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Bobby Bowden oral history interview by Robert Kerstein, January 25, 2006

Bobby L. Bowden (Interviewee)
Robert J. Kerstein (Interviewer)

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RK: This is an interview with Mr. Bobby Bowden on January 25, 2006 at the University of South Florida. Thanks a lot for speaking with me, sir.

BB: Sure, my pleasure.

RK: Can I ask a little about your personal background, where you were born?

BB: I was born in Quincy, FL; Quincy’s about 25 miles northwest of Tallahassee. My parents relocated to Tampa when I was about nine months old. So Tampa is more so home…. I attended Middleton High School, [and] graduated from Middleton High School in 1961. [I] went to Florida A&M University, and I graduated from Florida A&M University with a B.S. degree in Political Science.

I grew up in public housing here in Tampa, in College Hill homes, which is now Belmont Heights Estates, which is a very, very beautiful redeveloped area by the Tampa Housing Authority through the HOPE VI Grant. I had the opportunity to work on this, at least, be a part of the Steering Committee that looked at the redevelopment of the Belmont Heights Estates area. And that was, to me, very positive. And also the Riverview Terrace—Terrace at the River, as it’s called now. So I’m very, very proud of what has been done in that area.

RK: Great. So after college, you came back to Tampa, is that true?

BB: Yes. After college, I came back to Tampa. I was [a] teacher—

RK: Oh?

BB: …I left the school system to go with one of the great society programs…

RK: Oh, which one?
BB: The Neighborhood Service Center Concept, here [in] Tampa, [Hillsborough County].

RK: And who was mayor then, sir?

BB: The mayor back during that time was Dick Greco.

RK: Oh, I see.

BB: Yes, right. But I left county government after two years to come to the city. I worked with the Model Cities Program as the citizen’s participation coordinator, and the rest is history. When I became the Citizens Participation Coordinator, we were funded on a yearly basis. So I kept my teacher’s certificate—renewed just in case. But from ’68 through February 2004, I was a city employee…for 35 years.

RK: Oh boy, a veteran!

BB: Yes.

RK: Can I ask, sir, what neighborhoods did you focus on when you were a Citizens Participation Coordinator for Model Cities. Is it where you grew up?

BB: Yes, East Tampa. In fact if I remember the boundaries correctly, it was north to Hillsborough Avenue, south to Interstate-4, east to 40th Street, and west to 15th street. And what we did there was organize; I was responsible for organizing block clubs in that area because HUD required us to have citizens’ input into the program. In other words, when we met with citizens, they had the opportunity to sit down and reflect on things that needed to be done in their particular neighborhood. And these ideas, suggestions programs, projects, and activities were considered during the funding process. Which I thought was a very, very good process. And after Model Cities—five years of Model Cities—the community development block grant process started, and citizen participation was still a key element. And the process as far as planning [was] not for citizens, but with citizens. I think that was perhaps the beginning of a strong, citizen participation unit within the City of Tampa.

RK: And after you were with Model Cities, you went to work directly with the city?

BB: Yes, [Model Cities was HUD funded, but under the city’s jurisdiction].

RK: And what was your position then?

BB: I was the Assistant Director of [the] Citizen Participation (component) at that time. Alton White was the Director, and we had what was called a Metropolitan Development Agency. And so the title changed, and I eventually became the manager of the Department of Community Affairs which incorporated the Office [of] Community Relations, which was funded by the city. And this particular office came into existence as
a result of the poor race relations that we had back during the late 60’s, early 70’s. And this office…had as one of it’s responsibilities to improve race relations within the city.

RK: Was that Mayor Poe? Do you recall?

BB: That was Mayor Greco.

RK: Mayor Greco.

BB: Right. They had a Commission on Community Relations back during that time and they had some of the individuals that were the movers and shakers [on the commission]: Cody Fowler, Reverend [Leon] Lowry, were on the commission.

RK: I see.

BB: And then [there was] the staff, which was headed up by Charles “Goosby” Jones at that time. And they worked on different programs to help integrate various businesses and find jobs. And so that was their primary responsibility, to improve race relations within the City of Tampa.

RK: And you were a staff person there, sir?

BB: No. They were under the Department of Community Affairs. We consolidated that department a little later on, and it [became] a division.… And within the Department of Community Affairs, there were two components. One was the Office of Human Rights, and [the] other was the Office of Community Services.

Under the Office of Human Rights we were charged with the responsibility of investigating complaints of discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, public accommodations, and any other alleged unfair practices. And a little later on, we were able to get a contract—enter into a contract with the federal government. We entered into a contract with [the] Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (which is EEOC), to investigate employment discrimination cases. And what occurred there is with that contract, the federal government would reimburse us X number of dollars as a result of closing those type cases. And sad to say, we closed approximately 150 cases per year….

RK: In the private sector?

BB: Yes, in the private sector. And also in housing. We had a contract with HUD Fair Housing, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and we would close about 35-40 cases per year and they would reimburse us for those cases. In the public accommodations arena, we’d close maybe five or six cases per year. But those—as a result of closing those cases, we brought the city quite a few dollars per case. And we were probably generating over $100,000 per year between HUD and the EEOC case closures. And we provided citizens with the opportunity to address their problems in those particular areas—and it was a free service. And so we feel [that] with that type of service, we were able to help minimize frustrations.
RK: And when you say close, sir, I assume that sometimes you found discrimination and sometimes not?

BB: Yes, right.

RK: And if you found discrimination, what type of remedies might occur?

BB: There was monetary relief and also a settlement with the particular company. In other words, we would have them sign a settlement agreement that stated that they would not engage in this type of activity anymore. And it was a good plus for the city; and also the county had the same type of program. So it was a big plus for citizens.

RK: Now you served under Mayor Martinez, who was Mayor Freedman’s predecessor, is that true?

BB: Yes.

RK: And what capacity did you serve there?

BB: I was [Manager] of the Department of Community Affairs.

RK: OK. And then Mayor Freedman came in 1986, and you retained your position, I assume.

BB: Yes.

RK: And how would you characterize your primary responsibilities and your relationship with the mayor?

BB: Mayor Freedman?

RK: Yeah.

BB: Oh, [a] very, very good working relationship. I had known her for quite some time when she was on City Council, and she’s just such a kind, compassionate, person. Very, very good person to work with—and work for. I would say that she was one of the best mayors the City of Tampa has ever had. She implemented some programs that really addressed some issues that I felt needed to be addressed long before she came to office. And one was the racial slur policy that she implemented during her tenure. And that helped to really look at what was occurring in some departments right there in the City of Tampa in terms of statements being made by city employees. I’m talking about the different statements related to racial slurs.

RK: And did she discuss this over with you or the staff before she went ahead with this policy?
BB: Yes, oh yes, right, yes. She was the type of mayor that in our weekly staff meetings would discuss all of the issues that she was going to look at and perhaps implement. So there was always staff input, which was great.

RK: And that’s something you supported?

BB: Oh yes, most definitely.

RK: You saw it as a long standing problem?

BB: Oh yes, right, right, yes. …I think that if you look back at it, it was something that was really, really needed, and was very timely. Because back during that time, there was still a lot of racial tension here in the City of Tampa. I chaired an inter agency workshop that consisted of 25 different agencies within the City of Tampa and Hillsborough County that looked at issues that were occurring. And what we did was maintain what was called a “tension chart”…. We would review that “tension chart” and look at incidents that had occurred—as I stated before, in the city and the county—and most of them were race related incidents. And so we would make recommendations to look at what needed to be done and discuss it at that level. And then I would carry it back [to discuss it with] the mayor.

In fact, that’s how the “Community Unity” campaign was implemented, as a result of the hate crimes that were occurring within the Tampa-Hillsborough community. That would appear on our “tension chart”. So there was a significant increase and I discussed it with her, and she contacted the National Conference of Christians and Jews—[Dr.] Roy Kaplan was the Director at the time. We met with city staff, [the] police department, and set up a subsequent meeting with one of the marketing firms here in Tampa. And so we implemented a campaign to combat racial hatred. And it’s still going on. It’s a continuous process with the National Conference [for and] Community Justice, there’s been a name change—I think you’re probably aware of that.

RK: And this is something Mayor Freedman strongly advocated?

BB: Yes. There was a big press conference; we had bumper stickers [that] we put on all of the city cars and county vehicles, and also naturally, citizens put them on [their cars]. And there were other items, [such as] t-shirts, promoting racial tolerance. So that was one of the big campaigns, or projects, if you want to call it that, that she implemented, along with the racial slur policy to help better race relations in the City of Tampa.

RK: Any other policies come to mind?

BB: Yes. She also looked at the city budget and there was a lack of sidewalks in certain areas of the City of Tampa. And I’m talking about predominantly deprived areas, minority areas. And she implemented that citywide. And with her implementing the
neighborhood associations…she had this traveling [road] show (I’m quite sure somebody’s already told you about the traveling show)…

RK: Yes. [laughs]

BB: …which carried department heads to community meetings. And so what we started in Model Cities with the block clubs and community meetings, she enhanced it, by implementing the neighborhood liaison office with Steve LaBour. And [she] made that one of her top priorities, involving citizens in… the budget [process], and looking at needs in various neighborhoods.

RK: And were you in any way a type of liaison between the East Tampa neighborhoods and the—Mr. LaBour’s office?

BB: Yes, we worked very closely together because within the office [of] community services, we had outreach workers. We had about eight outreach people that were responsible for certain areas of the city. And so yes, we coordinated activities and [staff] had that experience as a result of the Model Cities program. Some of those individuals that were involved with the block clubs and getting input from citizens to consider for the planning process back during that time were still with us within the department, which was [an] asset. So we [were] intimately involved with that process. Although there was a separate office there was coordination, and cooperation with that office.

RK: During Mayor Freedman’s administration, THAN, I believe, expanded significantly, which was an [umbrella] organization representing [the] different neighborhoods. Were East Tampa neighborhoods involved in that?

BB: Yes, yes, they were, they were involved.

RK: And did the—many of the THAN neighborhoods were relatively well-to-do, and neighborhoods—was there a pretty decent working relationship between the different types of neighborhoods?

BB: As far as I know, yes. You know, you’re going to have some friction no matter what you do with a large organization. But yes, we worked quite well together. And as of today, I can think of people that are chaired some of the civic associations in the East Tampa area and in other areas, [and] in the immediate area that are participating in that process. And so we have to give [Mayor] Freedman credit where credit is due, because she was the impetus behind that process.

RK: And so some of these people worked with the mayor on the East Tampa initiatives…some of the same people? So you had continuity?

BB: Yes, yes, right, yes. And one other project that I want to mention is the Black History Month program. During her administration I went to her because Black History was not being taught in the schools. And we sat down and talked about the possibility of
implementing one [program] within the City of Tampa—that would be [for]—not only African Americans, but also the total community, [that would provide] more appreciation for Black History. So we implemented the Black History Month [program] within the City of Tampa. I was the Chairperson. And [now] they are about to have—I think it’s their 18th program on February 3 [2006], at the Convention Center. We started out in City Council chambers, and we would bring in…renowned speakers and we would have a display of African art in the mascot room. And [we would] have that room open during Black History Month, February, so that people could go in and see some of the art, and [get to] know the cultural artifacts. So we have to give her credit for that, because when I asked her about it, she said, *sure we can do it.*

And the very next year, Hillsborough County government did the same thing, they implemented their Black History Month program. The police department started…one too. You know, it really caught on. And I think that was something that was really, really, needed. [We] started out in City Council chambers, and we outgrew City Council chambers, and now it’s being held…at the Tampa Convention Center.

RK: Was City Council Person, Perry Harvey Jr. involved with that initiative as well? He was the African American person on City Council?

BB: Yes, right, yes. We would have Councilman Harvey on the program. Yeah, he would be a part of the program. In fact, we continued that tradition with Gwen Miller….

RK: During Mayor Freedman’s administration, several issues arose regarding race. One being—it’s kind of timely because Gasparilla Day is this weekend coming up—but the controversial the Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla and its all white policy. Did you get involved with that?

BB: …Naturally it was discussed in staff meetings. But I actively participated in Bamboleo—that’s what it was called that year. And I thought that was a very, very bold move on her part. And she’s just that type of person.

I’m reminded of a friend of mine that was walking [on], the Franklin Street Mall. He was on one side of the street and Mayor Freedman was on the other side. And he ran up to me after he saw her on the mall, and he said, *Bobby, guess what. I was on one side of the street, and the Mayor was on the other side and she called me by my first name.* She [made]…a lasting impression on him. It really did. But that’s the type of person she is.

RK: There were also several African Americans appointed to high office in the Freedman administration, Chief Holder, Bennie Holder, for example. And the head of the Convention Center as well (I apologize I forget her name)….

BB: And also the City Clerk…

RK: And the City Clerk!
BB: Janett Martin, yes. Those were firsts and the African American community really appreciated that because it demonstrated inclusion and how genuine Mayor Freedman was when it came to race relations. She did not back down, she really stood her ground. And I can imagine some of the calls that she probably received, and the letters that were probably written as a result of that. Especially when she named Bennie Holder as the Chief of Police.

RK: During your many years of working for the city, had many African Americans who you knew and who you worked with advocated that different Mayors appoint African Americans, more African Americans to high positions? Is this a call you had been hearing for a long time?

BB: Oh yes, most definitely, right, yeah. But she had the where-with-all and the goodness in her heart to do what was right. And that was a big plus. And it holds well for the city too because…of the make up of the city.

RK: Earlier when we began this interview, you mentioned that you were involved with the HOPE VI projects, involving College Hill and Riverview Terrace, is that correct?

BB: Right.

RK: Can you tell us something about the progression of these projects which ultimately razed those public housing projects and replaced them with new housing?

BB: Yes, well, I just felt it was a pleasure to serve on that steering committee because of my College Hill roots. And one of the things that we advocated related to both complexes…was that there [should] be strong tenant relations there. And we wanted to make sure we got an agency in there that was going to manage it, and manage it right. And we wanted to make sure that that agency not give into some of the things that occurred with the old management of College Hill Homes and Riverview Terrace. And so we made sure that there was going to be a social service agency that was going to be available to help with the school relocation, because some of the people that moved out were going to have some problems in terms of their kids having to go to a different school so the Tampa Hillsborough Urban League was [the] social service agency that provided those type services.

And as far as a strong tenant management type system being set up, we wanted to make sure that they were going to provide the necessary skills like budgeting, and home management, and some of [the] other things that go along with it to make sure that it was going to be maintained in a proper manner. But it was, as I stated earlier, it was a grant through HOPE VI that the housing authority, along with the mayor, back during that time, which was Dick Greco sought, through HUD funding. That was the beginning of the HOPE VI program. But a lot of planning went into that particular project in terms of making sure that it was going to be a development that was going to be maintained and not regressed to what the old College Hill Homes and Riverview Terrace [had become].
RK: So this began after Mayor Freedman left office, is that correct? And after Mayor Greco came in for the second time as Mayor, correct?

BB: Yes, right.

RK: Now, I’d like to just ask one other question about that if I could. Was there a fair amount of discussion, sir, during the planning stages for HOPE VI about the residents who would have to leave? You mentioned social services and so on about it, regarding exactly where they would be able to relocate to?

BB: Yes. Yes they worked with various housing agencies to relocate them to—if they did not want to remain in public housing, they were given a certificate where they could…get Section 8 housing. And so, they were worked with on a very, very intimate basis in terms of their relocation. In fact, I understand one lady took her voucher—she was from Chicago, and she went back to Chicago.

And one of the concerns we had though, was that, with the displacement, whether people would have the opportunity to come back. And we looked at some of the other HOPE VI cities around the state and other states, and we found out that the majority of folks that lived there didn’t necessary want to come back to that area. And perhaps because of bad experiences. For example, in Atlanta, one percent—one or two percent of the people came back. But once they would resettie in other areas, they wanted to remain in those areas.

But not too many people [in], Atlanta, Charlotte, Jacksonville—I remember these cities being named—not too many people really wanted to come back. I don’t know what the percentage is over there now that came back, because right after that I retired…. And I would see the Executive Director from time to time and I would ask him how…[is the development progressing?] I drive through myself, just to see how things [are] looking. And it looks pretty good. Naturally, they’ve had a minor drug problem, and they’re staying on top of it. But Chief Holder committed to us that he was not going to allow…it [to become an]…old College Hill homes. And so right now, on the East side of 22nd [Street] is where [they are] going to hopefully be implementing some new businesses…. There needs to be some economic development around that particular facility in order to help it remain stable. And help improve the community period.

RK: Sure.

BB: Yes.

RK: I know HOPE VI was implemented after Mayor Freedman left office. While she was mayor, did she focus on public housing to any extent? The Tampa Housing Authority was to a large degree independent of the city, I believe, is that true?

BB: Yes, right. It is an autonomous body. And she did appoint some of the commissioners. Right. But the Tampa Housing Authority and the City of Tampa have to
work hand in hand. But yeah, she did as much as she possibly could in terms of helping to make life better for citizens in public housing. In fact, we [worked] very closely with public housing. We had [a] Dental and Vision program [that provided a very essential service.]

RK: What was that? I apologize…

BB: A Dental and Vision program which really started back during the Model Cities era. And it was continued through the community development block grant process. …People within public housing qualified. And I’m just mentioning this one effort [where] we concentrated in public housing with a lot of social services type projects. To make sure that citizens were aware, and could avail themselves of the services. But we always had an ongoing working relationship with public housing, and a…working relationship with the Executive Director, [and more particularly, his staff].

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

RK: So the mayor did focus some attention on public housing?

BB: Yes. We worked very closely with the tenants association [and] with [our] outreach [staff]. [Staff was] attending meetings of the tenants association, so [that] we could be aware of problems that might exist that we could perhaps resolve within city government. And [we worked with] other agencies [also] because we had a very, very good working relationship with a lot of the other social service agencies. We always kept a catalogue of all the agencies that were available, and…as staff encountered problems…or issues within public housing, we would make sure that we could do as much as we possibly [could] to refer a citizen [to] the appropriate agency to get help.

RK: I’m curious. You grew up in public housing. Can you tell me roughly the decade, or decades?

BB: Yeah. I was there [the] ‘50s and ‘60s. Well, I went off to college in ’61, naturally when I came back I moved out of public housing. …And my mother moved out of public housing at that time.

RK: She did? Can you tell us about some of the changes that you observed over time from when you were a child there to when you were working there with the city?

BB: Well, back during the time when I was a kid growing up in public housing, [there] appeared to be a lot more pride…we did not have the drug problem back during that time, which made a difference. Because as a kid, we [would] to go—and I’m talking about me and my buddies—we [would] go…to the administration office and they had lawn mowers [for] the tenants to cut their yards, so we would check a lawn mower out and go around in
the community and cut senior citizens’ yards for a dollar…. But perhaps the biggest change, I would say, is that drug factor. We did not have that and like I said there was a lot more pride—probably a lot more male head of households back during that time. And so, that really made a difference. …That’s a big difference now.

RK: Did you live there during the disturbances in ’66, ’67?

BB: No, no, no. In fact I was working for Hillsborough Country government at the time. And I was a part of a system that whenever there was a disturbance I would go out in the area because [of] being known in the community, I was able to help quell whatever the situation was. In fact, [during] the riots in 1967, I was on the street along with some of the other county staff. And you’ve probably heard of the “white hats” and what [they did to help bring the situation under control].

RK: Yes, sir.

BB: So I knew all those guys, and—you know, so we were…out there, trying to help quell the riots along with a gentleman that was a very, very popular coach by the name of James Williams, “big Jim Williams”—he [worked at Blake] High School. And so, he was a person that was instrumental in helping, along with Bob Gilder—[you’ve heard of Bob Gilder…]

RK: Yes, Sir.

BB: …and some of the other leaders in the community that were instrumental in helping to quell [the situation…. In fact, back during Mayor Freedman’s administration when we had some problems with disruptive activity—rock and bottle throwing, we’d call the US Justice Department in Miami. A gentleman that was in charge, by the name of Tom Battles [that we] talk[ed] with, just to [find out] if there was something we could do to address the situation—the potential for disruptive activity here in the City of Tampa. Because Miami was having a lot of problems back during that time. …We took a contingency of both police department [and] citizens [to Miami] that was on our [and] we called it back [during] that time, “response team”. We wanted to get out of the mode of responding all the time, and wanted to be more proactive. So we went [there] and looked at how they dealt with disruptive activity.

And so Mayor Freedman, [the] staff, and I, sat down and we talked about it. And so Mr. Battles set up an “issue[s] meeting” and…[we] talked with some of the other folk that were involved in their crisis response system down there. They had a reverend [that] was very instrumental in helping to quell the riots down there, and he was heading up the crisis prevention and response system [at that time]….

[When we came back] I convened a meeting and we looked at our situation, because our situation was different than Miami. Miami had rock and bottle throwing almost on a daily basis. And we would have it occasionally, and most times it was as a result of [a] police related incident. Any time that police was involved in a shooting of a black person, or any
type of incident in the black community, we pretty much knew that there was that potential for disruptive activity—rock and bottle throwing is what I’m talking about.

So we set up what it was called...“the Community Awareness and Action Team”, similar to what they had [in Miami] the Crisis Prevention Response System.... We had citizens within the community that we could call upon, for example in the Robles Park...[public housing] if something occurred...there. We [had] citizens in that community that we could call upon to come out and walk within the [area]...[and among] people that were participating in disruptive activity and try to help quell it. Just let them—basically use [their] own skills and the fact that [they] hopefully knew that individual—just let them know that this is not the way to resolve it, whatever the problem [was]. We would even convene a meeting the next day with [some of] those citizens to sit down and talk with them about the issues and try to resolve them.

And we did that as far as resolving some of those issues, because the primary issue that they would talk about [was] the lack of jobs. And so we would bring in [appropriate resource people]. And in fact we implemented a project called “Jump Start” where we took a staff member and assigned him—because of his skills just [to] work with people, and [would] find jobs for them. And some of the jobs were within City government. Some people would state that they were frustrated with the City because they would fill out an application and never hear anything. So this person was able to help facilitate that. And also we dealt with the private sector. But that’s basically what we did with our Community Awareness and Action Team, and it helped resolve a lot of problems.

And we also set up a police community relations workshop concept as a result of that meeting in Miami where we were able to enhance what we already had [in place] because back in... the mid-‘80s that big riot occurred in Miami, when the motorcyclist was beaten to death by police officers. And then the trial was [held] here in Tampa.

RK: Mr. McDuffy? Was that his name?

BB: McDuffy, right, that case. Right after that, then Governor Graham called a meeting and he funded through the commission on human relations a police community relations concept. And this was done back during the Martinez administration. And so he funded it for one year, and what those workshops did, [is they] brought citizens and police together within the community. We would have these workshops in our rec centers or churches or wherever we felt it was appropriate to get people to come out. And there would be two and a half day workshops beginning at 6 o’clock in the evening. And we would have the food catered in, so that it wouldn’t be a deterrent...for people getting off 4, 5 o’clock so they [wouldn’t] have to go home and cook—they’d come right [to the workshop]. The concept was implemented back during that time and is still [on-going]. Like I said it was a pilot program for a year through the Florida Commission on Human Relations, but we saw the value in it so when I went to my budget meeting, I included it in my budget, and it was approved because [of] the problems we were having here in Tampa.
RK: Workshops still going on?

BB: Yeah.

RK: Were any businesses especially responsive as far as providing jobs to the low-income people in East Tampa?

BB: [Hesitates]. Yes to a certain extent, but there were not very many jobs in East Tampa as far as the private sector, because what you had was your mom n’ pops and…[a] pharmacy owned by the Harvey’s and they already had their staff. But [they] were, …receptive. Because we had a letter that would precede the visit by the Jump Start Coordinator and so they knew how important it was to try to hire as many—especially during the summer, young folk…people that had been in a situation where they were either unemployed or in some cases, under employed.

RK: Did you have any relationship with the Mayor’s Challenge Fund? The effort to improve housing in Tampa? Did you participate in that in any way?

BB: Yes, I referred a lot of people, that’s for sure. But [anytime] we were…in a neighborhood meeting…[we] would promote…the importance of the Challenge Fund, and the purpose of the Challenge Fund….

RK: Did many people seem to take advantage of it? Many people who you worked with in the community?

BB: …Yes, right. Yeah, that was a very, very good program. Very, very needed program…. 

RK: Are there any frustrations that you can recall during your years with the city, especially maybe your last decade or two—most of us have frustrations at our jobs—does anything stick out?

BB: Well, [pauses]—I’m trying to think. Sometimes maybe the wheels of government didn’t move as fast as you want them to. And especially when you’re trying to convince citizens that, certain things are going to be done. I guess you could call it the bureaucratic red tape. …Naturally we could always use additional funding within our department. That’s for sure. Because we could always use additional staff. When I mentioned the fact that we would close about 150 cases a year, and I was talking about seven investigators, and if we had more resources or more staff, we could have closed more cases. Therefore we would have been able to serve the citizens better. So staffing problems I guess would be one that sticks out in my mind.

RK: Did these investigations regarding charges of housing discrimination, job discrimination continue during the Freedman administration?

BB: Oh yeah.
RK: Was that still part of your responsibility?

BB: Right, right, yes.

RK: Did you notice any trend? Were there fewer charges over time, or was it relatively stable?

BB: Well, employment discrimination cases increased near the end of my tenure with the city. Because I think probably back during Mayor Freedman’s administration we would close about 70-80 cases of employment discrimination. But when I left the city we were closing about 150 cases.

RK: And when was that, that you left the city?

BB: February, 2004. It will be two years next month.

RK: Oh, so that’s very recently.

BB: Yeah, yeah. And it just goes to show you that racism is alive and well. Because most of our cases were race related cases. You know, we want to think that things are getting better, but you know, it, it raises it’s ugly head quite often. And like I said, I saw it with the incidents of hate crimes. And I saw a report—I still kind of follow things—I saw a report a few weeks ago on one of the local channels that St. Pete had the highest number of hate crimes reported. And you know, that’s so important to report it. A lot of those incidents go unreported. If St. Pete had the highest number, how many people didn’t report it, you know? Which is…tough, you would want to think that in 2006 that things are getting better. You know, things are better, but it’s not where it should be. And we still have a long ways to go. Yeah, I’ve seen it over the years.

RK: I guess you have.

BB: Yeah, yeah.

RK: Can I ask maybe just one or two more questions? One thing I’m interested in—you worked for the city for such a long period of time working with several mayors—I guess initially…

BB: I think about eight mayors [laughs]…

RK: Eight mayors?

BB: Right [laughs]…close to anyway.

RK: …beginning with Mayor Greco during his first time in office…
BB: Yes, first term, yeah, right…

RK: OK so you had Mayor Poe and others, Mayor Martinez…

BB: Yeah, right…

RK: How would you place Mayor Freedman in terms of this long series of mayoral administrations we’ve had in terms of how you viewed her priorities, accomplishments, style—anything that strikes you?

BB: Well, because of some of the things she did in terms of race relations, I would put her at the top. At the very top, yeah. Like I stated earlier, she was a very compassionate, kind, very easy person to work for and with. And that was just her personality. She’s a sweet person…

RK: So from your perspective, her primary legacy involves issues of race and trying to improve race relations?

BB: Yeah, and trying to be fair, period. From a budget standpoint, she did not look at it from one perspective, she looked at it as [something] that [was] needed—one in terms of addressing issues that needed to be done within the total community. And so, yeah, that’s basically how I view her. She was [great]—I hated to see her leave.

RK: [laughs].

BB: [laughs]

RK: Can you just tell everyone what you are doing now—this is January 2006?

BB: I am the Community Liaison person for the Institute on Black Life…

RK: At the University of South Florida…

BB: At the University of South Florida. And basically what I’m doing is supporting some of the projects that are ongoing, and I continue to interface with the community. And I’m working on a special project now. This is the 20th year of the Institute on Black Life, which was established in 1986, and it’s under the office of the University Provost. And the primary responsibility of this particular office is to do research development, and provide a bridge between the University and the community. And also we’re working with a project called Center for Africa and the Diaspora. And so what we’re doing in that area is, is emphasizing how important it is to do an exchange program with African nations. And we’re really working with a specific one now—Somalia—they came, I’m sorry [corrects himself]—Cameroon, I understand they came here last year in an exchange program. And we’re going to be sending some professors and staff over there [this year] to do the same thing.
And also, with the anniversary, I’m planning a program on April 12th that will honor our donors for the last 20 years, people that have supported the Institute. And we’re going to give special recognition to Warrick Dunn for his “Homes for the Holidays” initiative. And also Derrick Brooks for his work with youth in the community—I’m sure that people are aware of what he’s done with his educational trips around the United States, and he’s carried kids to Africa two…times, which coincides with some of the things we’re doing here with the Institute. …The President does have a memorandum of understanding, and I’m talking about President [Judy] Genshaft, with some of the African nations.

And so that’s one of my primary projects right now. And so I’m working on funding with various corporations in the community…

RK: So you weren’t ready to retire?

BB: Yes, well, what occurred is [that] the city did not take out Social Security. I got my Social Security quarters as a teacher and with county government. I only had thirty when I retired, so I needed ten more in order to qualify for Medicare. At age 65, you know how important that is. And so I need about five more quarters. But I’m enjoying it, 8 to 12 [o’clock], five days a week. But I really am enjoying it. Good people here. Dr. Geoffrey Okogbaa is the Executive Director of the Institute, and he’s a very, very fine man to work for. Plus, I’m still involved in some of the activities…that I was involved [in] with the City. And that’s the Human Rights board, and the mayor appointed me to the mayor’s African American Advisory Council. And also she appointed me to be on the NFL YET (Youth Education Town) board.

RK: Mayor Pam Iorio appointed you?

BB: Yes, right. So I’m still involved in the community….

RK: Well, the community is fortunate that you’re still involved

BB: Yes, well….

RK: Thank you very, very much for speaking to me, sir.

BB: Yeah, my pleasure. I wish you the very best with this project.

RK: Thank you.