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## Joanna Tokley oral history interview by Andrew Huse, October 14, 2003

Joanna Tokley (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

*How did she become involved in activism?*

Ms. Tokley was quite young when she first was faced with the necessity of action. When she was just a little girl she went to a public restroom and her grandfather had to apologize to a sheriff's deputy who was outside the restroom because a woman complained that she was in there. Her interest was also piqued in her pre-teens. She recalls an insurance man coming to the house and calling her grandmother by her first name, even though he was young enough to be her son. When she said something to her grandmother Ms. Tokley was not allowed to broach the subject. At her eighteenth birthday she had her first act of independence. She met the insurance man at the door and told him that he was not to call her grandmother by her first name. If she has to call him by "Mr." then he would have to call her "Mrs." He didn't take it the wrong way and he apologized. As soon as she went to Morgan State University in Baltimore she became involved in sit-ins.

In order to teach in Florida you needed to take certain courses, so she enrolled at USF and got the necessary courses to receive her teacher's certification. This started her "love affair" with USF since her alma mater was so far away. This was the mid-1960s when USF was still a newer school.

*The campus when she first arrived*

There were very few buildings at the time. None of the front campus, which is visible from Fowler Avenue today, was visible at the time because there were many trees. Her first visit she was wondering where the school was because she could not see it from Fowler. It was a small campus and a lot of it was hidden behind the trees. This was probably around 1963 or 1964.

She only needed to take a few classes. The classroom atmosphere was "very conservative, very subdued, and students were very respectful of the teachers." The classes were quiet, there wasn't a lot of student participation and there was little challenging of the professors. Instructors were to be "revered and really held a position of honor in the community."

The other students were cordial. There were strains in the interaction but Ms. Tokley is not sure if the strains were on her part or their part. This was different experience because she had gotten her degree in an academic setting with mostly African-American students. She had done her teaching internship at an integrated school, but most of the students were white. Most of the students in her class were white. Whether doing group work or just walking around campus she feels as if she had been treated very cordially. Ms. Tokley cannot recall a particular instance where she was discriminated against because of her race. She also feels she had been treated fairly by her instructors.

#### *Other African-American students*

She interacted with other African-American students in her classes, but because she was an adult she did not participate in student activities at the time. There weren't that many students on campus anyway. There weren't many activities for African-American students and because there were so few African-American students at the time this may have contributed to the fact that there was so little opposition. Once the black student population began to swell there was a rise in white opposition. In the early days most people accepted the few African-American students who were on campus because there were not many of them.

#### *Integration issues in Tampa*

She has always loved going to movies, but at the time she arrived in Tampa, movies were not integrated. She had difficulty adjusting to this. She could sit in the balcony to see a first run movie, but you would have to wait months or even a full year to see a first run movie. The first movie she saw in an integrated theater was *Ben-Hur*. The Tampa Electric Company now stands where that theater was at the time. It was a beautiful theater. She grew up on a river in Maryland and she loved to swim so it was discouraging to be denied access to the beach. There were a lot of things that pointed out differences in access and she arrived at just the time that a lot of sit-ins were taking place in the area. She can recall a sit-in at the old University Restaurant.

#### *Certified to be a teacher and plans afterwards*

It took Ms. Tokley about a year to get certified. She took summer courses. She had always wanted to get a graduate degree, but she became more involved in teaching and other things. Her plans were to work with children and "help them be the best that they could be." She then changed the focus after she came to the conclusion that the needs of African-American students were not being met despite integration. She decided to work outside the system because she would not see the change necessary. She wanted to get out of the school system and try to effect change from the outside.

Ms. Tokley then began to work in Social Services and Civil Rights causes. She felt that in this manner she could "push from the outside while at the same time helping children on the outside."

#### *Her inspirations*

She got inspiration from her mother and one of her Sunday school teachers when she was young. When she was young, this teacher told Ms. Tokley that she was special and the

Lord had given her a special purpose in life. Her mother taught her that regardless of what her job was she should do it the best that she could, because each job is just a stepping-stone to a final destination. She didn't have any national figures that she patterned herself after until she was grown. After she had grown up Ms. Tokley began reading about her history and learned about Sojourner Truth and other African-American females in history. They became her role models, there weren't many contemporary role models at that time, because there weren't many African-American women accepted in the arts who were well known nationally.

### *Work inside the system*

She got certified to teach, the schools were segregated at the time and she worked at Middleton High School. Ms. Tokley taught biology, math and science. This was a "very rewarding experience." She left Middleton in the early days of desegregation and went to Plant High School.

Being a black teacher in a white school started out as a disappointing experience, but she learned optimism. She had less to teach with than she was taught with as a student in a segregated school in Maryland. In Maryland the biology labs were equipped with enough stations for everyone to do individual experiments but at Middleton she had one Bunsen burner and one sink. The textbooks were hand-me-downs from other schools. This was very disappointing but she began to use her own resources to put together "compartmentalized labs." She'd order packages and give them to the students and they could do individual experiments.

When Ms. Tokley arrived at Plant she had a station for every student and more equipment than she could use. She was angry that she and her students at Middleton had been shortchanged. People heard about the differences in available equipment at black and white schools, but "you really didn't know until you went there." She was very angry that this was allowed to happen and students were expected to achieve at the same level as others with these handicaps.

Teaching white students did not lead to too much tension. She had one or two students in each class who were opposed. She had done her intern teaching in an integrated school so this was not a new experience for her. The kids were generally respectful and she was a firm teacher. They soon discovered that she was going to be in control of the classroom and if they wanted to stay in the class the students would all have to follow the policies of the teacher. She felt that she could communicate with her students and made an honest effort to learn the students' names.

She would not hesitate to call parents if there was a problem. She would call the parent at 10:45 or 11:00 pm and would apologize for calling so late, but since parents didn't like getting calls that late she would not have problems after that. Most of the racial tension was between students. Most of the students were very respectful and recognized that the teacher is in the position of power. There were also some peer problems between instructors. Everyone was pushed together and people's biases or prejudices came out.

They had some workshops, but never got to the core of the issues, then all these teachers were just pushed together.

The principal of Plant asked Ms. Tokley to be a Human Relations Specialist because she had developed such a good relationship with her students. They started doing workshops with students and worked on acceptance of differences programs with both black and white students.

*Differences between “touchy-feely” and effective counseling*

She considered the “touchy-feely” type counseling playing a lot of games that make you feel good but you never talk about the real issues. They might listen to “We Are the World” together and talk about the clothes they wear and the foods they eat, but they never really talked about the color of their skin and the reactions that people have to real dark African Americans and light skinned African Americans. They didn’t talk about stereotypes that they hear and some still believe. The first day at Plant High School they served watermelon in the lunchroom. Ms. Tokley made the assumption that they were serving watermelon because African-American teachers began working there. She refused to take any watermelon. One of the lunchroom workers asked her “you don’t want any watermelon?” Ms. Tokley said that she didn’t like watermelon (which was a lie) because the lunchroom people had put it out believing that all African-American people liked watermelon. During this time they dealt with a lot of these stereotypes and a lot of them are based on fear, so what they did was delve into the stereotypes and little comments or assumptions that are offensive to others. They dealt with the issue of isolation, meaning that you cannot understand or accept someone unless you know them, so the “barrier of fear” must be brought down so you can understand things in common rather than focusing only on differences. They also do activities to spend time with one another on an individual level rather than a big meeting.

She saw black students getting punished more severely than white students for similar offenses. The authorities would come and pick up kids for saying things that were deemed threatening when the student had done nothing to threaten another. Some were in class and complained of not being called on when they raised their hands.

When she started teaching the school was white and all the kids in the basic classes were white. When the school was integrated all the students in the basic classes were black. Ms. Tokley went to the guidance counselor and asked why the basic students from last year were no longer basic.

These were some of the things that she noticed that encouraged Ms. Tokley to get out of that situation and try to help from the outside rather than the inside. The Urban League had an opening and she decided to apply. The first thing she did was set up tutoring classes for young people that weren’t doing well. They also tried to set up in school suspensions because there were too many kids being expelled. There were certain lawsuits that Ms. Tokley was involved with in a “behind the scenes” capacity to further these aims. Ms. Tokley initially attempted to make the school more user friendly to parents. She also wanted to provide a community atmosphere for students to “navigate

the classroom” and “handle anger and aggression.” It was of the utmost importance to encourage students not to take their problems into their own hands, but to let parents and adults take care of them.

When Florida first started testing there were no standards for teachers to teach by so a lawsuit was filed that caused a delay of testing until they set up statewide standards. Ms. Tokley has a problem with any test that does not have a necessary teaching component standardized so students can know what they need to know.

*Where does USF fit into the picture?*

Students and teachers were complaining about unfairness on campus. The Urban League provided a meeting space for determining strategies and sharing problems. There was an African-American advisory committee established. Ms. Tokley was one of the first members of the committee and she is still on it.

There are issues in terms of involvement and recruitment that are important. These issues are similar to faculty issues. She does not believe that the University of South Florida “has always been the friendliest place for African-American faculty and staff.” There have been issues of fairness with regards to tenure and hiring practices throughout the history of the school.

They worked with faculty members who provided information. They tried to affect changes in the policy of the university. They encouraged the presidents to be aware of the issues of the staff. Deans of different colleges were expected to use means and practices to hire a diverse staff. One of the recommendations that was implemented affected the hiring committees ability to hire with diversity in mind as one of the standards of evaluation for the committee, and through this evaluation their raises are calculated. Ms. Tokley knows that human nature dictates that people are more comfortable hiring people that are like them. To go outside of the comfort zone is difficult for some people. The “most qualified” person does not always get the job, is the person qualified to do the job? That is the most important question.

*Most common complaints to come out of campus early on*

The “abruptness and lack of sensitivity of some of the college professors” was one of the most common complaints. Requests by black students were not met with the same level of cooperation as white students. There were also complaints about graffiti and other things around campus.

*Encouraging things on campus*

Ms. Tokley was encouraged when USF started the Institute of Black Life and started an inner city office at the Urban League. There was actual outreach into the African-American community. The college president was serving on the board of directors at the League.

She saw Les Miller elected president of the student body. This showed that students were able to elect an African American as student government president. Students became

involved in community projects to work with and tutor African-American students in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She also saw the university encourage people to go into the community and become involved. This may not have necessarily come from the administration, it may have come from a lower level, but it was a good trend to see. They started doing activities to bring kids to the campus. It started with sports and then moved on to academics, which was great.

#### *Responsibilities of an Urban University*

One of the responsibilities is to make the community better through the use of resources and talent on campus. There are a lot of community initiatives that originated with individual professors at USF but she doesn't see an organized community initiative that brings community-minded people together rather than just have a bunch of different groups working.

#### *Notable people in the area who helped out*

Dr. Juel Smith, Dr. Richard Briscoe and Dr. John Skinner, Dr. Brenda Thompson, Dr. Sam Wright, Lee Roy Selmon, Sonia Garcia a former librarian now on the board of trustees, and the current director of the Institute of Black Life are just a few of the people who are important to the development of life in general in the university area. Dr. Thelma Benton, Dr. Richard Pride and Mr. Bob Davis with Upward Bound.

#### *Communication with the University*

She is still on the African American Advisory Committee and they meet with the leadership group on campus, this allows for interaction. Ms. Tokley will also occasionally make suggestions directly to President Genshaft. She has written the president and will pass on information or comments if they see one another in person. "The university has come a long way" but "there are still some issues that the university has to work on." There should be a zero tolerance policy in relation to harassment with regard to race or religion. The entire staff should also have to engage in some kind of multi-ethnic training and preparation.

She still hears stories of comments made by faculty and staff that are inappropriate. As late as last semester there were people in the position to hire who made comments relating to who should be hired and "a university has no place for that kind of thinking in today's society and today's world because look to the universities for leadership." If this mentality exists in a hiring position it doesn't bode well for the future. The university might want to look into an institute on race relations. There needs to be some institute that helps everyone live together. Progress has been made and things are better today, but there are still problems that need to be addressed.

#### *Happiest times in career*

She is happiest when people come up to her and tell her how the Urban League helped them get their first job or a promotion that allowed them to make a good amount of money. Some people came to the league when they were young and the League helped them get their first jobs or tutored them and allowed them to pass a class. These are great moments because that means the Urban League touched someone and helped someone.

It was important to go before the city council and speak on behalf of things like renaming Buffalo Avenue after Dr. Martin Luther King or the establishment of a minority business program. To see that this program is still in existence to see that people are able to get business and to see people getting a home is great. It is nice to see people who have had their children taken from them be reunited with family. It is nice to see people get their GED, go to Junior College, then move on to USF. They have had that happen with a couple of mothers who had been on welfare, they went through this process and that is rewarding to see. There are hundreds of people they have helped who have moved on and the impact is unknown but it is there. The most rewarding is to see the policy change and to know that you've helped people individually and collectively.

### *Future*

The Urban League's new offices are scheduled to be complete in November 2003 and they are going to have some opening activities from November to March. It took four years to complete so they are going to have four months of opening activities. This center will have a high tech training skill center, which will allow people to get skills and find jobs. They are also interested in looking into occupations that a lot of African Americans are not considering.

She would also like to see a few other things come to fruition but retirement is coming. Ms. Tokley hopes that someone else will come along to revitalize the West Tampa area. She hopes that they can establish a West Tampa business center. Maybe they could combine it with living quarters upstairs and have a ready-made clientele and work staff. They also have a housing rebuilding initiative in the West Tampa area. There is a lot of community pride in the area. There are a lot of vacant lots and landlord owned lots in the area and they want to see housing that would make into the kind of community people want to move into.

### *Final thoughts*

She would give the same advice that she got from her Sunday school teacher: "Believe in yourself and love yourself" and "have a dream and a vision" and also "establish a plan in that dream and vision." You should also "get an education or a skill because that is something that no one can take from you." Lastly and most importantly is to "always believe in a power higher than yourself, because man may fail you and disappoint you but a higher power will always be with you."

### *End of Interview*