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Patricia Woods oral history interview by Andrew Huse, October 22, 2003

Patricia Woods (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
Oral History Program
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Current Position: Student in the Honors College
Involved with LIR and SeniorNet
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Year of arrival

She came to USF in 1960 as a student. Currently she works with Learning in Retirement, Senior Net, among other things.

Where was Mrs. Woods born?

She was born and raised in Bradenton, Florida.

What circumstances brought Mrs. Woods to USF?

“I always wanted to go to college.” Her parents could not afford to send her. She was at the state fair in 1959. USF had a table there with applications and information about the new school. She stopped and looked at all the material. She talked to her husband. He asked Mrs. Woods if she wanted to go. Mrs. Woods said she did. He said, “Do it.” She filled out an application and took it to the house USF used as an office in Hyde Park. Within six weeks she got a letter of acceptance.

Mrs. Woods’ husband decides to go to USF too

Her husband then decided he wanted to attend USF as well. He retired from the Navy in 1959. He had access to the G.I. Bill. He had always wanted to go to college, but never had the opportunity. He had not been able to go to college before because he had five sisters and a widowed mother. The kids all had to work to help her. He filled out an application and USF accepted him.

They both began attending USF in September of 1960. She was thirty-two and he was forty-two.

Mr. and Mrs. Woods have two children

They had two children who in 1960 were in fifth and sixth grade.

Mrs. Woods chooses a major

Mrs. Woods thought being an elementary school teacher would fit well with raising her children and keeping house. She went to her first biology lab and the professor had the

students look under microscopes at pond water. “When I saw all the little creatures swimming around, I thought, this is it, this is what I want to teach.” She fell in love with the subject. She remembered that she liked the subject in high school.

The first classes Mrs. Woods took

Some of the first classes she took were Introduction to Theater Arts, a general college math course, an English course, Biological Science, and American Idea, which was an American history course.

Mrs. Woods brings home dead animals to study

She took home dead animals for one of her classes, Comparative Vertebrae Anatomy. She kept animals in the refrigerator, got them out on the dining room table after dinner, and studied them. She remembers taking home an embalmed cat once. Her kids would say, “Yuck, mom.”

Mr. Woods chooses a major

Her husband had been an engineer in the Navy, and both math and physics interested him at USF.

What did the campus look like at the time?

She remembers four buildings on campus in 1960—administration, student center, library, and the chemistry building where they taught all the sciences at the time. She does not remember sidewalks at the time. She says a lot of the land the university sits on was orange groves.

What did the surrounding area look like in 1960?

She said Fowler Avenue was two-lanes. From Nebraska Avenue to the university’s entrance there was one building, the University Restaurant. Bruce B. Downs, about a mile and a half north of campus, was a two-lane dirt road. “Rumors went around that the kids used to go up there and park.”

The first day of class at USF—in September of 1960

Chairs were set up outside the administration building. Governor Leroy Collins came to the opening ceremony, welcomed the new students and faculty, and officially opened the new university. After the ceremony was over the students went to their first classes. They received medallions right after the ceremony.

How did it feel to be a part of a brand new university?

“I thought it was exciting.”

Mrs. Woods believes in Dr. Allen’s vision for USF

She has always remembered what Dr. Allen said at that opening ceremony. He hoped to build an academic reputation for the school. “This was stressed the whole four years that we attended.” He did not want a football team. She was of his mind, that it should be a great academic institution. “It seems to have departed from that, it wants to become a

research institution, and the football, sports thing. This is the direction our society is going. I think that we don't value the intellect as much as we could or should."

Mrs. Woods describes the professors at USF

She thought all the professors were outstanding as teachers and in what they knew about their fields.

Classroom size

Classes were small. As she and her husband entered the last two years of their college careers, the classes got even smaller. Some of the classes she took in biological science contained twelve students.

Mrs. Woods has to have a dual major

The university required Mrs. Woods to have a dual major in both biology and chemistry. She did not want to take chemistry. After attending her first chemistry class, Mrs. Woods dropped it. She then went to talk to her faculty advisory, who said, "You will not graduate from this university, unless you have a dual major. If you major in biology you have to major in chemistry." She had to "bite the bullet" and take chemistry the next semester. She made C's in chemistry, and it brought her grade average down.

Ages of other students on campus

There were other students at USF who were in their thirties and forties.

Mrs. Woods dyes her hair

Her hair turned gray when she was sixteen. So the day she entered USF it was gray, but she dyed it dark brown. The whole time she was at USF she kept it dark brown. She went back to gray when she began teaching at King High School.

Mr. and Mrs. Woods' involvement with extracurricular activities

USF students formed an organization on campus for people that were going into the teaching field. Mr. and Mrs. Woods participated in that. But, with their family and the studying required of them, they had very little time to participate in activities on campus.

Mrs. Woods on parking

"We did not have trouble finding a place to park."

Mr. and Mrs. Woods enjoy USF's performing arts theater

When USF opened a theater they attended performances there. "We enjoyed that very much." One of the most memorable moments Mrs. Woods recalls is the night Robert Frost came to USF's theater. Patti and her husband brought their children to the event.

Mr. and Mrs. Woods graduate from USF

Mrs. Woods had seven credits from UF, where she had taken courses the summer after graduating from high school. USF accepted those credits even though they were from 1943. The extra seven hours, plus taking a course each summer during her college career, enabled her to graduate in December with the charter class. Her husband

graduated in May. He is also considered a charter class graduate. He got his degree in math and physics.

Graduation day

It took place outside the Administration Building. The then governor of Florida gave the commencement address. She says the most disappointing thing about the graduation ceremony was when Dr. Allen said “everyone stand up.” They did, and then he said, “You’re graduated.” “We did not get to have our names called individually, didn’t get to walk up and get our diplomas. We just had a mass graduation.” Being a new school, Mrs. Woods thinks USF wanted to try things differently. After the ceremony they turned in their cap and gowns and then students handed them their diplomas. “You put out that four years of hard work, you need that one minute in the spotlight.

Mr. Woods and his post-USF years

He taught at Chamberlain High School for about eight years. Then he said, “I have worked thirty-one years, I’m ready to retire.” So he resigned from the high school.

Where did Mrs. Woods teach after graduating?

She taught her first semester at Jefferson High School and then transferred to King High School. She was there for eight years, and then transferred to the new Jefferson High School.

Mrs. Woods enters the master’s program at USF

When USF began to admit graduate students, one of her biology professors, Dr. Long, asked if she wanted to participate in the master’s program. The program interested Mrs. Woods. She took master’s courses at night from Dr. Long.

Mrs. Woods decides to quit the master’s program

She does not remember how long she attended classes. She realized that along with trying to teach and raise a family, the master’s courses were too much. She finally decided it was not for her. She really enjoyed just teaching high school students.

Mrs. Woods eventually gets a master’s degree from UT

She got her master’s degree in 1977 from UT. She continued to teach. The degree increased her salary.

How did Mrs. Woods first become involved with Learning in Retirement (LIR)?

She moved to the University Village in 1992. Wallace Russell, who was a professor of psychology at USF, had retired and lived there as well. The Learning in Retirement program interested him. At the time, he served on a committee to establish the Learning in Retirement program for senior citizens. Mrs. Woods was in Virginia for Christmas. He called her and asked if she had heard of LIR. She had seen information on LIR where it had a program in Australia. “I wondered why in the world we didn’t have it at USF.” Mr. Russell said, “Well, we’re gonna have it. Would you be willing to teach a class?” Mrs. Woods checked with her husband, who was also interested in the program. Mrs. Woods decided to teach a class. Family history had been her hobby since she retired

from teaching. She had her DNA analyzed to research her family history. She decided to begin a family history course in LIR. She has given seminars on how to research family history.

Mrs. Woods quits teaching in LIR due to health concerns

The family history course is the only class she actually taught in LIR. Due to health concerns she had to quit teaching. But, she still wanted to help LIR in other ways.

Mrs. Woods serves on a curriculum for LIR

From 1994 to 1996 Mrs. Woods serves on a curriculum, which selects classes to be offered in LIR, and contacts people to teach them. Also, by serving on the curriculum Mrs. Woods was in charge of taking role in classes and introducing guest speakers and teachers. The curriculum comes up with ideas for courses and discusses what might be of general interest to seniors.

Involvement with LIR is voluntary

Everyone involved with LIR, including teachers, are volunteers. Mrs. Woods says LIR has had some “absolutely wonderful teachers” in the program.

Mrs. Woods introduced a guest speaker, who is now the head of the Islamic jihad

She took a course called World Disorder. She introduced Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, now head of the Islamic jihad. The class invited him to come and speak about the Muslim faith. She said he did a nice job and was polite. “I was so shocked to find out what happened later.” At the time, her son, who is a Naval officer, worked for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Middle Eastern division. He knew that she had met him. He asked her if she took any notes during his speech. She had. Her son asked her for the notes to put in their files.

LIR tries to place more of an emphasis on science

The LIR courses focus on arts, history, and humanities. A few members of the curriculum, including Mrs. Woods, decided to push for more science courses because of the scientific age in which we all live.

LIR tries to get a Civil War course

Mrs. Woods believed the Civil War would be of interest. LIR had difficulty finding someone that was free to teach and knowledgeable enough about the subject. In the next semester coming up (Spring 2004) LIR is finally offering a course on the Civil War. “I think it will be wonderful, and I think they will probably have a full house for that one.”

How often Mrs. Woods takes LIR courses

She has taken LIR classes almost every semester. She usually takes at least two courses a year.

From 1997 to 1998 Mrs. Woods serves on the core group of LIR

The core group does different things, such as putting mailing labels on mailings that go out about the program, and serving in the lobby by checking people in and directing

people on where to go for their classes. They do anything that is needed. Originally, the core group would also go out and talk to other organizations about LIR to recruit support and seniors. LIR now has a special committee that promotes the program.

From 1999 to 2001 Mrs. Woods worked on planning Wisdom in the Woods and Spring Fling.

What is Wisdom in the Woods?

It was a weekend retreat at Chinsegut Hill. The retreat no longer occurs. When Wisdom in the Woods was in existence, LIR chose a theme for it and then would figure out who could do presentations during the weekend. In order to appeal to SeniorNet members, LIR offered something that had to do with computers and other interests that seniors have. At the end of each semester, LIR members fill out a questionnaire in order to provide feedback about how the semester went. One of the questions on the sheet asks, “what courses would you like to see, and what topics would you like to hear?” LIR used this as a guideline for Wisdom in the Woods, and still uses a questionnaire to help with the design of upcoming semesters. The theme of one retreat was American Indians and their heritage. Another time the theme was family history, in which LIR discussed the history of Chinsegut. They had a lot of good food and socializing. People brought snacks and wine. After the evening program ended there was a bonfire or a lecture. They often got together in someone’s cabin and talked. Sometimes people brought a guitar or accordion, and they sang. They went up on Friday, and left by noon on Sunday.

How did Wisdom in the Woods begin?

Mrs. Woods says retreats at Chinsegut occurred before Wisdom in the Woods began. They had a learning program there. She thinks they did a couple Elderhostel at Chinsegut. LIR is affiliated with Elderhostel. She thinks Wisdom in the Woods grew out of the Elderhostel experience. Lee Leavengood directed the Elderhostel, and probably Wisdom in the Woods was her idea.

Mrs. Woods comments on Chinsegut Hill

“I’m so impressed with it [Chinsegut]. It’s just a beautiful place. [It has] a lot of history, [and] a lot of native area is around there to see in the way of plants and animals. [It is] very peaceful.”

Mrs. Woods reconnects with an old professor during a ‘Wisdom in the Woods’ retreat

During her junior year at USF, she took an English course on poetry from Hans Juergensen. The first day of class when the bell rang, he walked over and locked the door. “If you came to his class late, you did not get in.” She reconnected with him at Wisdom in the Woods. He was always in attendance there and would usually hold a poetry-writing seminar.

What is Spring Fling?

Spring Fling occurred at Riverfront Park on the Hillsborough River. “We just go out there and have a good time.” They played different games. Everyone brought their lunches and chairs.

Mrs. Woods comments on the current absence of Wisdom in the Woods and Spring Fling
“I miss both of those. They are good for the mind and good for the soul.” Mrs. Woods hopes someone will start both programs again.

In 2001 Mrs. Woods went to Tanzania and talked about her trip during LIR’s Lunch and Learn program

Lunch and Learn is a program that has existed in LIR for a while. In 2001, after going on a safari in Tanzania, Mrs. Woods gave a talk about her trip at a Lunch and Learn program. She camped out in Serengeti National Park. “Fascinating country, such courteous people. That was a wonderful experience.” If it had not been for her major in biology and learning about the early origins of man, that area would never have intrigued her to visit. She went with an overseas adventure travel group. She knew no one. She was happy to share her experience with the Lunch and Learn program. She also gave a talk about her trip at University Village.

In 2002 Mrs. Woods served on the committee to set up the honorable seniors program

The program is where LIR members take honors classes with the undergraduates. The idea is that younger people would benefit from exposure to a few senior citizens in their honors courses. The students could hear a different view perhaps of the subject being studied. Also, the seniors could help them with different things. Mrs. Woods says one of the stickiest things about starting this program was to find seniors who would not take over and dominate the class, but rather just sit there and contribute only when the instructor or a student asked them to contribute.

In 2003 Mrs. Woods applies to the Honors College

She applied this year to the Honors College, which accepted her, and allowed her to take honors science. She had the first half of the semester with Dr. Ming. “He was just fabulous. He is so bright.” He talked about the chemical basis for life. Halfway through the semester the class had a different professor, Dr. Wecker.

Mrs. Woods comments on the honorable seniors program

Mrs. Woods is looking forward to taking more classes in the honors college. She does not feel that they have contributed very much to the honors classes. “We have gotten more out of the class than we have been able to give to it.”

What is SeniorNet?

SeniorNet is a program, which helps seniors learn about computers. She has taken a lot of SeniorNet courses. She says people her age are “electronically disadvantaged.” It has taken her a long time to warm up to the computer. She started with an introductory course to see if she could handle the computer. At the end of it she took an all-day seminar on how to buy a computer. That day she went home and ordered a computer. She had to get a few young guys to help her set it up. She continued to take classes until she got knowledgeable enough about computers. “As I continue to use it, I enjoy it more and more.”

Writers of Wisdom

She belongs to the Writers of Wisdom, which grew out of a LIR class on writing your life history. She writes stories. She has written about her and her husband's life up until they got married. She gave these stories to her children and grandchildren. They ask Mrs. Woods when she is going to write the rest of the story. Mrs. Woods hopes to be able to write it.

Mrs. Woods comments on her involvement with LIR, SeniorNet, and USF

"I have gotten a lot out of SeniorNet and Learning in Retirement. But, the greatest gift I ever had was being able to attend USF and get a degree."

Mrs. Woods recalls a few interesting moments at USF

"I would study plants in the herbarium at night until my eyes and nose ran and I had sneezing fits from pollen allergies. One day I was sitting under an oak on campus eating and reading. Something kept poking me in the rear. I finally got up and looked and it was a large rhinoceros beetle. I was sitting over his hole in the ground and he wanted out."

Final thoughts

"I try to tell the young people that serve us at University Village to get a college education. It will immensely improve your life forever. It's your orientation toward the world, the society, [and] your feelings about yourself. I tell them also that the person that gets the college education, finishes, and gets the degree, is the one that has enough intestinal fortitude. Do not get discouraged and quit. Keep at it, and you will make it."

End of Interview