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Keevin Williams oral history interview by Mark I. Greenberg, November 3, 2003

Keevin Williams (Interviewee)

Mark I. Greenberg (Interviewer)

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

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Current Position: Vice President of Florida Black Business Investment Board (FBBIB)	Location of Interview: Tampa Campus Library
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Early life

Mr. Williams was born in Tampa in October of 1970. His grandmother was from Mariana, Florida and he went to Hillsborough High School and Madison Junior High School, which is now Madison Middle School. In high school he was very interested in band. He had about three hours of band class a day by the time he finished school. He took everything from jazz ensemble to marching band, from symphonic band to music theory. He was also interested in playing baseball. He always dreamed of playing professional baseball, but is glad that he came to USF because it gave him another career to fall back on. He played baritone, started in junior high school and in his junior year of high school the band director asked him to switch to the tuba. The band really needed a Tuba player so the director asked Mr. Williams to learn the instrument over the summer.

He was particularly fond of English and Spanish classes in high school. He was a “pretty decent student” and enjoyed all the academic subjects.

Mr. Williams felt that college was a natural transition from high school. He is a first generation college graduate, and his mother encouraged him to go to college, but not any particular school. Dr. Sam Wright was on the admissions staff when Mr. Williams came here he was influential in persuading him to go to school at USF. He looked most closely at USF, FSU and Auburn University. Dr. Wright visited Mr. Williams’ high school in the fall of his senior year, 1987 and he made arrangements with the guidance councilor to meet in the library with interested students. He sat with Mr. Williams and in his deep baritone voice Dr. Wright said, “You’re coming to USF.” He encouraged Mr. Williams to apply; it was as simple as that. Dr. Wright was very persistent and the two of them have developed a close friendship. The interaction and friendships with African-American faculty members on campus is important and helpful.

He decided to come to USF and didn’t visit any other campuses. His first time leaving the city was when he got another degree after leaving USF. His first year at USF was in the fall of 1988 and he lived in the dorms. He lived in Beta hall for two years and this was a great experience. Mr. Williams recommends living in the dorm. His first job after graduation was as a recruiter in the admissions office and he recommended living in the

residence halls for a couple of years. The proximity to class is a benefit and the relationships that you develop are very important.

He was a resident of Beta 2 West and each floor was like a fraternity in itself. His roommate was Michael Smith and they hit it off. Everyone on the floor got along and they played intramural basketball and football together. They stayed up late and had lots of fun. Some guys had pets, they had a pet kitten named Nugget and this was beneficial in impressing women. Mike's girlfriend at the time had wanted a cat and he got it and kept it in the room. They had a great time and he wouldn't trade it for anything.

Mr. Williams wasn't on the meal plan and that made everything a little tough. He isn't really sure why he never got on the plan. It wasn't a financial issue, so he really doesn't remember why he never got onto the meal plan. He ate noodles and pizza and would sneak into the cafeteria from time to time. He never found himself hungry though. His parents lived fairly close to the university, in the Seminole Heights area of Tampa.

He had a car, but didn't use it very much. They walked to class and socialized on campus so there was little need to go off campus. His parents would bring by some groceries or pick up laundry on Thursdays, and he would occasionally go to the mall or McDonalds, but the car stayed parked most of the time.

Academics

He began as a business major and took the necessary math, English and science courses. Somewhere during Mr. Williams' time at school he took a speech communications class, that sparked his interest and he switched majors to speech communications. He graduated with a BA in speech communications in 1993. He planned on going to graduate school and wanted to be a professor. He wanted to stay at USF and had developed a good relationship with a professor named Carol Jablonski. Mr. Williams really enjoyed the professors and the program itself.

He was learning how to write and the writing skills were very important. The most challenging thing, which he benefited from the most, was the "public performance component to the program." You had to memorize lines and perform in a public setting and this was tough for him because he was a pretty rigid student, this allowed Mr. Williams to overcome his fear of speaking publicly.

Athletics

There was no football at USF and basketball was the big sport on campus. Homecoming for USF was in the spring semester. They really enjoyed it and he was at USF for the only two times that the school was invited to participate in the NCAA tournament. He actually got to travel with the team to Boise, Idaho in 1992. At the time he was Student Government President and one of the goals was to enhance the sports teams and provide the students with on-campus school spirit activities. His administration was responsible for the first "Bull Blast" which was a midnight basketball practice leading up to the start of basketball season. They also did a similar event through the baseball team. It was through this that he met Paul Griffin, the athletic director at the time. They developed a

good relationship and Mr. Williams also developed a good relationship with some players on the basketball team, they invited him to travel to Boise with them.

The idea for the Bull Blast came from other schools. He is pretty sure that the idea came from the University of Louisville, who was a Sunbelt Conference opponent of USF at the time. Leann Scirello, Mr. Williams' Vice President, came up with the idea. The event was held at the Sun-Dome, they worked with both the men's and women's teams, the Gospel Choir came out and performed. The event was like a carnival; they had a parade leading up to it from the Marshall Center to the Sun Dome. They would get residents out of the dorms and the Sun Dome was packed. The basketball team came out and put on a show with dunks and then the entire team had a practice. Everyone had a really good time.

At the time they talked about football and wanted a football team, but basketball was the big sport. President Francis Borkowski formed a task force to judge whether or not a football team was feasible. Mr. Williams, who was SG president at the time, and his vice president served as the two student representatives on the task force and the task force recommended that they could have a football team. The task force was large; there were at least thirty-five people involved. He is pretty sure that there was community involvement in the task force. As the student representatives, they had to convince the other members that students were interested in having football at USF and that they were willing to "put their money where their mouth was" to help raise the money for the football team. They had to commit to take on other activities and service fees. This led to a slightly higher tuition rate for subsequent years.

They centered a lot of their discussion on the University of Central Florida's football program, the school had similar demographics and they studied the model, but wanted to improve on mistakes that may have been made. Mr. Williams believes that the football program's attendance and level of play is indicative of good planning, comparisons to a similar school at UCF and hard work. The task force seemed to be supportive of the football program overall. Some people discussed where the team would play. Even at the time there seemed to be an idea that they would play at the Tampa Stadium, although Mr. Williams would like to see a facility on campus. One of his most controversial moves on the task force was a speech that he gave saying that the student body might not be ready for a football team. He gave the speech to motivate the students and get them on board. Shock was the general reaction, but the speech seemed to accomplish its goal.

Clubs, Activities and Student Government

In the fall of 1988 Mr. Williams followed the advice of the staff members he had encountered concerning what students should do to assist in graduation. They advised that students get involved, live on campus and join student organizations. Students who get involved in organizations feel an attachment to the school and are more likely to graduate. This is especially important in a commuter environment.

He got involved in the Black Student Union in his very first semester here. The BSU served as an advocate for African American students and organizations on campus, it also

sponsored speakers and athletic activities. Mr. Williams thinks that the black students at the time viewed the BSU as “its student government.” Despite this, he doesn’t think that university-wide student government was unresponsive overall. The student body president at the time he arrived was black, but it was easier to get involved with the BSU and on a large campus “you look for faces that are like yours.” It was less overwhelming than student government, the SG can be overwhelming procedurally and more difficult to get involved in.

He never considered that BSU would be a step to a student government position. He joined the BSU as a member and tried to work hard.

Sometime in Mr. Williams’ first semester there was an opening on the executive board, President Terrell Walker had left school because he was in the military reserves and went to fight in the Gulf War. Walter Jones, the vice president, moved into the president’s chair, and slots were created on the board. Mr. Williams was nominated to serve as the group historian in his first semester. The historian basically carried around a camera and recorded events and activities of the BSU.

Later in his freshman year the vice presidency opened and Mr. Williams had been a diligent and active participant in the BSU so he was elected VP by the end of his first year, and he became president in the fall of his sophomore year. This was as far as he planned on going in student activity involvement, he also pledged Alpha Phi Alpha his second semester. He was a young fraternity member and the president of the BSU so he was very busy.

During his term they had some tough times. The black fraternities and sororities held most of their parties on campus and the campus rules stated that all members of the community be welcome participants. One night a party got out of hand and the University Police were a little overwhelmed, they had to call in the local sheriffs to come in and settle things down. This was a big challenge during his presidential term, because the university decided that there were going to be no parties on campus unless there were campus police present. This would be very expensive for students. The BSU leaders worked with SG President Brian Tannenbaum to get money from the senate to get organizations money to provide security.

There was a perception that the police overreacted, but in retrospect Mr. Williams can excuse an overreaction. What the problem boiled down to was students versus non-students and some students were hurt in fights that broke out, but this allowed everyone to come closer together. The security fund that was created allowed students to continue having parties and have some police protection. The university implemented a new rule for admission to a party, essentially if you were not affiliated with the school you had to be signed in by a student. This made for a safe party environment. This policy came from two groups primarily, the BSU and the Pan-Hellenic Council, and the Student Government supported the recommendations by allocating funds for security for all organizations.

There were around 1,400 African-American students on campus at the time. There are a lot more now. He isn't sure how this compares with other universities but he would guess that there were fewer black students at USF than UF and FSU. Of the African-American students at USF most lived on or around campus, making them traditional college students. Plus, most of them got to know one another and helped one another out.

Relationship between the BSU and the Student Government

In the fall of 1990, the first semester of his second term as BSU president, and his third year at USF, a young Senator named Leann Scirello approached him and said that she was interested in being the vice president and she was looking for a running mate and thought that Mr. Williams would be a perfect running mate. She asked if he would consider running for the office and he was surprised. The idea of running for student body president had not occurred to him.

He had been appointed to Student Government Supreme Court by the president, but this was the extent of his involvement in the SG. He saw this as his "maximum involvement in the student government." He enjoyed the time on the court, but it was a short time because he ran for president.

Initially he told his future running mate that he would not run for president and was not interested in the job. He was content at BSU. She asked him to think about it some more, he discussed it with fraternity brothers and they decided that Mr. Williams could win the election. Ms. Scirello's persistence and the possibility that he could do good things for the entire university convinced him to run. There were four tickets on the ballot and he was pretty sure they would have a good chance because he had a base in the black student community that would support him, he still had friends from high school that attended the college, he had lived in a residence hall so he had some people on campus that knew him through this. His running mate was a member of the Alpha Delta Pi sorority and they would be supportive, and they were both in the College of Arts and Sciences, which was large college. This meant that there was a voting bloc that might support them. With four tickets they needed to get more than fifteen percent of the vote to avoid a runoff election and they succeeded.

They campaigned on a platform of School Spirit Activities and Campus Security issues. Security of the residence halls and the surrounding apartments was very important because at the time the University of Florida had some student murders and this scared people around USF. Campus security was a big platform and they worked hard to get the emergency phones installed outside the buildings. They accomplished this in a relatively short amount of time.

They also campaigned on changing the perception of the university as a commuter school so they focused on "some on-campus spirit activities." Since Mr. Williams had lived in the residence halls he understood a lot of their problems. They had little squares of toilet tissue rather than rolls and little things like a change to rolls got accomplished. They purchased vans to pick up students who were off campus and in no condition to drive, they also strongly supported the SAFE-Team.

When he looks at his tenure in Student Government the things that Mr. Williams is most proud of is the fact that he tried to make campus safety an important issue, having helped serve on the football feasibility task force and making sure that student government was a place that black students could be included and welcome. He is proud that they were able to help establish a contact between the BSU and the Student Government and some BSU members were able to use the group to launch Student Senate careers.

Race Relations at USF

USF was not colorblind at the time and as a black student Mr. Williams did not expect it to be colorblind, he expected it to reflect the larger society. There were a couple instances that proved “stressful for the university.” While he was in the Student Government several buildings around campus were spray painted with racially derogatory language and some flyers were passed out supporting this. This made the university uncomfortable. This happened late one night or early one morning and the school responded to the situation well by cleaning up the buildings and getting the flyers taken down from the bulletin boards. They also offered a reward for the people responsible but the situation was not resolved. Some of the black students questioned how the University Police missed students painting buildings.

In another incident around his time in a black student had been arrested for trespassing in student government offices. She had been around the student government for years and had worked and been involved in the SG. During the course of a person’s time on campus they develop friendships and even though she had been told that she could not hang out there she believed that she had friends there to hang out with. At the request of the student government the University Police had the student removed and this angered the black student population. This was for a number of reasons, you hate to see the student government, which is supposed to represent the students, remove someone, especially someone who had been involved in the group and knew people there. Another factor was the “whole dynamic of blacks and criminality” added to the tension and anger. Lastly, when Mr. Williams was in office black students had enjoyed a lot of access and had the chance to hang out there and be comfortable, this had changed when Mr. Williams left.

By this point he was pretty uninvolved. Mr. Williams wanted to enjoy his “retirement” and finish school. He had been the longest serving President in school history because the constitution had been amended. He served a year and a half. The student that was arrested was arrested in the last Friday in January, 1993. The next Monday was the start of USF’s Black Emphasis Month and student leaders took this chance to make a statement.

Over that weekend “we met and huddled and sent out news releases and held a press conference in MLK plaza” and there were a few hundred students there. They shared the story of what had happened to the student who was arrested and said how things had changed since Mr. Williams had left office and they invited all the students to participate in a sit-in. This is probably the thing that Mr. Williams is most proud of in terms of

students contributing to the university. There were many students that joined the demonstration in the student government offices on the second floor of the Marshall Center. The offices had to be shut down. They weren't ready for this kind of response and the sit-in eventually turned into a sleep-in.

They met with University President Frank Borkowski and Chuck Schuler, the dean of students at the time, to try and resolve the situation. They wanted the student body president removed because she had requested the removal and set the tone for a "lack of inclusion." The black students perceived her as someone they could not go to if they had a problem. The major issue was the removal of the student because this seemed to go against what student government should do, especially since the girl that was removed had not caused any disruptions.

Paul Uravich, the Chief of Police made sure that the University Police watched over the students who slept there because they were concerned about safety. Students were very interested in the issue, they explained that students there could get expelled, but not many people left. The leaders of the black student organizations sponsored food so people could stay there all the time. On Tuesday Mr. Williams woke up and had a real bad feeling about safety. They all got together and prayed, he told them to go to class, because they are here to graduate. He told them to go to class and do everything they could to help this cause, to call their parents and explain the situation and have them write their legislators. This lasted for a week and the students did not back down.

Ultimately President Borkowski dissolved the student government, which was horrible to see because Mr. Williams had been so involved in student government and students should have a voice. This had also happened in 1987 or 1988 because the senate had become very powerful and dysfunctional. They would not confirm any student justices so there was no court and they would not confirm any cabinet members so there wasn't a cabinet and the university president stepped in and dissolved the student government.

In the long run Mr. Williams believes that this dissolving of the government was a good thing. He also believes that the only reason the president did this was because the following week was homecoming. Maya Angelou was coming to the city to speak and she was very popular and the President did not want such a blemish hanging over the school. It took some time before student government resumed. Initially the President called a student council, with student leaders acting as a "de facto student government" to allocate budget funds and what not. In the end Mr. Williams was very proud of the students from all walks of life who joined their sit in. This is, in many ways, "what college is all about, being able experiment and lead" and it gives you the opportunity to do things that you cannot do after college.

Graduation

Mr. Williams graduated after five years at USF. Student government had been a large commitment for him. He knew he wanted to go to graduate school and work on a Ph.D. and he wanted to do it here, he was very happy with the speech communications program and got along well with professors. He eventually changed his mind. He spoke with a

Graduate Assistant and asked the GA what he would do, Ph.D. in speech communications or law school? The GA said that he would do law school because it wouldn't take as long and the money would be better after law school. Mr. Williams hadn't thought about law school all that much, but this student's advice made sense. Mr. Williams took a year off and worked in the Admissions Office, which was a perfect job for him, because he was recruiting students and this helped him have afternoons to study for the LSAT. In the fall of 1994 he went to law school.

Final thoughts

In the end, USF's most important impact on Mr. Williams is directly tied to his days in student government and the BSU. The people skills and leadership skills that he learned and developed have been very important to his life after USF. When he was applying to law schools, one dean from a school he had applied to included a hand-written note in the reply saying that his involvement with student government should make Mr. Williams a really good law student.

Being able to interact with and lead people, and work with people is very important. This affected his future and his days in student government really affected his future and his time in law school. His student government days affect his job now, it was through the position in student government that he first traveled to Tallahassee. This is important because he spends a lot of time as a lobbyist now and the experience in student government was important to learning how to interact in government settings.

End of Interview