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John Dunn oral history interview by Robert Kerstein, June 22, 2005

John Dunn (Interviewee)
Robert J. Kerstein (Interviewer)

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RK: This is an interview with John Dunn, who was Director of Communications with the Freedman administration. Today is June 22, 2005. Thank you for talking with me John.

JD: Sure.

RK: Can we get a little bit of your personal background? Where were you born?

JD: OK. I was born in Queens, New York, and was working for a newspaper in Newburgh, New York. Moved to Tampa to take a job with the Tampa Tribune back in 1980. Kicked around at the Tribune, and then in about ’85 — ’84 — ’85, I started covering City Hall when Bob Martinez was mayor. And Sandy at that time was the Chair of the City Council. And that’s how I got to meet her, and that’s how I ended up in Tampa.

RK: And when did you actually go to work for the administration?

JD: It was probably in the fall of— just before her—let me think...I initially talked to her about this when she was made aware that Martinez would be stepping down to run for Governor. And that she— and because she was on the City Council would become the mayor. The election was going to be in March, and I think I came right after the election. We, we held off making that announcement until after the election.

RK: OK, so that would have been 1987? Right?

JD: 1986, ’86. I believe it was ’86 when that election was. March of ’86.

RK: She became mayor when Mayor Martinez stepped down?

JD: She, she had, yeah. There was X number of the months where she was the Mayor. Because Martinez had stepped down, and under the city Charter, the Chair of the Council becomes the Mayor.
RK: OK, OK. Was there a Director of Communications under the Martinez administration, do you know?

JD: Yes there was, but my role was going to be different. I had talked to her about that during the process where we started talking about the job and how it would be structured and those kinds of things.

RK: And what was your—what were your primary responsibilities?

JD: I was the official spokesman for the city. I was responsible for all of the press releases. I was responsible for—I was a part of her management team, so I would sit in on all of the meetings where policy issues were brought up. I was also a speech writer. Which was something I hate [laughs]. You know, we had talked for months about all my job duties, and never mentioned speech writing until she—I took the job, and then one of the first things she wanted me to do was write a speech, so [laughs]. But I ended up becoming a speech writer too.

RK: And which media outlets did you interact with regularly?

JD: *Tampa Tribune, St. Pete Times.* At that time there were three news stations. I think there were three. And a couple of radio stations. And then depending on the issue, you know whatever media came rolling into town for whatever story they were covering.

RK: We have a newspaper in Tampa that you’re familiar with, *La Gaceta*…

JD: Yes.

RK: Did you ever deal with them?

JD: Not too much, you know we dealt with them, but usually they didn’t cover things. Same with the *Florida Sentinel*.

RK: Which is the African American paper?

JD: Right. That was mostly editorial board visits and things that would come up because there were a lot of issues in the black community at that time. So, but that was generally more on at a higher level than reporter. Because they didn’t really have a staff to come out and cover things.

RK: And what about, I think at that time, it was called, “Creative Loafing”?

JD: Right.

RK: Did they cover City Hall at all?
JD: Not really, they…tangentially and so I would talk to them to—and I knew the editor at the time, so you know there were interactions but not on a real daily basis. It was hit or miss.

RK: How did you know what to say to the press day by day? Did you meet with the mayor in the morning and then meet with the press? How did you decide what to emphasize?

JD: Well, I tried to never say anything that she wasn’t aware of what I was saying. And so what I would do was if an issue came up, I would talk to her about it, and try to find out what was going on and what she would feel comfortable talking about. A lot of times the issues don’t unfold in a timely manner to meet new cycles. So part of my job would be to just basically give them some fresh sound and give them some information without really committing the administration to anything.

So for example if, during the boycott of the Super Bowl, when we were trying to meet with all the sides to figure out what was really going on and what was really at stake and what they wanted, you know they were always showing up everyday, the media. So I would, rather than say this is what we’re going to do, this is what we’re not going to do, you know, I would say, well the mayor is talking privately with a number of people who are involved, we’re trying to you know, determine what in fact the issues really are, and, and to try and see if there is any kind of a middle ground. Just [to give them] something that they could use to kind of keep their stories going. Because you know these guys had to write—they had to cover the story anyway. And my attitude has always been you—if you don’t tell them anything, then you can’t complain about what they write or what they report. And so that was my attitude throughout, and I didn’t always win those battles. But that was always my position, is to give them something even if it wasn’t, you know—and reporters are smart, they know when they’re just being double talked, and that’s fine. I mean because you know, in some aspects it’s a game. So as long as they’re getting something fresh, and they can take it back and use it to do their story, then they’ll give you a little space. It’s when you circle the wagons and you don’t say anything, is when the dogs start barking at your back door.

RK: I imagine for that issue, the one involving the Super Bowl with the controversial Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla, there was national media here, is that correct?

JD: Right, right.

RK: Now were they easier to deal with, or more difficult?

JD: They were easier in some respects because they were coming in fresh, they really didn’t know who the players were, so a lot of what they were covering was fairly—wasn’t as detailed. The problem is though, is the further away you get from where the stuff is happening, the story takes on a whole new tone. And this especially came out during the racial disturbances. Where the local papers treated it a certain way, you had all the northern papers coming in with a preconceived notion of what was going on here, and
it was really tough to try to deflate that. So what was a disturbance in Tampa and the surrounding area became riots as you got up to Washington or into Miami, and you know, at one point, I thought—what I thought was that a lot of newspapers were deflecting what was going on in their own communities by pointing to Tampa, and especially the fact that you had a southern police department, you know, beating up black and killing black people. It just fit that stereotype and they ran with it. And you weren’t going to—you know, you weren’t going to deviate from it.

RK: Did they actually send people down, or did you speak to them over the phone?

JD: Both. A lot of them sent people to town though. Miami came down, Newsday in New York came down, the Washington Post came down. Other papers, it was over the phone, and they used supplementative with wire copy.

RK: And would that be for the racial disturbances or for the Super Bowl?

JD: Racial disturbances. The Super Bowl they were already—a lot of them were already in town anyway, so you know they were automatically here. But you know you had a lot of other things going on too. So you know, you had the Gulf War and….

RK: Did you ever hold a formal press conference?

JD: Yes.

RK: Was that frequent?

JD: [Pauses] No, it wasn’t, it wasn’t frequent. We tried to use them sparingly because you have different dynamics when you have them all together than when you do when you have one on one. And there were just some issues that lent themselves more to you know, just lining them up and going in one after the other, as opposed to getting them in a pack. But we did do press conferences on a number of issues: “take home police car” and the budgets, some of the racial things we ended up having press conferences [on]. Of course, the Super Bowl stuff, when we announced Bambaleo [laughs].

RK: And were you and the mayor at the press conferences or was it just sometimes you?

JD: No, it would be mostly the mayor. I mean I tried to stay kind of as low profile as I could given the nature of the job. It was my job to get them there and to help the mayor get ready for it. But it wasn’t my job to actually conduct the press conference.

RK: Most of us get all of our information through the news about a mayor or a mayoral administration. And I was wondering if you were trying to convey a particular image of the mayor as you were answering questions, as you were holding press conferences?

JD: Well, no because it was already established by the fact that she was the first female mayor. That already set the tone. Plus her style is not what you would expect of a normal
politician. She was not—I mean her approach was more, almost more like a City Manager than a mayor. She wasn’t big on floating visions. She wasn’t into flowery language. She was always—it was always fairly straight and, you know, plain spoken. Which is not to be confused with not being able to speak well, but she was just, you know, one of these no nonsense kinds of people. I mean she used to tell us that, you know—because I would say, *look, you have the pulpit, you are the mayor, you need to be able to float a vision*. And her response would be well, *when you have no money, any float, you float a vision, it’s a hallucination*. Because you know, at that time, the economy was really bad, and there was no money.

RK: When she first came in?

JD: Right. Back in the late ‘80s and mid ‘80s the economy was terrible. I mean, they weren’t lending money, and there was a lot that she wanted to do that was never going to happen. You know, the hotel deal—part of the problem with the hotel deal was the economics of what was going on at the time.

RK: The hotel to go with the Convention Center?

JD: The Convention Center Hotel. So you know, she wasn’t about to do those things. I mean I tried to get her to have a mayor’s program on cable, to try to give her exposure, and would be an unfiltered—she didn’t want to hear about it. *You know, that’s a political thing, and I’m not going to use blah, blah, blah*. And so we wouldn’t do that, you know. Today, I mean, you know, Greco’s started it, and you know, Pam is milking it for all its worth. And you know, it was just—it was not something that she was really interested in doing.

RK: Can you give some examples of how gender influenced the media coverage of the mayor, if it did?

JD: Well it absolutely did. The biggest thing I got, especially from TV reporters, was about her demeanor and the fact that she didn’t smile a lot. I must have had conversations—and these were reporters who were, you know, I’d had relationships with them, they were well meaning, I got them what they needed, so we had a good relationship. And it was almost like, you know, *you need to tell her, she needs to smile more, she needs to really loosen up*. And to which I would point out that the previous mayor, Bob Martinez, was described in one column as looking like a cadaver. Because that guy never smiled. He never smiled, and when he did it looked forced. You know, it was like somebody would tape his cheeks together to get him to smile. And it was never an issue, it was never an issue. So that probably, was the most glaring difference, was how and, you know—*she always looked sour, and she only had two looks. She was either smiling or she was sour*. And you don’t get that with men. You will never hear that, [never hear] them say that about any man in any position.

RK: So that would be written in the newspapers?
JD: No, you know it wouldn’t really be written, but it would affect—it would color their view of her. It absolutely would color their view. I don’t know if I can point to anything where it really manifested itself in the coverage, because there were other issues that affected that, but it was just, you know, it was like that initial point of contact—it makes that initial first impression. And it, it was definitely an issue for the TV people. And they meant it in a good way. You know, they were offering advice as opposed to being you know, god what a bitch. But, you know, I mean—but that, I think that more than anything was how the media covered it. Plus, her being a woman affected her with the Tampa Tribune and the attitude of the entrenched attitudes of that newspaper at the time. And you know, and in other ways.

RK: Who were the major decision makers for the Tribune?

JD: At that time it Ed Roberts came in, he was the Editorial Director. When he first came to town, he wrote a column in which he talked about women’s moods being judged by—you know being controlled by phases of the moon. So you know, the guy—the newspaper wasn’t ready to deal with a woman in the position of authority, is my take on that. Plus, Sandy never went out of her way to schmooze them. Never went out of her way to schmooze them. Which I think she would probably admit today was probably not the best move to make.

But then you had Doyle Harvill coming in as Managing Editor of the Tampa Tribune. And you know, I used to work at the Tribune, so I’d go over there a lot and you know, talk to people in the newsroom. My first encounter with Doyle, standing in a hallway, he came up and got—you know, Doyle was one of these people, he would get right in your face and talk to you, and you know, he tried these little intimidation tactics. So he gets right in my face, and he asks me, how long am I going to be working for that skirt? [Laughs]. So, you know, I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe it. But that was Doyle, that was Doyle. It’s just the way he was, he was making no apologies for it, and you took him or you left him.

So I remember, I had to arrange for them to sit down and try to clear the air. And at one point in their discussion he said to her that no one would ever take her seriously because she’s a girl. At which point, she got up and left, and it was a terrible relationship from there on out. She had a really bad relationship with that newspaper.

RK: And what about with the St. Petersburg Times?

JD: St. Pete Times was different. They were just opening a bureau here, they were just coming into town. They didn’t have the level of coverage, their editorials board wasn’t—their bureau back then was not as big as it is now, their operation wasn’t as big. They had a City Hall reporter who got along with her fine.

RK: Do you remember who that was?

JD: Jennifer Stevenson was one of them. There were a couple of others that I can
probably remember if I need to. But you know, editorially it wasn’t, it wasn’t as bad. I mean the big—but they, but nobody—at that point they were just coming into town, so they didn’t really have a lot of influence.

RK: For a period of time, there was a columnist for the St Pete Times named Mary Jo Melone who wrote many columns about the mayor that seemed to be critical of her, if I remember correctly. Did you—did you have much interaction with her?

JD: Yes, I talked to Mary Jo. Mary Jo was critical of a lot of things. And Mary Jo’s game was to just knock whoever was in running the institutions at that point. I mean, it wasn’t—she was an equal opportunity offender. She did not get along with the mayor for probably personal reasons as opposed to real issues. And so a lot of Mary Jo’s things would be kind of like, nibbling little things, I mean because she could really disagree on the bigger issues. It was probably more a matter of style over substance. But you know it was this—there was a clash of personalities there that didn’t translate well into columns.

RK: When people speak sometimes about the national media, some emphasize it as a conservative bias or a liberal bias. Others say, well, it’s just sensationalistic, it doesn’t give much information. Did you have any general impression about the newspapers here or the news networks in terms of any bias?

JD: No, no. I mean, more so than a bias would be preconceived notions. But we, we fed some of that by how we responded or didn’t respond to what was going on. So I can’t—just as an example, when Dwight Gooden got beat up at a traffic stop. Well his picture was on—the mug shot of him with all the bruises and the puffy eye—was on the front page of probably every town with a major league baseball team. I know it made the front pages in New York. And so, you know, here you’ve got a group of southern white cops, beating up a rich black guy, driving a really nice car, and at one point the police going, you know break his arm! during this whole thing. Our response to that was to circle the wagons and not say anything. And we got the ever-loving crap kicked out of us, nationally by that.

But I can’t call that bias because we did not do anything to try to set the record straight. We “no commented” for weeks, while the State Attorney dithered on this case, thinking that he was going to come back with something, which of course he didn’t, because he didn’t want this mess. And I remember sitting around the meeting where we were deciding how to deal with all this. And you know, the mayor’s style at that time was to ask everybody: public works people, finance people, all of the different groups—how we should respond to something. So of course, everybody is an instant media expert. So I argued in fact that and I told them that if we didn’t say anything that we are going to get our butts kicked, we would have nobody to blame but ourselves, and we needed to do something and say something about this. Even if it’s to say, they screwed up, whatever. We need to be able to say it, take a hit and then move on. Because the story will not go away until we do.
Now the City Attorney will argue, and did argue that we that we shouldn’t say anything because this was a criminal investigation that was going on, and the State Attorney’s offices was doing this, that, and the other. And my counter was, but the State Attorney’s office is not the one getting the heat, not the one’s getting beat up over this. And it’s—we can’t depend on State Attorney to do it. Well, and of course the mayor at that point decides that she’s going to follow the City Attorney’s advice…

RK: Who was the City Attorney?

JD: Pam Aiken. Actually, was it Pam? I think it might have been Pam. I’ll have to double check that. I think it was Pam. So anyway, and that’s what we did, and we just got creamed.

RK: Was that a learning experience for the next issues?

JD: It was for me. It definitely was for me. The whole thing was a learning experience. Because this town hadn’t been through racial disturbances for twenty-something years. They had never had the silver anniversary of the Super Bowl boycotted. We never had the Queen coming in to visit. You know, there was a lot of things that went on during that administration that this town had never been exposed to.

I mean I think she came along at the time when Tampa was starting its future shock and it was making that transition from a little tiny town to a bigger small town. And you know with all the growing pains that went with it—I mean, you know, the Chamber of Commerce for example and that slogan, “America’s next great city.” So you know, I think Tampa was starting to grow up then and there was just, there was a lot of thing that were you know, happening as a result of that.

RK: When you read the newspaper the next day, after you spoke with reporters, was it usually a close relationship between the facts you gave them and what they wrote?

JD: It would depend. It varied from reporter to reporter. There were some—a couple of reporters who I was convinced would either just make it up or whatever. And then I would get on the phone and we’d yell at each other, and then I would have to figure out how to deal with it. For the most part though, I would say the coverage was accurate. I mean, I wasn’t happy about a lot of it, but it was accurate. So I can’t complain about it if it’s accurate.

RK: Was there a frequent turnover of reporters covering the City Hall or did you have one person from, the Tribune for example, staying for several years?

JD: Usually the change over every year, it seemed. So then you’d come in with somebody else and then they would start up. But in addition to them, you have the different bureaus in the neighborhoods, who would be calling about some neighborhood specific thing that was going on. And [they] would want either a comment from the mayor or something else. So it was not only the City Hall reporter, but it was some of the
bureau reporters who would call in. So on any given day I could be dealing with like, you know, four or five Tribune reporters or you know, on some days, maybe just one.

RK: Given that you at least had some turnover in City Hall reporters, I suppose, is it true that there is some lack of institutional memory in a certain sense? Was it difficult for you, if—because you would perhaps be referring to something a year ago, and they might not have any knowledge of it. Was that difficult to have to fill in the back ground?

JD: It was an issue for television because television never sent the same reporter to cover anything. Even the same issue would have different reporters showing up. So there was always a curve, which I saw quite honestly as an opportunity because it allowed me to put my spin on the facts. So I didn’t really complain too much about it because it gave them, I mean, they were coming in fresh. They didn’t have a clue what was going on except what they read in the paper. And you know, so they would have to hit the ground running and figure out who the players were, get to them, and then get their story on the air, and then they’d be assigned to do something else. So it was not so much an issue with print, it was more [of] an issue with TV.

RK: What were your—and I think you’ve already referred to a couple—what were the most difficult issues you had to deal with during the administration?

JD: In no particular order, the take home police cars, when she took away their take home cars; the racial disturbances; the whole issue with the investigation, our whole inter-review of the police department; the Super Bowl boycott; and the, let’s see—those were probably the biggest ones. And the housing problems on the plus side. Doing stuff in housing was probably the biggest bonus in terms of issues.

RK: And did the press cover that in a positive sense, those programs?

JD: Yes, yes.

RK: Did they cover anything else you recall in a generally positive sense/

JD: They would cover, I mean the day-to-day routine things were generally positive. But you know, there was not a—I sat back and tried to remember what all of the glowing positive things that happened and there weren’t a whole lot of them. I mean you know, there was stuff—but the big issues were mostly the negative ones.

RK: Is that in part because of the economy, you didn’t have too much development going on for the first several years?

JD: Well…

RK: Because sometimes the press likes to focus on buildings going upward.

JD: Right. And developers were not fans of Freedman.
RK: Why not?

JD: Well because she wasn’t giving them—I mean, Martinez was a friend to developers. Sandy was not. She wouldn’t let them come in, I mean, the first big one was building a high-rise on the river. And she turned down I think, I can’t remember who the developer was, it may have been Dick Beard. Turned him down and refused to let him build a high-rise on the river because she wanted to maintain public access.

And then developers who were you know, quite honestly, at least in my opinion, were used to just being able to come in and do whatever they wanted, all of a sudden now were finding resistance in the mayor’s office. And you know, Sandy was convinced at one point, part of it was the fact they had to deal with a woman and they hated that. You know, I don’t know if I’m as strong on that as she is, but I think they, they—they fact that they just couldn’t come in and do whatever they wanted to do set the tone. And I know at one point it got so bad that a contingent of them went up to Cleveland and then came back and started complaining that *Tampa needed to be more like Cleveland, and this is not a developer friendly town, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.* To which I said, well you know, *who the hell wants to be like Cleveland?* But this was the kind of stuff that was going on. You know, when you have your sacred cows and all of a sudden they’re not allowed in the herd anymore, they’re the ones that scream and raise bloody murder.

RK: And did they ever hear of the media?

JD: Oh, yeah. Because the media made them you know--they just wanted somebody to bitch. They can find somebody to complain and they have some legitimate reason, because of their position or otherwise, the merits of the complaint, they don’t care about. That is not their job to weigh the merits—in their mind, it wasn’t their job to weigh the merits of the argument, it was just to cover the argument.

RK: During the first administration the Convention Center was completed, and I guess the Performing Arts Center as well.

JD: Right.

RK: Did the administration get positive coverage for those?

JD: Well, I mean there wasn’t a whole lot of coverage on it anyway at that point. You know, it was already done, it was in the ground. You know, some of the problems with the Convention Center was the location, but that, that decision had been made long before she got there. There was probably more stuff about the Aquarium and what’s now the St. Pete Times Forum than there was about those two projects.

RK: And what was the press reaction to those?

[End Tape 1, Side A]
[Tape 1, Side B]

JD: I can’t remember specific editorials in support or opposed to it, but you know, the media, they cover what’s there. I mean, they don’t necessarily generate the opposition, but if the opposition is there, they will quote them and find them. And so that’s really what you had. I mean quite honestly, I didn’t necessarily buy the consultants’ figures on how many visitors would go to the Aquarium anyway. I mean, I didn’t, I wasn’t a big fan of it. But nobody elected me to anything. So you know, I would just go out there and we’d talk about it and you know, take the hit.

And you know, with The Lightning, you know, we had every goofball showing up—the Duke of Edinburgh showed up, you know, he was going to be building the stadium. We had some other character, Mark Gannis who was just like a you know, song and dance guy coming in. At one point, you know, we just had a—it was almost like a slapstick, some of the characters that were coming in around that forum. Because you know, she went to Palm Beach to help get the hockey team here. Which I was a big fan—because I’m an old time hockey fan, and you know, Phil Esposito coming, and I’m like, oh God, it’s Phil! you know.

RK: Did she get good coverage from that?

JD: Yes, she did. You know, holding the hockey stick up over her head, you know we had that picture up on the wall for a long time. So she got, you know—the bad coverage for the most part was more a reflection of people in the community and the fact that the Tribune was after her. And I’ll give you a shining example of that, she was going to—a stupid example—she was going to replace the rug on the 8th floor, because it was worn out, it was crap. So you know, you get bids, and you’re talking about replacing the carpet. Well then the Tribune of course comes over, and they wrote four stories about replacing the carpets on the lobby of the 8th floor. Dick Greco, came into office, moved the Mayor’s Office down to the ground floor, spent more than a quarter of a million dollars on some palatial office—they never wrote a word about that as opposed to four stories about replacing a rug. So I put the Tribune in a separate category from the rest of the media at that time.

RK: And is that, the fact that they didn’t focus on the Greco administration’s spending that money related to the fact that they liked Dick Greco?

JD: Dick would go over there, and would visit with them all the time. Dick was a schmoozer. Dick ran for my job more than he did—and he hired a guy to come in and run the city. Which is fine, I mean, because, you know, it all depends on what your definition of a mayor is. You know, a lot of people see the mayor as the bully pulpit, the vision floater, the—you know, sets the tone, and doesn’t sweat the details. Sandy wasn’t like that. She didn’t float vision, she didn’t set, you know, do those things—she had an agenda, and she stuck to that agenda, and like I mentioned earlier, her approach was
almost like a city manager. Which, in a strong mayor form of government is probably better, because ultimately the mayor is responsible for everything. In a strong—I mean, you know, if she was the mayor of St. Pete at the time which was largely a ceremonial position, then you could say, well, you know... But in Tampa that’s not. It [Tampa] was like the most powerful mayor’s office in the state at the time. So, you know, her approach was, you know, she wants to be on top of every detail about all of these big things going on. And when you focus on the details, you don’t, you know—that 50,000 foot view sometimes—you don’t spend a whole lot of time up there.

So, and the Tribune had a certain mindset as to what they wanted. And like I said, she never went to visit them. Her attitude was [that] if they had a question about something she was doing, they would call her. She was too busy doing stuff. And I tried to convince her that it didn’t really work that way, but I obviously was not very successful.

RK: Did the Tribune want the mayor to focus more on being pro-growth and pro-development in neighborhoods perhaps?

JD: No, I think, I think—I think a lot of it was style. I think a lot of it was the fact that they thought they should be the ones being wined and dined. And she thought that she was the one who was elected, and that they should be coming over to talk to her about issues. You know, they sat in their ivory tower, they, I think—and again, this is, I have no evidence—but the fact that she was a woman, the fact that she thought that minorities had a right to live and to actually hold positions of power, I think they disagreed with her stand on the Mystic Krewe—the Krewe and Gasparilla, they disagreed on that.

They didn’t agree with her whole social component of what she was trying to do. Housing was not an issue for them. They felt that, you know they thought Tampa should be taking its place in the country as one of the leading communities and blah, blah, blah, blah, which meant buildings, which meant you know, the usual stuff, the edifices. And she was not about that. And she never bothered to really try to get them to buy into her vision.

RK: If a segment of the community was discontent, builders, for example, developers, did they consciously go through the media?

JD: Oh yeah, oh yeah. It was—I mean, you could see it, you could absolutely see it. And again, you know, the reporters didn’t care. I mean it wasn’t their job to see—you know, if somebody was going to come up and throw rocks and bricks, I mean—you know a perfect example was the take home police cars. You know, the cops used the media the whole time. I mean, they got a radio station to organize a “honk-off” around City Hall. WFMI 70, WFLA. You know, they got everybody together in their cars, and just start[ed] driving around the block at City Hall honking their horns and flashing their lights to support the cops.

RK: That got great coverage I imagine.
JD: Of course, of course. So you know, to them it was great radio. You know, they didn’t understand why we were doing it. And you know, it was, it was a losing argument right from the start. You know, and the thing I will give Sandy credit for is because it was the right thing to do, it was the most unpopular thing to do. It haunted her throughout her administration. But she, she did it. And I don’t think that you know, given some of the leadership you have now that they would even take that fight on. Especially after they saw what happened to her.

RK: Did the press ever remark to you or write about the fact that the mayor walked, when she went to meetings—public meetings and out in public generally—had a body guard or former police officer?

JD: Yeah, that came up a number of times. Because Martinez didn’t necessarily have a police officer, but he had three people with him everywhere he went. He was never alone. Sandy didn’t do it that way, but she did have—I mean look, I saw her hate mail. You know, her car was axed in her parking lot of her house at 2am in the morning by some whack-job who had just gotten out of jail. So, I mean I—and my approach to it then was to just come out strong. And just say—I said, every big city mayor has a security person, she has already had—you have already written about her car getting axed, you’ve seen some of the (what I used to call) crayon mail, from some of the whack-jobs out there. They didn’t know whether to hate her more because she was female, Jewish, or because she thought blacks should be able to live inside the city limits. And there were any number of times where we would be called into the office because of a letter that really upset the police department because of the tone and some of the phraseology, and that we were warned to be careful. You know, so I mean—and again, you can’t talk about that stuff publicly. But I just—you know, it would be an issue, but I would come out strong on it, and I think it didn’t become as big an issue as it could have been. But it definitely was discussed.

RK: Is there often a tension or potential tension between good policy and good public relations?

JD: There was probably more of a tension between good policy and good politics. Because the politically expedient thing to do isn’t necessarily the best thing to do in terms of policy and what’s in the best interest of the city. And Sandy, invariably pissed people off because she would not necessarily go their way or take the politically easy course. And she always did what was, what she believed was in the best interests of the city. I mean I could sit here today and say that without any hesitation at all.

You know, I don’t think Greco operated that way, and you know, I don’t know about what’s going on now because I’m not that close to it, but I mean, I learned—what I went to school on is I learned why politicians sometimes do things that you know are not in the best interests of the community. It’s because it’s politically easier for them to do it and let somebody else deal with the consequences.
So again, the biggest—directly related to your question—the biggest clash between policy and PR was in fact [of] the take home cars. You know the fact that we saved two and a half million dollars, the fact that you know, two thirds of the department were living outside of the city limits—and some of them had to actually go out and buy cars, which says that they were using it for personal business, never, never got traction. Because this was a big emotional thing, she’s handcuffing the police, she’s being soft on crime—they were saying, you know, if you have a police car in the neighborhood, that protects that neighborhood from crime, even though there weren’t any studies; because I kept saying to reporters, well show me a study that says that—there aren’t any. I said, that’s an illusion. But you know, it never got traction. It never got traction. And I had told her when we announced this, I said, this is exactly what’s going to happen. This is a highly emotional issue, you are taking away something that these guys think is their God-given right to have, and they are going to hit you with all of this emotional stuff, and we’re going to be sitting here spouting economics—about how we’re saving tax payers money. And I said, we, it’s never going to work. We’re going to get killed. And we did. But she knew it was going to happen. We held her press conference, we made the announcement, did the charts and the graphs, and it got buried. Absolutely got buried. But I mean, it was the right thing to do.

RK: Any mayor is going to have people that they interact with relatively closely outside of the administration, the private sector. Were there any people that you can think of that the mayor often consulted with, spoke with about issues?

JD: Probably her husband more than anything. That was, you know, up until at least the whole Key Bank saga. You know, and I’m sure she did. I wasn’t privy to who she talked to about what, but her management style was always to go around and get a lot of opinions from everybody before making a decision. And between Buckhorn and myself, we were probably on the losing end. Our track record in those meetings was about as good as the Bucs at the time. You know when she decided to ban alcohol on city—at city events and city functions, you know, on city property, I just wanted to—I just wanted to leap up and just choke her. I said with everything else we’ve got going on, you want to play like you know, Mother Superior now? And you want to just tell people they can’t drink on city property anymore? What is wrong? Why are we picking this fight? It was totally unnecessary. You know, and we’re getting beat up on all this other stuff, why would you just do this? And of course the media, where do they go to get reaction to this, do they go to the church? No. They go to the bar. [In a deep voice] I think this is absolutely ridiculous [laughs].

RK: What was that, like city parks and so on?

JD: Yeah, you know like Friday Extra and you know, city events on the—you know, where they used to be able to, you know. And this was a big deal for a lot of non-profits because that’s how they raised their money. You know, and I belonged to a couple of non-profits, and you make your money on beer sales. You cut a deal with the distributor, you go out there and you make money. And that’s how you do it. And she cut that out.
So, but you know—I mean once she made up her mind, that was it. So we went out there and we had to do that. And the worst part was, I had to go out and explain it.

RK: To the not for profits?

JD: To the media. I mean, and I didn’t even support it! [laughs].

RK: Did you ever participate in, I think you called them, the mayor’s road show?

JD: Oh yeah.

RK: What were they?

JD: They were—we called it, that was our name for it, “the traveling road show”. And what she would do is make every department head go to all these different neighborhood meetings. I must have, I’ve been to every single neighborhood. And, you know she would get up there and give her talk, and then people would get up and they would complain about speeding, and potholes. And then she’d make the police chief get up and talk about speeding; the public works guy get up and talk about potholes and what have you down the line. From a PR standpoint it was a great thing, but as one who had to sit through it all, it was just painful.

But I really—I mean the benefit to it for every one of us bureaucrats at that point, was it gave you a really good sense of how the different neighborhoods operated. We would go into some neighborhoods in East Tampa where they would be complaining about—they can’t sit on their porch at night, because people are shooting at—shooting guns, they’re shooting out the streetlights; they can’t let their kids go out and play. And then you’d go over here on Davis Islands, the most pampered, overindulged community in the city, where they would complain about the color of their dumpsters and the fact that you pick up your yard clippings on the wrong day, we really need to have it picked up sooner because it’s so unsightly sitting out there. You know, and it really did give you a sense of what the different neighborhoods were dealing with. And it really did I mean, you know, Tip O’Neill’s thing “all politics is local”—it really is.

And just as an aside, one of the things that used to drive Mary Jo Melone nuts, was that she would write these big, high altitude things about city government and you know, why isn’t Sandy doing this, that, or the other thing people, and she would go to these meetings expecting neighbors to get up and complain about this stuff and they never did. They never did, and it would drive her nuts. I said, Mary Jo, I said, they don’t care in Wellswood, what’s going on in Tampa Heights. It is not their issue. They don’t care about what’s going on in the rest of the city, all they care about is what’s going on in their neighborhood, specifically their street, but maybe the rest of the neighborhood as well, and that’s where it ends. They don’t care. You can write all this stuff until you’re blue in the face, and they are not going to care. And she could never, she could never get over that. I used to love kicking her with it [laughs].
RK: So did the insight you gained from these meetings help you with the media beyond this example?

JD: Not, not really. I mean, it gave me a better understanding of the different things going on in the neighborhoods and it allowed us to address problems so that we could head off you know, any potential uprisings from neighborhoods. In fact now it’s gotten so bad that, I mean, these neighborhood groups have like, their own special interest. You know, and I blame her for that [laughs]. To this day I say, you know, you started this. I work at Tampa General—we just had to pay out a million dollars [and] I said you know what, this is your fault, you empowered these neighborhood groups and now they’re just out of control, they are as bad as any lobbyists, I mean you know…[laughs].

RK: I wondered why you felt so strongly about Davis Islands.

JD: Well I mean, Davis Island was, you know, it is the most affluent neighborhood in the city. I mean it was at the time—I don’t know about, maybe Tampa Palms now. But their, their whole view was they paid more taxes than anybody else, they should have more stuff than anybody else. And you know [they] don’t care about what’s going on in—anywhere else in Tampa. So yeah, I have a special, special place for Davis Island. Or any pampered neighborhood compared to what else is going on.

I mean none of these people have ever—I mean, it’s the same with the Tribune. None of those people ever went into any parts of those areas, any parts of town that were underdeveloped. They never hit the ghetto. Those editors at the Tribune never did, most of the reporters never did, and that became painfully evident during the riots—disturbances. You know, when they had to go out there and actually start covering it they were so ill prepared to deal with any of it, that you know, it was just—it was new territory for them.

RK: And did they learn over time, did things improve?

JD: Well I remember the first night of disturbances, I think after the chokehold episode, our police department…

RK: Can you say what, what did that involve, the chokehold?

JD: It was when a police officer answered a call for a mentally, a kid who was threatening his mother and family members. Apparently he had some mental issues and the police officer puts him in a chokehold and he ends up dying later as a result of that, which sparked a lot of—they set the dumpster on fire, they trashed the store that the Korean family owned on the corner of 22nd and Lake, I think it was. And but you know, reporters came in with their helicopters and police would you know, just disperse of these groups—mostly kids. Disperse one group, the media helicopter would come in, shine the light, and then they would get back and start congregating again.
And on more than one occasion they ended up having to get reporters out of the area because they had wandered in there, you know, like they were in Carrollwood going to a flea market. And in fact, you know, one of the TV anchors, they hid in a truck during the day. Him—her, an anchor and a photographer. And then at night they got out, and of course they got—the photographer got beat up, had permanent ear damage—hearing damage. And the only reason the anchor made it through was because she ran into a patrol who managed to get her out of there. I had to call every TV station and the newspapers and tell them that if they crossed the line and went into that area, that they were on their own, and [that] we could not guarantee their safety. It was just ridiculous.

You know one—I was talking to one print reporter, their car got tipped over. And he’s out, holding up his press like he’s in some third world you know, La Prensa, and you know, and those guys didn’t care. They, they rolled this woman’s car—this reporter’s car over, and her car got totaled. So you know, and the media had no experience covering any of this, just like we didn’t have any experience in dealing with it.

RK: There other racial issues that came up during the H years. Did the media improve as far as the coverage of these issues, whether it be the Krewe, whether Whydah?

JD: You know they, I think they did OK covering it. I mean some of the Whydah stuff I disagree with because of what was said about what took place in meetings, did not actually take place in meetings. And it was more like we say, they say. And so I overall I don’t, I can’t really be too critical of the coverage, but they had no understanding of the issue at all. These were white male editors, for the most part they were white reporters trying to cover racial issues. They had no grounding, they had no understanding of it. And they could do nothing really more than write about what was taking place. They couldn’t add anything to it, they couldn’t expand on any of it, and they just didn’t get it. They just didn’t get it. And I, know you, quite honestly, considering the people, the crew that was in charge, especially at the Tribune at that time, they didn’t care about it. My sense of what they were thinking is, this is just bad for business, this is, you know—I can’t believe we got these people all stirred up, and you got to do something. You got to get the police in there, and crack down on these people. [This] is pretty much my impression of what their thoughts were. Now again, it’s just me saying that, but that was my sense.

RK: As the media person, did you interact at all with groups outside of the media, different interest groups?

JD: Not to any extent. I think you know, Bob did more of that…

RK: Bob Buckhorn?

JD: Yeah. Bob was more the Chamber guy, and the developer guy and you know, when the different business groups were parading in to tout their latest project, and to—you know, he was usually the one that sat in on that stuff. I generally tried to stay away from it.
RK: Did [inaudible] interact as far as Bob Buckhorn informing you what was going on so that you could interact with the media regarding this project?

JD: Oh yeah, yeah. I was never in the dark about anything that I needed to know about. In fact when I was talking with her about taking the position, one of the requirements I felt was that I needed to report directly to her, and I needed to sit in on those high level meetings so I would have a better understanding of what was going on, because that would help me do my job. Because you know, I could go off the record with people and just kind of give them a sense of what’s really going on to help give them a better understanding for when they were doing their stories.

RK: Does that happen often that you go off the record?

JD: It depends on who the reporter is, what the story is and how comfortable I am doing it. There were certain things that I couldn’t say because it was just put them in an uncomfortable position, and so I wouldn’t do that. If it was some real blockbuster thing, I wouldn’t put them in the position of saying, well I’m going to tell you, but you can’t do anything with it. It’s just too much to expect. It’s like, you know, putting a bunch of ice cream in front of a little kid and telling him, don’t eat it. You know, you’re just asking for trouble. So I wouldn’t do that. But you know, in some instances, I was able to do—you know, give them a little more background to kind of help them out.

RK: Did you stay with the administration to the end?

JD: No, I left a few months early. I didn’t want to be there at the very end and you know, have to deal with the stories of everybody packing their boxes, and waving goodbye to all our friends and you know, heading off into the darkness somewhere. So I had an opportunity to go to Orlando to work for Time Warner on some interactive television research project, and to become a speech writer, and a media spokesman for them. So I took that job, and I left before the end.

So, and I had talked to Greco, you know because then it was obvious that Greco was going to run, and I know Dick, and I’ve known him for a while and I get along fine with him. And I had talked to him and I told him, I said listen, you know, I know you’re not going to have somebody doing this, so you don’t have to worry about me hanging around and saying, can I have a job Dick? Or complaining to reporters because he was kicking me out. So I mean, I knew when I took the job that it was going to run for a certain length of time and then it was over. So you know, she was deep into her second term, it was probably about three months before she was, you know—the end of the line. So that’s when I—I had this opportunity, so I took it.

RK: And what are you doing now?

JD: Now I work at Tampa General doing—I’ve had the same title for 25 years: Director
of Communications. First with the city, then for Time Warner, and now for Tampa General.

RK: When you look back at the years that you worked with the Freedman administration, what do you think about first and foremost? If you’re speaking to people about how you worked with the Freedman administration, what are kind of the highlights, so to speak?

JD: I think to me the fact that she forced this community to deal with some of the racial issues that were going on at the time. If you were to talk to the white community, you know their attitude is, *what race problems?* But when you talk to the black community you get a much different picture. So I think the fact that she had—for example, she went nose to nose with the Chamber to try to integrate, which cost her politically, but she did get them to do it. And I think she paid a price for that. So I think her….

RK: When you said the Chamber to integrate, did you mean the Krewe?

JD: No, the Chamber of Commerce, the governing board.

RK: Oh, the governing board, OK.

JD: There were no blacks on the governing board. So she went after them not only over that stupid slogan, but also about the make up of the governing board of the Chamber and why there were no blacks or Hispanics in that position. And they were not happy. They were not happy about that at all. And they did very little to hide their displeasure. And that, you know, who did they complain to? *Tampa Tribune* editorial people, you know, *what does that bitch think she’s doing, telling us how to do our blah, blah…* Yeah, there was a lot of that.

So I think forcing this community to look at race was a huge thing. I think the other thing was trying to improve housing. Because there was some really deplorable housing in this town. There still is. But the fact that she was able to get the banks to pony up millions of dollars to provide low income loans for people who would not qualify to help fix up you know, housing, I mean, she was the one who started the “paint your heart out” thing where we went out and painted hundreds of homes of low income elderly; the river clean up, those kinds of things, I think is what I would look back on. And then obviously you know, the crap [laughs] that went with it. You know, take home cars, you know some of those things, but in terms of my view of what, her legacy is? I think it would be forcing this town to finally face up to its racial issues, getting the police department to acknowledge, to deal with and become sensitized to the black community especially, and the stuff that she did for housing.

RK: And I guess one final question, as you mentioned Tampa changed in a variety of ways from the mid ‘80s through now, obviously, and you’ve been dealing with the media for that entire period, have you noticed the media change in any way that you consider significant?
JD: Well, I think you’ve got more—now you’ve got two legitimate you know, competing newspapers in this town…

[End Tape 1, Side B]

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[Tape 2, Side A]

JD:…you know back then there were only three TV news stations, now there are, you know, we have the “all news channel” now, we’ve added—we’ve added about three more. So there’s a lot more reporters sniffing around. I think the big difference is that the media now are less, in terms of—at least the TV stations—are less prone to get involved in the community than they used to be.

When we would—when she was in there, we did this whole campaign, it was called the “community campaign”, where we got every TV station, we did it in conjunction with the National Conference of Christians and Jews to promote tolerance in the community. And we got TV Stations to pony up, you know, thousands of dollars worth of free air time to run PSA’s dealing with you know, unity and issues of tolerance, and people getting along. You would not be able to do that today. You would not get the TV stations to commit to that level of public service for this community. You know most of them in fact have gotten rid of their community relations people just because they just don’t feel it’s part of their mission now to give back to the community. They’re, what they would call giving back to the community now really is lending their anchors to go emcee some United Way event. That’s what they see as their role in the community. So I think that is probably the biggest change of all. It’s not something that’s affected on the street level with the regular reporters, but it is something in terms of how the corporate media see themselves in this community.

RK: Thank you very much for speaking with me John.

JD: Sure.