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# Cynthia Visot oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, January 30, 2004

Cynthia Visot (Interviewee)

Mark I. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center  
Oral History Program  
USF 50<sup>th</sup> History Anniversary Project

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Current Position: Director, Board of Trustees'  
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

*Upbringing*

She grew up just outside of New Orleans, and went to one of the last all-women public high schools, which was, "an interesting experience." She then went on to Southeastern Louisiana University for her undergraduate studies, recalling that there was never a time in her life when she did not expect to go to college. She had been set on Southeastern since she was a sophomore in high school, preferring a smaller institution with a strong program in education. All of her life, she wanted to be a teacher, and her dream was to one day become a principle.

*College experiences*

She was very active in her sorority at Southeastern, an experience that she believed helped her to develop strong leadership skills. She also served as president of her sorority, and went on to travel for the national sorority, which is when she discovered that she "really liked the university environment."

At Southeastern, education students were involved in the classroom as early as the sophomore year, serving as aids and teachers. While her experience was a positive one, she began to question whether that was where she really wanted to go. After graduation, however, the opportunity arose to serve for her national sorority, a job that required a one-year commitment. Her plan at that point was to return to school after working for a year to begin her master's studies.

During a visit to her sorority chapter at the University of Minnesota, she made a friend who encouraged her to look into the higher education and administration programs at Bowling Green State University. What interested her most was the opportunity to work with college students while utilizing her skills for teaching. She believed her organizational and creative strengths would make her an effective teacher, helping students develop the skills to become strong leaders themselves. "It was just exciting!"

*Graduate work at Bowling Green*

Some time after visiting the Bowling Green campus, she got a letter from their program encouraging her to apply, which she did. Based on her chapter consultant experience, she

was selected to be a unit director (“House Mom”) for one of the sororities at Bowling Green, a position that she occupied for two years. In the classroom, she studied the theories of higher education and student development. Instructors expected their students to use their classroom experiences to inform their own academic work, applying theory to practice.

#### *Early career*

Her experiences at Bowling Green left her with a strong proclivity towards involvement in collegiate student life and activities. Following her graduation, she accepted a job in student activities at Tulane developing an orientation program for incoming students and families. She spent three years serving in that capacity at Tulane, and probably would have stayed longer had the opportunity at USF not presented itself. Still, she knew that New Orleans was not the place she wanted to stay and raise children.

#### *Move to USF*

In 1990, she applied for a job as the Director of Orientation at USF. Her responsibilities were to develop an orientation program at the university with a renewed emphasis on academics. With recommendations from university administrators, the expectations were that she would “come in and transform the whole program.” She worked in this position from 1990 through 1997.

#### *Fostering school spirit on campus*

One thing that she immediately noticed was a lack of school spirit on campus, attributed in part to USF’s status as a commuter school. “I want every student to come and have pride in the fact that they attended the University of South Florida,” something which she is starting to see more and more of. One thing that she introduced to the program at USF was an emphasis on publications and information flyers that exposed prospective students and their parents to the university. Marketing and merchandising were also important in increasing the school’s visibility and spirit both on campus and in the surrounding community. Items such as t-shirts and bumper stickers were made available, and were offered to incoming students as part of the orientation program.

#### *The University Experience*

After a couple of years, she also started teaching the university experience course, an academic elective offered to incoming students. The goal of the class was the establishment of connections between the university and its student body. “Orientation planted the seed ... the university experience would take it one step further,” offering direction in the development of effective study habits and the establishment of some structure and self-discipline in the lives of newly independent freshmen. The experience also gave her a better appreciation of student learning styles, something that she had been taught as a graduate student. “It was fascinating to watch the students learn.”

#### *EXCEL fellowship*

In 1996-1997, she became involved with an EXCEL fellowship, a one-year program that selected women and minorities who showed potential for future leadership positions. Working under the direction of a mentor, the program gave her an opportunity to gain

some experience outside of student affairs, while learning more about academic affairs and the operation of the university.

#### *PhD program*

Following completion of her EXCEL fellowship, she decided to rededicate herself to her doctoral studies, which she had begun in 1995. Her dissertation was very much student orientated, considering ways to help students develop the necessary skills to succeed at the university level. She graduated from the program in 2000.

#### *USF presidential search committee*

While Visot was working on her dissertation, President Castor resigned from her position at USF, and she was given the unique opportunity to serve on the presidential search committee. Thus, she set aside her studies for several months in order to participate in the proceedings. The committee first began with eight candidates, who had been determined by the Chancellor's office, to be interviewed for the position. Judy Genshaft had a strong economic background as a result of her experiences at Albany, something particularly impressive to the Board of Regents. She also recalls that Genshaft interviewed especially well.

#### *Transition to the Board of Trustees*

She was working for Provost David Stamps when the Board of Regents was replaced by a local Board of Trustees. President Genshaft informed her of the upcoming transition, and offered Visot a position as Director of Operations for the newly formed BOT . Her personal opinion is that the Trustees are a real benefit for USF because, "They are so committed to our university." She believes that their connections in Tallahassee have also been instrumental in the success of the university's funding over recent years.

#### *Working in the office of the president*

When President Genshaft made the decision to integrate the Board of Trustees with the president's office, Visot was appointed to the position of Chief of Staff to head up the joint operations. She enjoys working with Genshaft tremendously, noting that a "high-energy" informs an atmosphere of intense engagement and teamwork.

#### *Issues in the president's office*

Funding is the biggest issue at the time, a concern to which the president and BOT devote tremendous energy and attention. Faculty and staff salaries are also an important matter, and one which the administration hopes to resolve in the near future through the implementation of strategic plans developed within the president's office. "I think [Genshaft] is the driving force" behind many of these initiatives.

#### *Future at USF*

She predicts that while we may not see any dramatic changes at USF in the coming years, "It's only going to get better." Visot plans to stay at USF, noting that she loves being at the university, and enjoys serving as the person behind the scenes. "My goal is to be here as long as Judy Genshaft is here."

*End of Interview*