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Laurie Walker oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, February 24, 2004

Laurie L. Walker (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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USF 50th History Anniversary Project

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Current Position: Director of USF Botanical
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Personal interests; Education

Ms. Walker grew up with a “green thumb ... I always had an appreciation for nature.” It was not until she came back to school in 1992 that she “really got interested in botany and the science of plants.” Previously, she was working as a buyer for Maas Brothers department store in Tampa. As a result of corporate downsizing in the 1980s and 90s, she decided to return to her college studies. She earned a bachelor’s degree in botany, and stayed on at USF for her master’s degree.

Experiences as a student; Impressions of the campus

When she began her classes, Ms. Walker remembers being “quite intimidated” because she was “a little bit older” than the typical undergraduate student. Her experience was a good one though, as she immediately found the campus very easy to maneuver and “fell in love with my classes right away ... and have been here ever since.”

Establishment of the Botanical Garden

Ms. Walker has been influential in landscaping changes. “The landscaping has definitely improved around the campus in the last few years.” “There wasn’t really a whole lot of interest in a lot of the common places on campus and that’s really changed ... I think it looks just wonderful now.” The Garden was first established in 1968 when John Allen set aside funds for its creation. The greenhouses were originally set up near the current police department location, and within a year was moved over to their present location on the west side of the campus. Once established, a fence was put up around the garden, an irrigation system was installed, and a small storage unit was built. The Botanical Garden was established originally as a teaching and research facility, and the Biology Department was responsible for its operations and maintenance. Derek Burch, a botanist, was hired in 1969 as the first director of the Garden, a position that he held through 1975.

The Botanical Garden is situated on a lake, “actually a pond,” named in the mid-1990s in honor of Dr. Roy Behnke, the founding chair of the Department of Internal Medicine. His wife, Ruth, spent a great deal of time volunteering as the Garden, helping to establish many of the plantings and display beds.

Goals of the Garden; Relationship to students

“Having a place where biology students could go [to] see plants, grow plants, [and] conduct experiments in a natural setting outside of a lab ... I think it was a wonderful start ... some real hands-on experience [for] the department.” The Garden became a much more public endeavor in the 1970s with the arrival of the second director, Fred Assick, who made it increasingly accessible to university students and members of the surrounding community. Today, they have over 30,000 visitors from twenty different countries around the world.

Physical description of the Garden; Features

The Garden consists of about seven acres that are available to the public, with an additional three acres used primarily for research purposes. In the public space, the Garden’s focus is “connecting people and plants – the Garden has been kept in really a natural setting ... we emphasize native plants throughout ... but we have different display beds where we show plants from all over the world that can grow here.” Among some of the features are: the Bromeliad Garden, the Carnivorous Plant Bog, Fruit Orchards, and Orchids; “It’s a very diverse group of plants, and all in a natural setting.” They are currently developing an “ethno-botanical” aspect to the Garden, “showing how people use plants for food, for medicines, for textiles ... emphasizing a lot of the economic uses of plants too.”

Educating visitors

Education is achieved in a number of different ways in the Garden, from labels and signs on plants, brochures, and interaction between staff and visitors.

Mornings in the Garden

Her favorite part of working there is seeing the Gardens first thing in the morning. “It’s kind of quiet, the birds are really active ... the sunlight is just beautiful, and I love seeing the water ... and all the wildlife activity ... it’s very much an oasis right in the middle of an urban area, and it’s very peaceful.

Resident alligator

In her twelve years at the Gardens, Ms. Walker has spotted the resident alligator on only two occasions. Others, she reports, have seen it on a weekly basis. “I hope I don’t ever see it out of the water,” she jokes.

Typical day at the Garden

“My day is probably not as typical as someone might expect.” Her day is often spent on the telephone or computer, working in development and trying to raise funds for the Garden. “When I do get a chance to go out to the Garden, it’s a lot of hands on.” She does try to go out to the site every morning to get a sense of what is going on, and often spends weekends working in the beds planting and weeding.

Current projects

Through a Community Foundation donation, funds have been made available for the construction of a gazebo on the site. Presently nearing completion, the gazebo overlooks the “lake” and gardens, and could potentially serve as a site for weddings, classrooms, meeting, and concerts. “It’s a really exciting addition ... we are really excited.”

Fundraising

They have also been involved in a fundraising project for the last couple of years in hopes of building restroom facilities at the Gardens. Through plant festivals, workshops, and dinners, the funds have been raised to install the facility, which will be built in the next couple of months.

Memorial garden

Construction of a memorial garden is also set to begin, providing a “nice retreat area [for] meditation.” The project will include a waterfall and a pond stocked with coy fish.

Students at the Garden

Ms. Walker observes that more students have begun coming out to the Garden in recent years, where benches and tables provide wonderful sites for reading and studying. They have also had dance students use parts of the gardens for practices – “It’s always fun to watch.”

Admission

The Garden is open to students and public seven days a week, with no admission charge. “At this point, it’s important for us to keep it as a public garden.”

Spring Plant Festival

The Festival is “our big fundraiser ... it’s probably one of the most exciting things in the area.” They bring in local plant clubs and societies, wholesale growers, and “just about every plant product that you can think of – plus the experts to teach about them.” From bananas to orchids to native plants, a diverse selection is available for purchase at the Garden during the festival. “People come from all over the state to this plant festival – it has really gained in reputation.” The Botanical Garden relies upon the proceeds from the event to help fund the various projects and upkeep throughout the year, bringing in as much as \$10,000 - \$20,000 per event. Much of the year is spent in preparation for the weekend-long event at the Garden.

Offices; Other departments

Ms. Walker’s office is currently located in the Science Center building, about a half-mile away from the Botanical Garden; “It’s a lot of phone calls back and forth.” The Garden is housed within the Department of Environmental Science and Policy, and so “we have wonderful resources with the professors” who use the gardens as part of their classes. “What’s really exciting is [that] other departments are finding the Garden ... that’s what really got me hooked ... I took a fieldtrip out to the Botanical Garden with my first botany class and was hooked, and have been there ever since.”

Early interest; Initial involvement

When she first began volunteering there, she recalls, “I was immediately connected ... in some way to the Garden.” With her business and science backgrounds, she thought it was the “perfect opportunity” to combine the two fields; “I just couldn’t imagine a better job.”

Director of Botanical Garden

She started as an assistant with the retail plant shop at the Garden in the early 1990s, working there one day each week. In 1998, the Garden was moved from the Biology Department to Environmental Science, and a new director, Brad Carter, was hired. She served as an interim director during the period immediately preceding Carter’s arrival while attending graduate school. When Carter left in 2000-2001, Ms. Walker was asked to serve as director of the Garden.

Garden’s Master Plan

“Right away, our goal was to get a master plan [for the Garden] approved by the University.” Her first goal as director was to start a “capital campaign” in order to facilitate further development of the Garden. Not long after that, she faced significant budget cuts, forcing her agenda from long-range projects to more immediate fund-raising campaigns. “We were challenged to become self-supporting.” The master plan had largely been developed by her predecessor, Brad Carter, and included the addition of a visitor’s center as well as a reworking of the display gardens. “That’s our goal now – to start on the visitor’s center.”

Membership

The success of the Garden has been largely reliant upon support from its membership, which has grown from about 600 members in the mid-1990s to nearly 1200 presently.

Volunteers

“We always need help ... it’s a large garden with a lot of work to do ... we really do depend on volunteer support ... we have an incredible group of volunteers ... they account for probably 5,000 hours, if not more, a year – which is wonderful ... we can always use more.”

Advertisement

They try to advertise on campus as much as possible, in addition to a web-based calendar that announces events at the Garden. “I think a lot of people on campus don’t know that we are in our little corner ... that’s always a challenge – how to get the word out about us ... and encourage people on campus to come visit.”

Possible expansion

Expansion of the Garden grounds “would be ideal ... and could be done in conjunction with the University’s ‘Green Space’ set aside at various locations on campus. At this point, the focus for the staff is on protecting the current collections and facilities.

As director, she works with the landscape architect and the Grounds Department on campus, offering resources and services for the development of landscaping around the university grounds.

Growth

“Seeing the Garden grow from a research facility to a more public garden over these last thirty-five years has just been absolutely incredible ... One of the really cool things about the Garden is it’s a way to bring people to the University that might not have visited [it] before ... People from all over the country are finding out about us, and once they get on campus, often times they explore the rest ... The Garden I think can only continue to grow.”

Proudest achievements

She is most proud of the exposure they have gotten in recent years, in addition to the opportunities to add “really wonderful pieces” to the Garden. “People see that we really deserve the attention that we’re starting to get, and I’m very proud of that.”

Future plans

“Being in a university environment is something that challenges you on a daily basis ... I never want to stop learning.” With a couple of years “under her belt” towards her Ph.D., she hopes to one day be able to return to her studies.

End of Interview