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Derek Williams oral history interview by Danielle E. Riley, May 5, 2004

Derek R. Williams (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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

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Current Position: President-Elect, Alumni
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Mr. Williams is a graduate of USF Sarasota.

Background

Mr. Williams is a native of Florida. He grew up in the Sarasota-Bradenton area. In early 1997, he had a son and decided to do his undergraduate studies locally. He recalls being attracted to USF because of both its geography and its reputation. “It did attract me because I think USF is an up-and-coming university ... What attracted me to USF was opportunity.”

USF Sarasota

While at USF Sarasota, Mr. Williams was elected Student Government president, and also served as the university’s ambassador. “Part of our goals during my term was to continue to build on the profile of USF in the Sarasota-Manatee area.” USF Sarasota was particularly appealing to Mr. Williams when he began considering different universities, in part because it provided him with the “hands-on” experience that he desired. “Sarasota/Manatee offered me an opportunity to get to know every one of my professors ... and really it was a personal relationship ... that helped me really accelerate the learning process because of those intimate relationships that I formed.”

Involvement in the workforce

He believes that during the years he worked for Publix Supermarkets he developed a strong work ethic and refined his ability to work effectively with people. This led to his academic and professional success. Management training also increased his leadership skills and prepared him for his position as the president of student government at USF Sarasota. He asserts that his participation in student government “gave me a venue to share my vision for what I thought USF could continue to be.”

After high school

After graduation, Mr. Williams “meandered through community college” while he was working full time in the retail business. As a student at USF, he took advantage of the

opportunity to speak local business leaders about the nature of their professions. As a result, he was determined to be an accounting major. He was encouraged to exploit his relationship to the university, “exploring all avenues” and networking himself by building relationships with people on and off campus.

Involvement in student government

Mr. Williams became involved in student government as the result of a suggestion by his advisor at USF. The opportunity to participate in the governance of the university while representing the student body presented an enormous appeal to him. With an interest in accounting and finance, he particularly relished the opportunity to negotiate how funds were spent and distributed on the Sarasota campus. One of the most rewarding aspects of the position, he asserts, was “Being able to work with new people and do something good for the community and the area.”

Student government met with the student government representatives from other campuses four times a year in order to exchange information and evaluate particular programs. Of primary importance was their ability to promote the local identity and autonomy of the Sarasota campus in response to the specific needs of students in the area.

His involvement in student government “took up quite a bit of time,” though they tried their best to accommodate the schedules of commuter students in addition to those who had occupational or familial obligations outside of the university. Student government officials at the Sarasota campus took advantage of a list-serve in order to reach out to members of the university and the surrounding community. “It took a little bit of organization to see all this through.” The experiences, he recalls, helped him to better develop his leadership skills above all else. “I can take orders fine, but I always know that being able to delegate and get things done is also very important, and it’s not a skill that everyone has. I took that and said, ‘this is something I can offer.’”

Professional experience

While studying at USF, Mr. Williams worked for an accounting and financial services firm in Sarasota, an experience that provided him the opportunity to meet with a variety of people in the business world. “Those are a lot of the people that I personally took advantage of by sitting down and speaking with them and getting their perspective on the profession.” As a result of those experiences in the workforce, he decided to give financial planning a chance, and it has since turned out to be his passion. All the while, he was balancing the responsibilities of being a single father, full-time student, and having a full-time job in addition to his involvement in student government. He was able to maintain such a hectic schedule, he asserts, by staying focused on his ultimate goal of being a successful entrepreneur. “It’s a lot of dedication and hard work ... it was exciting for me.”

Shared space at USF Sarasota

Because USF shared facilities with New College in Sarasota, there were certain disparities and occasional animosities between the two organizations and their students. “New College is an honors liberal arts college, and they’ve always been a little different.”

Though they are more traditional students in terms of age, “They were much more outlandish in the way that they dressed and the way that they acted and the type of things that they did.” Mr. Williams understood the importance of distinguishing USF Sarasota from New College, asserting an academic and organizational identity of its very own. “We wanted to let each [college] have [its] own autonomy, and then within the confines of the university, we wanted to synergize the efforts of the administration, the alumni, and the students.”

Mr. Williams asserts that there was also a certain competitiveness between the Sarasota campus and the main Tampa campus. He cites the allocation of funding as a particularly volatile issue among students who felt that the branch campus should receive more attention and resources. The establishment of a football program at USF, in his opinion, served to unite people from the disparate campuses around a common unifying element.

USF Ambassador

Because of his dedication to the university, Mr. Williams was selected to be a USF ambassador, charged with promoting the spirit and reputation of the school throughout the local community. His involvement provided him with an opportunity to participate in an orientation at Chinsegut Hill, a historic site owned by the university and utilized as a retreat for faculty, staff, and student groups. He served as an ambassador for both of the two years that he was a student at USF.

USF Alumni Association

It was through the Ambassador Program that Mr. Williams first became involved in the Alumni Association at USF. He was invited to serve as a student representative to the Association during his tenure as the student body president. After graduation, he decided that he wanted to continue his involvement by serving as part of the executive board. The board is a “pretty good group” consisting of local community leaders, congressman, and business owners, among others. “I am proud to say that we’re the only two-time “Chapter of the Year” award winner - and hopefully this year it will be three times.” This year, Mr. Williams has been serving as vice-president of the Alumni Association, and he is currently president-elect.

After graduation

Mr. Williams obtained his bachelor’s degree in finance and information systems from USF Sarasota. Because of his involvement in student government, he had the privilege of speaking at his graduation ceremony before an audience that included his friends and family. “USF offered me an opportunity, I believe, and I set a goal. I remained focused on that, and all these other things motivated me to [finish]. That’s part of who I am, I think, today.” Currently, Mr. Williams works as an independent financial planner in addition to his responsibilities with the Alumni Association. “I’m really proud of USF. I’m proud that we’ve been able to evolve the way that we [have].”

End of Interview