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## Samuel Lamar Wright oral history interview by Andrew Huse, February 16, 2005

Samuel Lamar Wright (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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

Narrator: Dr. Samuel Wright  
Current Position: USF Associate Dean  
of Student Relations  
Date of Interview: February 16, 2005  
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TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

*Dr. Wright came to USF in 1985 as multicultural student activities advisor.*

*Background; political career*

Dr. Wright served two terms as a city commissioner in Boynton Beach before deciding to move to the Tampa Bay area. After getting married in Sarasota, he worked “a few jobs here and there” until discovering an advertisement for a position at USF’s University Center. “They wanted someone who could work with black student organizations ... and identify with the students.” He was hired for the position and began working in November of 1985.

*Early experiences at USF*

He remembers his initial experiences at USF fondly. “It was a real wonderful experience; it was like an enriching experience to some degree. I knew that I never wanted to teach school per se ... When I came here, I was sort of reliving my experiences from the University of Florida [as a student there] ... I loved college so much. It was a wonderful experience to be able to give back in a different capacity.” At first he recalls being “somewhat frustrated” dealing with African-American students at USF because there was not a strong sense of community among them. “I think I achieved a lot in eight months – I at least got them to talk to one another again, because there was so much fragmentation going on there.”

*Working with Phyllis Marshall*

“I had a great time working with Phyllis [Marshall]. I cherish the way she adored students and how she made everybody feel at home at the Marshall Center. It was a real wonderful experience.”

*Departure from and return to USF*

After working in the position for eight months, Dr. Wright left the university in order to manage an Urban League program for Joanna Tokely. “My main reason for leaving ... was financially [sic]. The pay was just the pits – it was deplorable during those days ...

But I cherished the job. I worked as if I made \$100,000 a year ... I was leaving, but at the same time I felt that I had to come back. Now that was the weirdest thing I've ever experienced in my life, and believe it or not, eight months later I was back on this campus in the office of admissions." He worked in the office of admissions under Vicki Aherns as the coordinator for minority admissions.

#### *Urban League*

"My whole life my passion has been giving, and serving, and making a difference for mankind ... that's kind of been my calling. So, when I went to the Urban League, it was just a continuation of what I started in Palm Beach County ... I learned a lot, but I gave a lot as well."

#### *Minority enrollment at USF*

Dr. Wright remembers that at that time USF was "somewhat being admonished" by the state government because of the low percentage (approximately three percent) of minority students at the university. "I was told that the university was looking for a recruiter." Thus, he applied and was placed in his new position in order to help draw greater numbers of African-American and minority students. "Now, the interesting part about all of this too was that I knew that I would not take the job for what it was being advertised for." After interviewing, he negotiated the terms of the contract and took the position. "It was my charge to get out here and preach the USF gospel, and I did just that ... And believe it or not, all kinds of things started happening ... I felt what I was doing, it was a commitment to the universe to make a difference in the lives of black children ... And that was something I was wedded to."

#### *Working as a recruiter*

"The life of a recruiter, your job never stops. You wear the hat of a recruiter everywhere you turn in your life, twenty-four seven when you're recruiting students ... It was an interesting experience."

#### *Minority recruitment*

While the program's initial emphasis was specifically on recruiting African-American students to the university, it evolved to target "all students of color ... who were underrepresented, and everybody who didn't fall in the category of Caucasian [or] European. So I worked with Asian families, Latin families, you name it – I did it."

As an admissions recruiter, Dr. Wright found that, "You must interact with people from all walks of life ... You name it, you have to interface with them. And what most people wanted to see was that you were a person who was concerned about the welfare of students, first of all. With that, you could see anybody." He was surprised to discover that twenty years ago most Floridians outside of the area knew little or nothing about the University of South Florida. "I had a real outgoing personality ... That was the way I was able to break a lot of barriers ... I used poetry at times, I used music at times ... I did a number of things to reach students where they were ... I was able to deal across the board with a number of people regarding the University of South Florida."

### *“Multicultural Road Show”*

When he first began working in the office of admissions, Dr. Wright found that many incoming students at USF came unequipped, uninformed, and unprepared to enter college life. So he and others in the admissions office assembled the “Multicultural Road Show,” a program which took USF out to potential students and their families. “That was one phenomenal program ... I did about five or six a year.” A similar program still exists at USF today under the title, “Showcase USF.”

### *“Each One, Reach One”*

The admissions office also undertook a number of other initiatives in effort to increase minority enrollment at USF. Dr. Wright worked with Linda Erickson in the development of “Each One, Reach One,” a minority recruitment program which enlisted students to recruit other students from the area and spread the word about USF.

### *Student retention*

As a recruiter, Dr. Wright was concerned with what the university was doing not only to enroll minority students, but also to retain them. After conducting a study under his own initiative, Wright told university officials that he didn’t “feel comfortable bringing people from their homes to USF [when] these students are not succeeding.” As a result, they came up with a new program which worked continuously with minority students at the university, enabling and empowering them “to become productive citizens in this country.”

### *Enrollment statistics*

Wright asserts that as a result of such recruitment and retention programs, the university saw some “phenomenal gains” in minority enrollment. When he left the office of admissions in 2000, the number of African-American students at USF had risen to approximately 11.5 percent. Overall, nearly 25 percent of the university’s total enrollment was minority students by the end of the 1990s.

### *Student involvement*

“I didn’t do programs with just colleagues alone,” Wright recalls. Instead, “I had my students at the table ... I fervently believed that students should have been at the core of planning these activities because that’s the way education comes. It’s not just about my doing it, but I needed to train them so they’ll be able to do it.”

“USF has I guess the smiles and the special touches to monitor and watch students. I fervently believe that if students know that you’re watching them, and you care, they will step up to the plate. And a number of our students did just that.”

### *University Experience course*

Currently, Dr. Wright also teaches a University Experience course to incoming freshmen at USF. “I believe at this point in my life I know what it takes, I think, for students to be successful. So I’m one to challenge them. I try to extrapolate the very best out of them. So I make them work.” Later down the road, Wright explains, students come back to thank him.

*Current position*

Dr. Wright has since been promoted to the position of associate dean of student relations at USF. He had also gone on to earn a doctorate in special education from the University of South Florida. "I always wanted to use my brain and not my hands ... So I always wanted to go to school and succeed academically ... I was always enamored with people who had advanced degrees."

*End of Interview*