

4-1-2004

Jarrold Ali oral history interview by Andrew Huse, April 1, 2004

Jarrold Ali (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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Ali, Jarrod (Interviewee) and Huse, Andrew T. (Interviewer), "Jarrod Ali oral history interview by Andrew Huse, April 1, 2004" (2004). *Digital Collection - USF Historical Archives Oral Histories*. Paper 220.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/usfhistinfo_oh/220

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

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Current Position: USF Alumnus
Date of Interview: April 1, 2004
Editor: Danielle E. Riley
Date of Edit: April 13, 2004

Interviewer: Danielle Riley
Location of Interview: Tampa
Campus Library
Abstractor: Jared G. Toney
Final Editor: Jared G. Toney

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Introduction to USF

After high school he visited the USF campus and determined that it was “a very good place to be.” The university’s location within a large metropolitan area was appealing to Ali, as well as the variety of academic programs.

First impressions of USF

He remembers that the students were especially friendly and knowledgeable, particularly those he met from student government. The look of the campus, Ali recalls, was “intriguing” in comparison to other campuses he had visited. “It’s very organized, and I think that’s very important . . . I didn’t want something too confusing.” His parents were very surprised by the size of the campus, and really only had time to see the half of the campus that housed the academic colleges for undergraduates. Because he had only returned from vacation in time to enroll for classes, Ali felt it was most convenient for him to attend USF. He began taking classes in the fall of 1997.

Living arrangements

At the time he began taking classes, Ali was living with his family in Wesley Chapel, having recently moved to the area from Plantation, Florida. Commuting, he recalls, “was very interesting.” “I remember timing myself, sometimes to the minute, from the time I left my house to the university.” Something he did not plan for ahead of time, however, were the parking difficulties on campus, which added time to his commute.

Because he was a commuter student like many others, Ali “did not get that feeling of belonging to the university.”

Involvement in student government

He became involved in student government first by helping Mike Griffin with his campaign for student body president. “I found time for it because I thought it was very important.” Government had always been something of particular interest to Ali, who was himself a political science major at the university. He believes it is important for students to become involved in the daily activities and events on the university campus,

“because it grounds you for what you want to do later on ... and gives you leadership abilities ... that you would take with you.”

Issues in student government

The first campaign he worked on at USF consisted of getting to know what the students wanted. As a volunteer for the Griffin campaign, he helped organize town hall meetings and presidential debates. “You really got to find out what students think, and how they react to some of the policies.” Some of the big issues were tuition increases, parking problems, distribution of state funds, and student involvement to name a few. Ali felt that by giving his time to student government, he was giving back to the student population and affecting change at the university. “Students tend to be very apathetic about a lot of issues, and it is the responsibility of those charged with defending those rights and responsibilities to protect the interests of the students.” Because of his connections around the university, he thought it was “pertinent” that he became involved in student government.

Ali cites his involvement in “Wake-up Wednesday,” a program designed to encourage students to register to vote and go to the polls on election days. He believes the right to vote and express one’s opinion is taken for granted in this country, particularly among university students who become involved only when issues affect them directly.

Positions in student government

Following his tenure as a volunteer in student government, he began his current position in the cabinet as attorney general. He has also held interim positions in the cabinet such as chief of staff and various directorships. His current position is the attorney general of student government, though he is also involved in his fraternity, Sigma Phi Epsilon, where he served as the Vice-President of Finance for two years.

He founded Theta Alpha Kappa, which is the national honors society for students of religious studies. Ali has also assisted students in forming organizations of their own. His first priority was with student government, because that is where his actions affected the entire student population at USF; “That is very important.”

Academics

A political science major, he added a second major in religious studies in the 1999-2000 academic year, after taking a course, “The History of Christianity,” with Professor Dell DeChant. “It really opened my eyes to see how politics and religion were intertwined.” It is something he is tremendously proud of, because he believes his studies have enabled him to better understand different cultures.

He hopes to pursue international studies and law in the future.

Daily schedule

A typical day, according to Ali, requires a schedule planned sometimes two or three weeks in advance. His first priority is reviewing matters and concerns at his desk in the student government office, followed by committee meetings and other engagements. He

presides over honors society meetings, all the while attending classes at various times throughout the day. “It really gives you a true understanding of the value and importance of your time here.”

Involvement with students

His involvement with the honor’s society and his fraternity give Ali the opportunity to interact with students in a more socialized setting. “It really personalizes what students view as the big ... issues that effect them ... and directly give them a chance to hear from us.”

September 11, 2001

He particularly remembers how the events of September 11, 2001 were personalized among students who wrestled with explanations for the disastrous developments. “It certainly would be something that I would never forget ... how much we in student government were able to help with their suffering.” The events also served to facilitate within him a stronger conviction to act on behalf of others, as well as a greater understanding of other cultures.

Diversity at USF

“It is always a good thing when you have diverse groups of students.” He believes in disagreement as a means of facilitating an important dialogue and discussion among eclectic groups of students and interests. “Student Government ... is very much a melting pot of students here at the university and of very good representation.”

Future plans

After graduation, Ali hopes to go on to graduate school. His number one choice is the University of Oxford because of their program in International Human Rights Law. Not only would he like to work as an attorney, he also hopes to one day teach at the university level.

“I think you live day-to-day, and you need to appreciate that ... you can’t rush into things.” His best experiences at USF always came during Homecoming Week, because, “The best experiences are those experiences that you have a hand in. Really.” He believes that the contemporary student population is more enthusiastic than ever, in part a result of increased efforts by Student Government to engage students. “USF can compete amongst the very best schools in the country.”

Ali hopes to maintain connections to USF through the Alumni Association, helping to establish new traditions at the university.

End of Interview