allow us to grow. They're adjacent to the current campus. We still use the library and the student recreation centers.

H: What do you see in the future there with New College and USF? Is there going to be more joint facilities?

S: What time is it? Is it a quarter to twelve?

H: That's probably about right. Do you want to wind up now?

S: I'm supposed to meet someone for lunch.

[Cut in tape]

H: I don't think we're suffering of lack of it. Before we close, I usually like to ask people to make a closing statement. For your purposes, I guess it would be best [to ask], what would you tell students that were just thinking about getting started in college, whether they be in Sarasota or the surrounding area? What would you tell them? Just [give] general advice. [It] doesn't even have to be USF-related necessarily, but it can be.

S: I think my advice is to get ready for the college experience, to really come to your college ready to learn, to have some ideas about what you like to do and don't like to do, so that you're able to start your experience in a way that you're going to get that early feedback of, I really like history, or I really like math, or I really like technology. I think my advice to kids today is, you get ready, and make some early decisions. I think when we came through it was, we'll just get a good education or just to become a generalist. I think you need a well-rounded education, but I also see that when students can connect to

something that they think they like, that that makes a big difference. The other side is to not only concentrate on your campus and academic life, but always have a foot in your community, whatever you think that's going to be. That may be an on-campus community or an external community, because that's going to make it real. That's going to make it not just something I'm learning, but something I can test out in places that I want to make a difference.

H: That's great. You followed your own advice. You've obviously come prepared, and your door is open to the community. I think the students would do well by emulating you. Thank you for taking time with us today.

S: I enjoyed it, thank you.

End of Interview