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Robert Turner oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, June 8, 2004

Robert G. Turner (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
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Current Position: Vice-President of Operations
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Turner came to USF in 1979 as a student.

USF Sarasota

Though Mr. Turner was already involved in a career, he registered for classes at USF because he desired to continue his education as a part-time student while continuing to work. Previously, he had spent two years as a student at the University of Georgia before moving to Florida in 1979 with the company that he was working with. He wanted to get a degree in business, “because that’s generally the most useful to me,” and so he completed a B.S. degree in the College of Business Administration at USF. He chose USF Sarasota because, “It was the most convenient at the time – and thank goodness that it was ... If I could improve my education, then my opportunities would improve.”

Sarasota campus

He lived in Bradenton while attending USF, commuting to the campus in Sarasota “too often” – at least every evening for class. “The campus was gorgeous, right on the bay front, it was a beautiful campus. The first time I saw it was breathtaking.” Mr. Turner remembers that the classrooms were “different,” and “very substandard” because of an overcrowding problem.

Classroom experience

He recalls having good professors at USF Sarasota: “It seemed that I always got lucky, and we had some very good, knowledgeable, and tolerant professors – very willing to help. My feeling about them was that they were on a mission to bring some education to a group of people that were mostly night students ... If they weren’t there, we wouldn’t have [had] that opportunity.”

Students; Classroom environment

Most of his classmates at the time already worked in the professional world as he did, and had decided to return to academic pursuits. “It was really a good environment, because we were all in it together. We all understood what the other was going through, and we were all thankful that we were able to have the opportunity to go back.”

Student gathering places

The library, he recalls, was “probably the only place where you would actually meet other students at the time.”

Relations between USF and the local community

“At the time, there was very little known about [USF Sarasota] in the community. You could ask someone what it was like, and they wouldn’t really be able to tell you ... There was very little understanding about what [it] was about.”

Unique experience

What really made the experience unique to Mr. Turner was, “The fact that it was an opportunity here where people like me and in a [similar] situation ... allowed us ... to go to school at night – we didn’t have to drive fifty miles to Tampa, which would have been our only other opportunity.”

Graduation

After studying part time and working full time, Mr. Turner received his degree from USF in the late 1980s. He usually took two classes each semester.

Brunch on the Bay

After he graduated, Mr. Turner got involved with developing the “Brunch on the Bay” program at USF Sarasota, “which is now one of the campus’s largest fundraisers and friendraisers.” Begun nearly ten years ago, the project’s intent was to introduce and expose more people to the University of South Florida in the Sarasota community. “By the time we’d sent out our invitations, we already had a full tent. So it was very successful even in its first years.” Mr. Turner remains involved in the event.

Community Leadership Council

He was also involved in a community leadership council, explaining, “I felt like for this community that other people needed the same kind of an opportunity that I was able to have, and I wanted to try to give back something.” It began as a group of people from USF who wanted to upgrade community awareness of the university’s function and goals. The duties, Mr. Turner recalls, kept changing as different projects were added to the agenda. About five years after the Council’s inception, Mr. Turner developed a program that recognized the area’s distinguished alumni. “The idea being that we wanted to continue to create affinity to the local campus, and what better way to do that than to recognize some of our alumni who had gone out into the community and done well ... That program brought a lot of friends in.” Among those distinguished alumni are: Pat Glass, a county commissioner; Liz Lindsay, former member of the state board of education; Charles Bauman, a well-known CPA; Byron Shin, a successful businessman and past chairman of the Chamber of Commerce; “and the list goes on.” An advertisement would be run in the *Bradenton Herald* that highlighted all the winners.

Bradenton Herald

Mr. Turner began working for the *Herald* when he moved to the area in 1979. The newspaper, he asserts, has been a big supporter of the university “right from the beginning.”

Changes at USF

He asserts that USF’s reputation in the community has progressed “light years” from its earlier days. “There are a lot of people that recognize and understand what USF ... does, and have a good healthy respect for it, and ... are willing to help it continue its mission.” Additionally, Mr. Turner remembers that, “You didn’t see any bull [license] tags around town back in 1979, and now you see them very frequently.”

“I’ve just enjoyed the whole thing, keeping in mind the whole time that it was an opportunity for me and it’s going to be an opportunity for someone else down the road.”

Mr. Turner is continuing to serve on the Community Leadership Council, in addition to working at the *Bradenton Herald*.

End of Interview