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Sandy Freedman oral history interview by Robert Kerstein, May 31, 2005

Sandy Freedman (Interviewee)
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RK: This is an interview with Sandy Freedman, Mayor of the City of Tampa from 1986 to 1995, and the date is May 31, 2005. Good morning.

SF: Good morning.

RK: Where were you born?

SF: I was born in Newark, New Jersey in 1943.

RK: And when did you move to Tampa?

SF: I was about two and a half years old when I came here.

RK: Do you know why they moved here?

SF: My father bought a business on Franklin Street, he was in the jewelry business. And he had been in the jewelry business in Jersey, in Newark, and because he was interested in business oriented and was there for 50 years.

RK: And what neighborhood did you move to?

SF: We moved to Davis Island, and I lived in that house until I got married.

RK: What high school did you go to?

SF: I went to Plant High School.

RK: And what college?
SF: First I went—my freshman year I went to University of Georgia. And then I transferred to University of Miami. I was a tennis player in those days, and Miami had a very good tennis team and in Georgia it rained all the time.

RK: And when did you graduate?

SF: I graduated in 1961.

RK: And you came back to Tampa right away?

SF: I came back to Tampa and actually worked for some months at the Tampa Tribune as the first copy girl.

RK: How did you perceive Tampa when you came back, did you have any reactions that you recall as to what kind of a city it was?

SF: Well it was still a small town, I mean it was growing obviously, hundreds of thousands of people in the area, but it was still a very small town and everybody knew everybody. Still provincial in many ways.

RK: Provincial meaning—?

SF: Didn’t want a change, it was controlled by really a handful of downtown men, predominately white establishments; blacks and whites were—led very separate existences, Hispanics as well for the main part. It, it wasn’t my idea of a sophisticated, progressive city.

RK: Were women active in politics at all?

SF: Not when I returned, no. I think there might have been a woman on the school board, but [inaudible].

RK: When did you get married?

SF: I got married in 1965 [inaudible].

RK: Okay, and you ran for City Council in 1974?

SF: That’s right.

RK: Did you get involved in any political groups before that?

SF: I had a degree in government and was always interested in local government from the time I was in grammar school because I had a teacher, at Gorrie Elementary, named Ms. Baker who would require us to bring in current events. I think that was the 5th grade, every day we had to bring in current events and talk about them, and so from that point
on I was interested in government, mainly local government in particular. And I think the first time that I ever got involved in a political campaign, I was probably about 16. I remember going downtown and stuffing envelopes in Leroy Collins’ campaign.

[5-6 minute inaudible tape]

SF: [A rezoning at E & W Davis for commercial. Eventually a] family who had lost their son donated some money so that the park would be named after their son. And that was the piece of property that really got me going on the zoning issues and growth management and land use concerns.

RK: And when did you decide to run for City Council?

SF: I had always thought I would run for City Council. I really, it sounds silly, but I always wanted to be the Mayor someday, and that was the, as I said, the emphasis was on state and local government when I went to college. It just always intrigued me because that was where the action was. And I remember telling friends when we were first married that someday I was going to run for City Council. And that was kind of unheard of, a woman! And everybody would laugh. And I remember in 1974 when then Mayor Dick Greco, [we] heard on the news one night at that six o’clock that he had resigned to go into the private sector, and there would be a special election to replace him, and I knew that there was a member of the City Council who would be running for mayor. And I remember calling my husband Mike and saying, “Greco has resigned”—and Vince Malloy was his name, the Councilman’s name—“And Vince will run for Mayor, and I’m going to run for City Council!” And he, I remember him saying exactly, “Don’t do anything until I get home!” [Laughs] But I did announce that same week that I was going to run for City Council.

RK: Did you have a core group that was helping you?

SF: I had just some friends and family members and it was, in those days—like today, but of course campaigns cost so much less. I remember deciding with my husband that because I was unknown as a political entity that rather than ask people for money I would just take any contributions that came from friends and family. And we would finance the campaign ourselves, because I didn’t think it was fair to ask people who didn’t know me for contributions. And it was expensive. In those days I think the campaign cost about 25,000 dollars, probably it might be five times that much today, or six times that much—running for a City Council seat, unfortunately. But that’s the way we ran it.

RK: This was a citywide seat wasn’t it?

SF: Yes. That was before we had any single member districts so they were citywide seats, yeah.

RK: And did you usually go to speak to neighborhood organizations, to business groups?
SF: I went everywhere I could go. In fact, civic associations had forums and I would, I remember going one morning at about 4:30 in the morning to the farmers’ market, somebody was going to take me to the farmers’ market out on Hillsborough Avenue. And going to all those people and telling them who I was and why I was running. But as I said, nobody knew me as a political entity; my name was fairly well known because I had been a, a well known tennis player nationally, but if you didn’t read the sports pages, you had no idea who I was.

So you could go anywhere and everywhere that you possibly could. I remember going to bowling alleys, I remember going once, somebody said, “Well, there are always people on the catwalks at Gandy, on Gandy bridge late at night and they’re captive there.” [Laughs] And I remember somebody taking me to the catwalks [laughs]—people didn’t want any part of hearing, I’m running for City Council!—you could just, you couldn’t see their eyes roll, but you knew they were, like, Lady, all I want to do is fish, get out of my life! [Laughs]

RK: Did you have strong opposition?

SF: There were a lot of people in that race. There was a woman named Irene Hadley, there was another woman named Barbara Reeves, there was—there were a couple of men running; I think there were five or six people running in that time.

RK: And was there a runoff? Did you have a runoff?

SF: There was a runoff. And I think I ran first but a woman named Irene Hadley was in the runoff as well, and she had been endorsed by the Tribune. And I remember right afterwards, she got kind of nasty in the campaign. I don’t remember what the specifics were, it was very mild I’m sure by today’s standards. But I remember after a couple of weeks of, of her nastiness if you will, I went to the editor of the editorial page, James Clendinen, at the Tribune—and unannounced I might add. And I remember taking all of the clippings and putting them down on his desk and saying to him, “If this is the kind of person that you want for service on the City Council, then endorse her again. But if not, you ought to think twice about it.” And surprisingly enough, I guess he thought I had so much chutzpah, maybe I’d be alright. They did a dual endorsement. And they had endorsed her solo, alone the first time around. And so I won the seat.

RK: Was the Tribune very influential?

SF: Yes. Much more so than they are today—and than any newspapers are today. They really, pretty much, I wouldn’t say they picked the, the winners, but they had tremendous influence on the winners. Some said that people—and I actually saw this—people would clip out the editorial box that they would place in the paper the Sunday before the elections and actually walk into the polling places and, and just mark those same names. People at that time considered them to be able to control maybe 50% of the electorate. It was really, very, very influential. Especially the Tribune. The Tampa Daily Times was already—it was the afternoon daily, and it was not as influential but, they had a
remarkable hold on, on who ran the city. Which is not surprising in those days actually because that’s, it was the same downtown establishment that really ran the city anyway and they were part of the establishment, so—

RK: It was a nonpartisan race I know, but did political parties play [a] role at all?

SF: No. In those days it was nonpartisan of course as it still is today. But in those days almost everybody was registered as a Democrat even if they were so conservative they should have been a Republican. But people didn’t register as Republicans because there weren’t ever any contested primaries for them to vote in. So they, they all registered as Democrats, and then frequently would vote for the most conservative Democrat that really was a closet republican.

RK: Did any issues stick out in your mind when you were running that you emphasized?

SF: Zoning issues were always important and they continue to be important, which I think shows how local government really is, and how close to the people it really is. Unfortunately then there were very few active neighborhood groups unlike today, they were mostly in the affluent neighborhoods, and there was very little organization of any other groups.

There were, in those days, groups that had influence within their particular sphere. I can remember a number of groups in the Hispanic community that were very, very influential and could count on hundreds and hundreds of votes based upon who they chose for their slate, if you will. There was a man named Virgilio Fabian who was a dear friend of mine over the years, and he and his supporters really didn’t want anything, I think they, they just wanted their voices to be heard and, and the Hispanic community was certainly a minority. They could generate oh, maybe 2000 votes, I don’t know the numbers exactly. They all had large families and the group was large, maybe 60-100 people and they got out with the yard signs and put them up and they made phone calls, and they had fish fries and spaghetti suppers at MacFarlane Park. And as a result of their efforts, in the Hispanic community they really turned out votes. And everybody voted. They, people who they had influence with went to the polls in those communities.

And there were some in the African American community that had similar groups. The newspaper, the Florida Sentinel Bulletin owned by the Andrews family, [it] is still owned by the Andrews family today—if they endorsed you then there was a certain percentage of the African American community that would turn out and almost that entire percentage would vote the way the Florida Sentinel Bulletin suggested. So that there were those influential groups. But the main issues really were the zoning and land use kinds of issues. And also I think people—I think the people, at least I came in contact with for the most part really wanted to break out of the good old boy network and get some independent minded thinkers.

RK: You mentioned the good old boy network, and before, the downtown establishment. Who were these people?
SF: They were bankers and business people and some lawyers. Chester Ferguson, who was a well known lawyer, was one of those people. The president of the Exchange Bank was another. The president of General Telephone; several of the other bankers; Tampa Electric was also a very prominent, always a very prominent player, not nearly the way it is today where you, you don’t even know who the president is now. You knew Bill MacInnes in those days and he had a tremendous amount of clout. Those were the people who controlled the Chamber of Commerce; they were the people who controlled many of the boards in Tampa and the, certainly the Financial Institution Board of Directors. So they were wired, if you will, and they as well, had people that they turned to when the political season came around and, and they could turn out their voters. Tampa Electric, I’m sure, they, they let their employees know who they should vote for. And the same is true of General Telephone company and the banks, and, and those large businesses. They, there was a vested interest in being in control of local government and they let their people know that they needed to, to turn out to help continue that. And it was all white men.

RK: Is there anything you can say about what policies they tended to support? Or what they generally—

SF: Whatever worked for them. I mean, if it was a question of business, a question of—I remember for, and I don’t remember which bank—for many years one of the banks had all of the business of the city. All of the city’s money would go into that bank. And that meant inordinate profits for them, you know, millions of millions of dollars going into that bank [or] one or two banks. And it, these were local banks, these weren’t like they are today, the big national banks. So these people had a tremendous stake in, in who was running city government and how their fortunes were going to be made.

RK: You were elected to City Council, and Tampa has a strong mayor system of government. Did you feel when you were on City Council that you were able to make your mark in terms of influencing important policies?

SF: Oftentimes I felt that I had some influence on, on making things go in one direction or not. But there were many times of frustration. If the mayor doesn’t want to do something in this form of government, even if the money is appropriated, the mayor doesn’t have to spend it. Or if the mayor doesn’t want to tackle a program that the City Council—even all seven of them want—the mayor doesn’t have to do that. I remember in the later years I was on the City Council I was very interested in housing. And Bob Martinez was the mayor at that time. And I, I remember talking about housing very early on in the tenure, my tenure on City Council, and none of the mayors were interested in housing. [The] city didn’t do any housing, we didn’t try to improve the housing stock of the community or better the people [and] the conditions that they lived in. And it was very frustrating because nobody ever even wanted to talk about it. No matter when I brought it up or how I brought it up, they just weren’t interested in it. So we never did any housing, not until I became the mayor much later.
But the major influence that the City Council has, and to this day doesn’t realize that it has such a tremendous focus on—and should have—is the future of this city as it relates to the land. And they spend a lot of time on zoning but they don’t spend as much time on the overall land use, and how the development occurs, and where it’s going to occur; and controlling it in one area and, and allowing it in another area and vice versa. And I’ve always thought and, and continue to think, that because that’s not a very sexy issue, and it’s a long term issue—that they may not see the fruits of their labor for many years—that they don’t spend the time on it. And now with comprehensive plans, it’s even more important as the future unfolds, and yet I think they spend less time. And I’m sure—I know when I was on the City Council—most of the council members never even read the comprehensive plans that we developed. They weren’t, you know, exciting reading. But it, they did have a, and do have a huge impact on the future of the community.

RK: Did the attorney—you didn’t have your own City Council Attorney, did you?

SF: In 1974, when I was first elected, and Jan Platt was also elected at that time. And she was very interested in having a charter review commission, and we established that in 1975. And we had a charter review commission that each of us appointed members to, and as part of that effort, we revised the city charter, and included in this city charter, over objections of the mayor of the time having a council attorney and a budget analyst for the City Council. And those two positions were part of the charter that was voted upon, and successfully voted upon. And so those positions have been in, in city government ever since. Ironically there isn’t a budget analyst that the city has, city council has—and hasn’t had for some years now, which is a big mistake on their part because they’re at the mercy of the administration. And have to take every piece of financial information as gospel without having the ability to really investigate it and, and see whether or not it’s actually so, or whether the numbers might be slightly off.

RK: When you were first elected, I think Mayor Poe came into office. Did you, the City Council have a good relationship with the mayor?

SF: We did have a good relationship with him, and I had a good relationship with him until there was an impasse over the firefighters’ contract. The firefighters have their own union, and police also have their own union. But the firefighters union was very influential in those days. The police PBA union was not so influential, they were just developing. And I don’t remember the year, I think it was somewhere around 1978, but the firefighters, and the mayor who negotiates the contract for the city were at an impasse. And when that happens, the City Council gets involved in the negotiations and has to either agree to the contract, or not agree to the contract. And the contract came to the City Council and the council voted five to two—I remember because we were dubbed “the firefighters five.” The five members voted for the firefighters union, and the two voted for the mayor’s position. I voted for the firefighters’ position because it was the first example that I had ever seen in my brief time with City Council and in government, where the city had withheld information from the union. And we had a lot more money than the government was saying we had in order to pay them better wages and all. And when that was brought out, because it had gone to arbitration before it came to City
Council; it had gone to a Special Master is what they call it. And through his investigation it was found out that the city actually had the money that the firefighters said they had, but the, the city government, the administration had said, We don’t have the money therefore we can’t pay you. When that came out, it just seemed a question of fairness that we should approve the contract and give the raise to the firefighters. There was a lot of acrimony after that between the five members who voted with the firefighters union and, and the City administration, until Mayor Poe left.

RK: You were reelected in 1975 after initially being elected in ’74; then 1979, then 1983. Does anything stick out in your mind about these elections? Did you win easily? Were there important issues?

SF: The issues were pretty much the same. The firefighters five was dubbed a major issue in ’79, I remember that. And I remember the newspapers were very anti-union in those days. And, they, they wrote countless numbers of editorials about these five people who shouldn’t be reelected and, and I know they didn’t endorse me because of that. But the issues really were pretty much the same over the years. We had building issues like where to build the art museum; the very one in 19—this year, in 2005, has been so controversial, whether we should build it, whether we shouldn’t build it and the money to build it.

We were doing other building projects, the library was being expanded. We were tackling the sewage treatment plant, which was spilling effluent into the bay until that time, and polluting Tampa Bay. And, and spending huge amounts of money to, to clean up the bay. We had an incinerator that was also spewing toxic material into the air, and we had to clear that up and so we spent money on that. So those were big issues that, that took place. Growth management was coming into its own in the ‘80s so that was always a big debate. And it always seemed like, as much as things changed they stayed the same.

RK: Were there any change in the politics as far as neighborhood organizations becoming more active?

SF: Neighborhood organizations really didn’t get much more active, and there weren’t very many of them until, really until the [early] ‘90s. And there was always a feeling on the part of the administration, Don’t worry we’ll take care of you, so don’t get involved, don’t get organized, because we know what’s best for you. Of course, we know now that that’s clearly not the way it ought to be, but there was always that, that paternalistic kind of behavior. And that, it was, it was really a fear that administrators had, that they wouldn’t be in control. And they wouldn’t be able to do what they wanted to do, they’d have to do what the people wanted them to do, which is kind of amazing because the people elected them! But that was always the attitude.

There really was a blind eye toward racial concerns in the, let’s see, the ‘80s. I said neighborhood organizations came into play in the ‘90s, that’s not correct—that’s mid ‘80s they came into, began to come into effect. But in the ‘80s we were just beginning to see crack cocaine. And Bob Martinez was the mayor at the time and he was going to run
for governor, and didn’t want anything kind of to spoil that gilded image that we had; we were a city on the move, a lot of good things were happening, and so we really didn’t talk about that. And it, it was really getting out of control and yet we weren’t doing anything about it.

And that was difficult to deal with initially when I first became the mayor because people who lived in the neighborhoods that were affected by the open dealing of crack and, and drug sales, they were so angry at the city for having done nothing for years, and allowing this to creep up on them that it was really sad; but it was also—I was afraid that, that these people were, were really going to, to do something to the city. And I remember when I first became the mayor I think they would have hung me in effigy if they could because they were so angry at the city in East Tampa and in College Hill and Ponce de Leon neighborhoods, and several other neighborhoods, because they city had, had totally left them without any assistance. And little by little, we had to win back that trust. But that took a long time and many years.

RK: Perry Harvey Jr. was elected to City Council in 1983, the first African American to be elected since 1887. Did that make a difference in terms of representation of the African American community?

SF: Yeah, I think that was one of the turning points. Perry was the head of a local longshoremen’s union. His family had been very prominent in the African American community for many, many years. His father before him was the head of a longshoremen’s union. They had a close relationship with the Florida Sentinel Bulletin, and the Andrews family. And they had involvement as a result of the longshoremen and the shipping and everything with some of the major white establishment figures. And with Perry’s election he really lent credibility to the cries that the African American community had for justice, if you will. And Perry was a tireless advocate for—he aggravated people because of it, because they thought he was one-dimensional, but somebody had to be at that time. He, he constantly badgered the establishment, the City Council, the mayor, for things that would better the African American community. And the entire time he was on the City Council that was his major contribution.

RK: While you were on City Council with him, was he able to achieve any success?

SF: Oh, I think Perry did. I think as we look back people will see that as a turning point for the African American community having the voice. He’s probably been the most articulate voice for that community that we’ve ever had to this day. And we’ve had other African Americans who have served and continue to serve on the City Council but nobody beat the drum like Perry.

The more recent ones have been more go-along to get along. Perry didn’t need the job, and he was willing to make waves, as I said. And angered an awful lot of people, and scared a lot of people. But his methods were worthwhile because they raised the consciousness of the community. He along with some others.
RK: During the 1970s and into the 1980s while you were on City Council, most of the growth in Hillsborough County was in the unincorporated area.

SF: Oh yeah, the city I think was losing population. There was the white flight that was happening in urban areas all around the country and we either couldn’t control that or you know, we didn’t want to—whatever the case.

RK: Did you have any interaction at all with the board of county commissioners who, who was the primary governing authority for the unincorporated county?

SF: We had some minimal amount, but it was always us and them. And it still is to this day really. There’s far less cooperation than there should be on a whole range of issues. But they really didn’t want to be bothered with anything but—the city, that’s your problem because of course, we had a higher crime rate and we had—the drug sales were predominately in the city. And the bad things that were happening and they didn’t want any public housing, in the unincorporated areas. And for many, many years, up until the ‘90s, there was no public housing in the unincorporated areas. It was “those people”—that would be kind of the way it would be couched, “those people” who were in the city, and they’re your problem, they’re not our problem. And there was never a feeling that everybody lived in Hillsborough County, whether you lived in the city limits or you lived in the unincorporated area. I think the County Commission—well I thought they had, I’m not sure they have today—but up until recently I thought they had made some progress toward realizing that we were all in this together.

RK: On City Council did you have any influence at all over the Tampa Housing Authority?

SF: The mayor appoints the members and still appoints the members of the Housing Authority. They may be confirmed by the City Council, but that, the confirmations were always pretty routine. I don’t ever recall a confirmation of a housing authority member that was controversial.

RK: Then as far as policy making they went their own way to a lower extent?

SF: They went their own way and they were supposed to be created by the legislature, the housing authority, and they were supposed to be independent. From time to time different mayors have, because they’ve appointed the members, tried to take more control over the decisions of those members. And it’s, sometimes it’s worked, sometimes it hadn’t.

RK: Is it the same with two other important authorities, the Port Authority and the Aviation Authority? Did they operate pretty much independent of you?

SF: Well, first of all, both of those were also created legislatively. But the composition was always different. The mayor appointed a couple of members, not to the Port Authority at all. The mayor would sit on the Port Authority, but that came much later in the ‘90s during the time I was the mayor actually. I was the first mayor to sit on the Port
Authority. Before that no member of the County Commission or the mayor sat on the Port Authority, they were all members appointed by the governor. And so a group of influential businessmen, once again would get together and say, We want this one, that one, the other one. And they’d tell the governor and that’s who the governor would appoint. That changed in the ‘90s.

In the Aviation Authority, the governor makes several appointments to the Aviation Authority and the County Commissioner sits on that. So the influence of, of the mayor on those two authorities is much more limited than it could be on the housing authority.

RK: When were you elected Chairman of the City Council? And I think that was the terminology, “chairman,” is that right?

SF: It was the chairman, yeah. And then, then when I became the first woman who was elected to that job, then everybody got confused, Was it the Chairman? The Chairwoman? The Chairperson? The Chair? You know, whatever, and I’m sure they called me all kinds of things.

I was elected over the objections of Mayor Martinez. In 19—I think it was about ’91. No, not 1991, way before that; [1983] something like that. And it was pretty clear at that point, he had just won his second term as mayor, but he had his eyes on the governor’s office. And I had just been elected, along with the other members of the City Council, and I wanted to be the chairman. He didn’t want me to be because it was very clear that he would probably resign, and whoever was the chairman would move into the mayor’s office. And he and I didn’t always see eye to eye, and so he really favored Haven Poe to be the chairperson. And I remember after that election that night, it was the same day that we were all sworn in and then the election for council chairman immediately followed the swearing in ceremony. I, I remember walking out at the same time that he did of the building, the old Curtis Hixon Convention Center. And he didn’t speak to me, he’s funny—he was dismayed that he had somebody that was not an ally who was going to chair the City Council. So—

RK: Do you remember what the vote was on City Council?

SF: It was very close; it was a four to three vote. A man named Tom Vann also wanted to be the chairman. And there was a lot of wheeling and dealing behind the scenes on the, by, by the Poe camp and then the Vann camp. And I think what had happened, I’m not sure to this day, but I think what happened is they had, had indicated that—the Poe camp had indicated they would support Vann. And when it came time for the voting, they did not. And it was a surprise to me and I think to everybody else that Tom Vann, rather than voting for Haven Poe, he wound up voting for me, and he was the swing vote.

RK: You still don’t know why?

SF: I think he was just piqued—as I probably would have to, that he had kind of been
promised and kind of placated and everything and felt that he was going to get elected, and then they pulled the rug out from him.

RK: This is probably 1983, is that—

SF: Something, yeah.

RK: Because it followed the election immediately? Is that true?

SF: Yes—was the election, yeah. It was right in ’83, yeah.

RK: Okay good. Now does the chairperson have significant influence of the operation of the council? Did that make a difference in your role in the City Council?

SF: Oh yeah, the chairperson is in charge of running the, the office, and making sure the budget of the office, the City Council office. And the employees of the office, and doing the employee evaluations, which here before we had never done, but I initiated it—employee evaluations, and you know trying to run it a little more business like than the haphazard way it had run before. And also he ran the meetings. And there had been Council Chairmen who have roughshod over the citizens who came to speak in front of them—those people shall remain nameless; and then there—you can run a much more democratic but firm meeting, which I think is what I did, and it was more controlled.

Council was a very unique body for many, many years. I mean they didn’t know Roberts Rules of Order; we had a chairman for many years in the early days when I was first elected who was a very nice man but wasn’t that well educated. Not that that means so much except he didn’t run the meeting particularly well, and he had certain prejudices and biases that came through pretty loud and clear during the course of meetings. Cutting certain people off, and certain things like that. And I was determined that we were going to change that because it just wasn’t very professional and it certainly didn’t, wasn’t keeping I didn’t think with the kind of city we wanted to be, and even were at that point in time.

So there was more influence that the chairman could exert, and I think I did exert. And you could bring things up more readily. I mean, if you were really interested. I remember during that time I really tried to focus on housing, and even though we didn’t get into the housing business, at least it was starting to be talked about. Because I could talk about it every time I got the microphone, which I had every, every week you know. Not that I did, but it was easier to get things accomplished.

RK: Because you were chair did you have more discussion with the mayor, with Mayor Martinez at that time?

SF: I did; there was kind of an estrangement where we didn’t see eye to eye on too many things. He had switched political parties which really aggravated me. He had been a long
time Democrat, had led a teacher’s strike. And then for political expediency became a Republican and that really—I’m a die hard Democrat, and that really got my goat.

There were other things, he, he wasn’t as good to the employees as I thought he ought to be, and as fair to the employees. He had some appointees—city people who, who worked for him that had great disdain for the City Council. It was like, We don’t need to bother with you at all, even if you want information we won’t give it to you. So there were frictions that I thought were needless, we didn’t have to have those, we could have been a lot easier. And it was pretty apparent that he wasn’t real happy to know that when he resigned to run for governor I was going to become the acting mayor and be in a you know, a cat bird’s position to run for the seat and potentially win it. So I guess it was more fractious than it needed to be.

RK: His primary focus during the time he was mayor, I believe, at least to a large extent was downtown development.

SF: Yes.

RK: Did you have any differences with him on how he approached downtown development?

SF: There were, there were several things that I recall. I was very concerned about the convention center. Mayor Martinez embarked upon a land acquisition for the Convention Center which is where it currently is today, down at the water, and I believed it was the wrong location and was very vocal about it. Because there was no room for expansion primarily, and we were paying a lot of money. And some of Mayor Martinez’s friends own[ed] the land, which kind of got my goat a little bit and made me wonder too. But that probably was unfounded concern. But, and I voted against many of the land acquisitions and the location of the Convention Center because I was concerned about future expansion.

We were building the Performing Arts Center which I wholeheartedly supported, except things were getting out of hand and construction costs, and cost overruns and problems like that, which I had to assume when I became the mayor. There was a lot of focus on downtown development. We started doing the tax increment financing at that time, and we were, just had to declare certain areas slum and blighted that really weren’t slum and blighted in my mind, which then gave the city the ability to condemn people’s property and turn it over to the private sector. And some things that are a little less than democratic than I believed to be the case. Some of that has proved to be accurate from my point of view, other aspects of it I was wrong about. But I was concerned about that and didn’t support those.

RK: So the mayor stepped down to run for, successfully, for governor. And you became Mayor of the City of Tampa. Was your title Acting Mayor?

SF: I was the Acting Mayor, yeah.
RK: So what’s the first thing you do when you become acting mayor?

SF: [Laughs]. They were funny things. Well, we had a swearing in ceremony, which was almost—to my way of thinking it was like a civic celebration. I guess it was—Mayor Martinez had, had been out of town a great, he was running for governor, and so in effect, George Pennington, his Chief of Staff had been the acting mayor for roughly a year. I don’t think people realize it even to this day that he was out of town, he, Martinez, was out of town traveling around the state, running for governor, oh, five out of every seven days of the week. I knew it, and I would meet with George Pennington quite regularly; he and I were good friends and had known each other for years. But George was actually running the city; he and a couple of the other top administrators.

I remember I think it was in December or January of that year, six months before I became the mayor or so. We had a terrible freeze. And I remember the head of Metropolitan Ministries calling me because he couldn’t reach Mayor Martinez, who was off campaigning somewhere around the state. And saying, We don’t have any shelters that can be opened, and people are going to die from the cold, homeless people are going to die from the cold. Is there something we can do? Can we open Curtis Hixon? The Convention Center, the old convention center. And I remember calling George and saying, George Pennington and saying, “George, we, we have to do something to help the homeless people or else we’re going to have terrible tragedy. And, which we do.” And I said, “We need to open the Convention Center.” And in effect, perhaps they would have done it anyway—but I’m not sure they would have because they didn’t know who to contact.

And we opened the Convention Center for the very first time and developed a system whereby on those very, very cold winter days that we would open some city owned facilities to house homeless people and get them in out of the weather and, and clothe them—clothe them if we could, but certainly provide cots and blankets and food. And I remember calling Cesar Gonzmart and the Columbia restaurant, who was the owner of the Columbia restaurant and telling him we were going to open the convention center, was there anything he could do to help us? And Cesar came down with, with his, I think it was December—with members of restaurant staff and they cooked huge pots of Spanish bean soup and fed all the homeless people and that, that was for days. Because it continued, the cold, for some days. And we had cots and blankets.

I remember going there and realizing, I think it was the first time any of us realized that when we housed the homeless people we had to separate the men and the women, so we put them in different rooms. And a lot of good came out of that, because we learned some lessons, and learned how to deal with helping the homeless during these kinds of weather conditions. And, and we continued to do that to even today.

RK: So you were now Acting Mayor and George Pennington stays as your Chief of Staff is that true?
SF: I kept most of Martinez’s staff intact for several reasons. First of all I had learned to work with most of them. I had known many of them. George Pennington, before he became Martinez’s Chief of Staff had been the headmaster of Berkeley Preparatory School. And my children all attended Berkeley from kindergarten through graduation. And I was on the board of Berkeley Preparatory School, in fact I became the Chairman of the Board of Berkeley back in like, ’84 I guess it was, or ’85. And so I had worked very closely with George Pennington for many, many years and knew him well, and thought that George could continue to serve, and he would serve me as well as he served Mayor Martinez.

Lou Russo, who was the Finance Director, and I had a good relationship. So I asked him to stay on. And I asked most of the people to stay on for two reasons. First of all most of them were good public officials and knew how to do their jobs. But more importantly and I guess, selfishly, I knew I was going to run for mayor the following year, and the business community was very skittish about having a woman as the mayor. And I knew that these people had had a lot of involvement with the business leaders, and they could calm the waters if you will, for me. And that it would help me politically.

And as I began to say before, when I first became the mayor in the day, we had an elaborate swearing in at the Convention Center. I had a political team of consultants in place. And they felt that it was really important to start off with almost a public celebration of a new beginning. First woman mayor and, and here was somebody who was talking about neighborhoods and housing, and, and a more open and democratic kind of government, and people working together. And that was really the theme. A lot of people didn’t understand that the slogan was “keep Tampa, Tampa.” And what it really meant—a lot of people never got that—but what it really meant was, keep the good things about the community in place and don’t throw out everything for the sake of more business and more development, as we were doing. And anyway, this big—it was a huge, huge crowd of people, and it was, it was kind of euphoric because there were parts of the community that were finally getting a voice. The African American community, women in the community, Hispanics, neighborhoods—that heretofore really didn’t have much voice in the community; and a change from the old guard running the show. [It] scared a lot of people though I have to tell you that. Real scary.

RK: When were the first riots during that period in College Hill? Was that after you were acting mayor?

SF: Yes. That, it happened—as I had said, we had turned a blind eye toward crack cocaine and the problems that were occurring. We had a high unemployment rate of African American males; police were—99% of [the] police department was white male. There were just a lot of conditions that caused a whole host of problems that began in the fall of, fall and winter of 1986, shortly after I became the mayor. Dwight Gooden, the basketball—the baseball star was arrested by the police, or chased in his car by the police and then arrested. They believed that he had had drugs in his car and the African American community was incensed that one of their heroes was you know, arrested. And there were several deaths of African Americans at hands of police.
One, a retarded man named Melvin Hair, I think was his name. I think his mother called because he had a knife and was threatening her—I think I recall this correctly. The police came and tried to, to apprehend him, and, and one of the police officers got him in a choke hold and he suffocated and died. And there was—all hell broke loose in the African American community. And riots and rocks and bottle throwing and burning of cars, and cordoning off whole sections of the police, by the police of parts of the African American community. It was very scary times, I remember sleeping in the office for three nights at one stretch with the whole staff there and figuring out what we were going to do.

I remember going with a group of African American community leaders, Reverend Lowry, Bobby Bowden, Perry Harvey, [and] a whole number of leaders after the first night of rioting, wearing a bullet proof vest. Going into the neighborhood and walking door to door, trying to calm people—over the objections of my staff, my family and police chief and everybody else. But they, I thought that, that the community needed to see me, to see that I would come to them. That had never been done before, and to promise that we were really going to try to make changes and better their lives. And little by little—took a long time, we had many nights of rock and bottle throwing and serious, serious problems—and it was very scary. I remember the first time I ever saw the SWAT team going in their uniforms which were like ninja suits—it’s the only way I could describe it. And the ninja rage was on at that time, so that’s how it was dubbed. And watching them crawl on their bellies through the neighborhoods, trying to get into place in the dark. And being there and seeing how the hatred that many people in the African American community felt toward whites, and the police in particular. We had to make changes or else we were going to go up in smoke. And it was a difficult, difficult time. And I think, I think I got elected mayor probably because I didn’t hide and just let the police take care of it. That I did go into the neighborhoods, and I think people—even if they disagreed, they thought maybe it was courageous to go out and really confront the problems.

RK: Did the police support your going out?

SF: Many of the police officers did not support me going out. First of all they didn’t want a woman running the show. And then I had officers to the day I left who would walk up to me and see me and talk to me, and say they weren’t taking orders from a woman. We had very few women in the police department at that time—when I left we had many, many more. We had very few African Americans and Hispanics as I said, and we had many more then. Still not enough today, but they were less than excited about the fact that I would go out there with them and try to help calm the community down.

RK: You knew you were going to run for mayor in 1987 while you were acting mayor. What steps were you taking to try to secure your election? Who’d you speak to in the community, how did you raise funds?
SF: Well first of all, back in ’86, early ’86, I decided, I knew I was going to become the acting mayor when Martinez left. And in those days when the chairman was elected, the chairman was for the full four year term. There was one effort to—I think I was out of town—I think somebody tried to make a motion to remove me or something but it died. The forces were still at work to try to get rid of me. But, so I knew I was going to be the acting mayor and I wanted to run for mayor. So I put out a net nationally, to find some political consultants that wanted to run a first rate campaign, and one like we had never seen before. And I knew I was going to have raise a lot of money in order to do it. So I went looking for those top fight political consultants who had worked with women before because this was a totally unique thing. I mean, there weren’t big city mayors who were women. And I located somebody named Ray Strother in Washington. And Ray had done more women than any other political consultant in the country. And he came down, and it was just, it was eye opening. And it was really unnerving. And we spent a whole weekend, and it was a real learning experience. He told me what would have to take place in order to win.

First of all, television was now being used widely in political campaigns which hadn’t been used very much and it was pretty poor development of, you know, commercial and everything. Well he knew how to produce them, but he said there were certain things as a woman that were very unique. And I’ll never forget that three day period. He—let me just mention some of the things that women couldn’t do. Based upon extensive focus groups around the country, first of all we had to develop a look. A woman had to develop the look that she was going to have the entire time. You couldn’t change your hair, you couldn’t change your makeup, you couldn’t change the type of clothing you wore. You had to develop the look because people were so attuned to the fact that here was a woman running for public office, that they would focus on all of those other things—those extraneous physical things without focusing on what the message was.

So one of the first things we did was develop the look. And I wore very little makeup then, and didn’t do much with my hair, and didn’t, didn’t worry about my clothes. Well, we got the look. He had somebody come in and show me how to apply make up, we got my hair cut and whatever. And said, If you’re ever going to change the color of your hair, you better do it now, because you can’t do that in the middle of being in office because then everybody will talk about that and that’s all they’ll write about and they won’t even think about what they’re—So I started to color my hair because the gray was starting to come in. I wasn’t very old, but nevertheless it was starting to come in.

And then it was, we talked about clothes. Well, you couldn’t wear certain fabrics. You couldn’t wear anything shiny like silk. You had to wear very tailored things—that was when women were buttoned up in suits all the time. Cotton, linen, the natural fabrics were the fabrics used. You had to use dark colors. The only bright color that was recommended was red. Red was the power color for a woman at that time. Jewelry was very limited. You had to wear very small earrings, only gold, no stones but very limited jewelry. My father was in the jewelry business, and I had a lot of very nice jewelry but I couldn’t wear my jewelry because, people would focus on your jewelry and that would mean that you were rich, or whatever it was.
You should never carry a pocketbook or a purse which I found to be extraordinary—where are you going to put your stuff? Men had pockets, and their things were in their pockets. But women—

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

RK: Okay, we were learning about what the political consultant was telling you.

SF: Political consultant—one of the early things that he said was, “Don’t carry a pocketbook, because men never carry a pocketbook, and so when they come up on stage, or they come in to make a speech or whatever, they have all of their notes and everything in a pocket—in their pockets. You can’t have a pocketbook.” And that was almost impossible to do, I didn’t know how to do that because you had to have your comb, and your lipstick and, and your notes and everything else. Well, that one I never could live up to, but I could see the logic of it because people would focus on the difference. And what he was trying to get across as the consultant, based upon all these focus groups and work that he had done was that everything had to be as equal as possible so people would focus on the message as opposed to the physical. And this great difference of having a woman and a man—and that made a lot of sense.

But one of the other things that was really strange, was don’t ever wear open-toed shoes or sling-back shoes. Because those were kind of for floozies [laughs]. You had to wear a plain pump in a dark color and you had to obviously wear stockings. And you didn’t wear pantsuits—heaven forbid you didn’t wear pantsuits! They weren’t that popular at that stage, so, but you had to wear the omnipresent suit, and, and the buttoned up blouse underneath. So those were some of the early things.

And then we had to talk about delivery, and how you made your speech and using your hands, and all the other things that—so we worked on that a lot, and worked with a speech doctor to help in the delivery of, of making speeches and everything. A fellow named Michael Sheehan who to this day still works for the Democratic National Committee, and does all the, the speech doctoring for major political candidates in the National Convention. I worked with him many years later in 1992 when I was one of the speakers at the Democratic National Convention. And Michael helped me to deliver that speech. So that was one of the things.

And then we hired people who would help with the, the direct mail and, and all the other aspects of the political campaign. Fundraising—I had always been very successful after that first campaign in sending out a letter to friends and supporters. A personal letter, Dear Sam, Dear Joe, Dear Sue; as opposed to a form letter telling them that I was going to run and ask them for support and financial support as well. And I raised a lot of money each time with that fundraising letter because it was always very demeaning to call up and make appointments to go have to ask people for money. It was, the entire time, my
career, it was just the hardest thing to do and the most demeaning thing to do. So we, we sent out direct mail pieces that generated a lot of money and of course I would go and make pitches for financial contributions.

I had one experience very early on, the very first time I ran for City Council that I want to go back and tell you about, which was kind of the guideline for me, in all future campaigning and fundraising. And that was, as I said earlier, the first campaign we decided that I would basically fund the campaign from our own personal money. And I got contributions from family members and close friends and everything, but I didn’t solicit any money from anybody. And one day I got a 250 dollar check, which was a lot of money in those days from someone who had gone to Plant High School with me, a doctor. And he had been a year or two ahead of me, but I had known him for many years and I thought, Oh, isn’t this nice, this is really very nice. And I wrote a letter back, saying, thank you very much for your contribution. And low and behold, the very first zoning, after I became a member of the City Council in 1974, there he was, wanting this zoning on Bayshore Boulevard, for his office, and wanting me to support it. And I did not. It was wrong then, it would be wrong today. And he didn’t talk to me for many, many years. “I contributed to your campaign, how come you didn’t vote for my zoning?” I mean, he actually told me that. And I thought he contributed just because he was interested in good government and he knew me for years. So it was a lesson to be learned and to be remembered. People always want something—very few exceptions. When they contribute to your campaign they want access, they want special treatment, they want something, quid pro quo. Family members and some personal friends, generally not. But most people do. And so it was always hard to ask for campaign funds.

The second thing that I was going to tell you about was is when in 1986 when I knew I was the acting mayor and I was going run, Hugh Culverhouse was the owner of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. And when he had moved to town, he became a friend and I knew his daughter well, she was a friend and we socialized. And he had supported me in previous City Council races. And I went to him and asked him for his support when [I] ran for mayor, and he said of course, he would do whatever he could to help. And there was a well known businessman named Al Austin, who was the developer of most of the properties in Westshore at that time in the Westshore business district. And Mr. Culverhouse actually had his office in one of Al Austin’s buildings. And I wanted Al Austin to be supportive of me as mayor. And I, I knew Al, had known him for years—in fact my husband had done some legal work for him. And so I asked Hugh Culverhouse if he would help me gain Al Austin’s support. And he said of course he would. And he said, “What you should do is just, you go visit with him, you know him and make an appointment and go see him, and tell him why you want to run for mayor and ask him for your help—his help.”

So on this particular day I went to Mr. Austin’s office with an appointment, and having made an appointment. And I remember I had a briefcase. I was carrying a briefcase in those days. And he graciously invited me into his office—he had two wingback chairs—I remember it like it was yesterday, because it was so astounding to me. He had two wingback chairs, and we sat opposite each other, and we had some small talk at first. And
then he knew why I was there, and then he leaned forward, and his eyes narrowed, and he said to me, “how many children do you have?” And I was taken aback because I’d never been asked that, and I said, “three.” And he said, “how old are they?” And at the time, I think the kids were like 14, 17, 20—close to that in age. The two older ones—the oldest one was in college, the, the middle one was getting ready to go to college, and my youngest one, my daughter was 13 or 14. And I told him the ages of the kids, and he said to me, “how do you think you can be mayor and raise those kids the right way?” Well, I had all I could do to contain myself, I went ballistic practically and I know my voice rose, and I launched into a diatribe about how my kids were better citizens than he ever would be and how they had learned so much from my being involved in government and that they were really going to be the best citizens that this country had to offer, and the kinds of people that we needed and everything, and that I was just taken aback by the whole thing. And I picked up my briefcase—and I remember that exactly because I had that briefcase, and picked up my briefcase and marched out.

And he did not support me for mayor. And no matter what Hugh Culverhouse would do. He did support me in future elections however. But it was a, a tremendous learning experience, because I had never been confronted so overtly with the woman issue. And to this day I’ve never had that kind of experience. I’ve encountered it many times before and after, but I’d never had it so overtly thrown in my face.

RK: I believe Mr. Austin was a prominent Republican and a strong supporter of Mayor Martinez—

SF: He was.

RK: Might that have influenced his perspective?

SF: That did influence his perspective, and he also was a very, very close personal friend and supporter of Helen Chavez who turned out, was going to run for mayor at the same time. And he did support her. But of course her kids were all grown by that point. So I guess it was okay that she could run, but it was really an amazing lesson for me. So there were lots of lessons along the way—continue to be lessons all the time, even though I’m not in politics anymore.

So anyway, as, as time went on, we built up this campaign and we enlisted the aid of hundreds and hundreds of volunteers, and we walked door to door. We had rallies, we did everything, and it was really a very professionally, probably the most professionally run campaign to that date that we’d ever had. And the television commercials were filmed by a pro from Washington, and that, the first time that had ever happened—they hadn’t been just produced locally. And they, we did targeted direct mail, and it was, I guess Tampa’s first really modern political campaign and, and I raised 500,000 dollars and then stopped the fundraising. But that was the largest amount ever raised to that point for a campaign.

RK: And what was the maximum one could get for that point?
SF: I think 1000 dollars at that point, you could give 1000 dollars. But it was, I remember, I think I lost probably 10 or 12 pounds. It was arduous work. I won handily it turned out. But it, I went everywhere. I mean, we had rallies and we had fish fries and we had all kinds of interviews and forums and everything. And I didn’t miss any of it because, and I was still running the city. And we were really having difficult times. Not just from the racial disturbances but we had really bad economic times. So there were a lot of things happening at once.

RK: Who were your major opponents?

SF: Helen Chavez, was in the race.

RK: And she had been on City Council?

SF: She had been on City Council. Charlie Spicola, who was also a member of City Council, he ran. And I think there were several others who ran as well.

RK: Was Bruce Samson running at one point?

F: Bruce Samson was rumored to run. He never did run. He was rumored to run; business community was trying to get him to run, in, in 1987, and then again I think they were trying to get him to run in 1991. But he never did run.

RK: You had mentioned the Tampa downtown establishment before. Did any of these people strongly support you?

SF: Most of them it turned out did. I think they saw the handwriting on the wall. I know that some of them were just beside themselves that they were going to have to deal with me. But little by little I think—through actions and, and personal relationships being developed, I think I won them over for the most part. There were some who never did accept the fact that I, I was the mayor and that they would have to deal with me. And, and those were some really diehard good old boys. But for the most part, I think most of the business community became receptive.

RK: You mentioned the Washington people helped you. Did you have a local campaign manager as well?

SF: Bob Buckhorn kind of assumed that. I—Bob came to me as a friend of someone and I met him and he was like 26 years old, 24 years old, very young and energetic and a real political junkie. And he got involved, and I saw his promise, and he was very good at, at doing the nuts and bolts. And Bob became the campaign manager. But he would dispute this. One of the things that I was always concerned about, and I had seen going back many years, I had seen campaigns get out of control by the candidate. The consultants come in and all these people take charge, and then the candidate doesn’t know who they are at the end of the day. They—and I vowed that I was never going to be in that position, that I always was going to know what was going on in my campaign, who was doing
what, who was being talked to, and I was, at the end of the day, I was the one who was going to be responsible, so I had to be able to look myself in the mirror and know that that was who it was plus, everything that was being done I was comfortable with. So, from time to time Bob and I had little prayer meetings over that. But nevertheless he, he did a really good job for me, and then came to work for me after I was elected.

RK: Was he new to Tampa?

SF: Bob was new to Tampa. He had come down; he had graduated from Penn State. And he had wanted to be in the military, he wanted to be a, a pilot and there was some misdiagnosis of an eye exam when he was in, somewhere up in the Panhandle when he joined the military. And he got an honorable discharge because they thought he couldn’t, wouldn’t be able to fly. Turned out his eyes were fine, but something happened. So he came down here to work on the John Glenn campaign for President. And was selling Land-O-Lakes Butter; was a salesman for Land-O-Lakes. And on the side he was working and doing campaign stuff, and then I brought him on board, paid him to help in the campaign.

RK: And did you have a fair number of people who were relatively new to town work for you?

SF: Oh yeah, we had a lot of people like that. I do want to tell you one story that comes to mind about someone—and I won’t name this individual. It was the person who actually introduced me to Bob. And this was a prominent local attorney, very politically active. And this person came to me when it became apparent that I was going to become the mayor, or the acting mayor, and said, “I really have been following your career, and I’m interested in helping, and I’m progressive and, and, it’d be great to have a woman and all this.” And I bought this whole business, and it was very flattering. And I—he, this fellow got involved in the campaign, introduced me to Bob, and Bob came on board, and the guy was helping. And then I was looking around—the one person that I knew I was going to replace when I became the acting mayor was the city attorney. I wasn’t comfortable with Martinez’s city attorney and had had several run-ins with him. And so I had asked this lawyer, along with Reese Smith, who was the former head of the American Bar Association, and Mike Fogarty who was then the president of the Hillsborough County Bar Association to look around and try to identify several people who might be the kinds of people that I would want to be the city attorney when I became the mayor—or the acting mayor in 1986. And this is in the spring of ’86, and Buckhorn was already helping in, in, you know laying the groundwork and everything, still selling butter anyway. But I had been introduced to Buckhorn.

And one day I got a call from a long time friend of mine, a lawyer who had gone to Plant High School with me. And he said, “I need to talk to you.” And I said, “Fine.” I was in my office at City Hall. And he said, “But not at City Hall, let’s go get a cup of coffee.” So I met him across the street at the Hyatt for a cup of coffee. And he said to me, “Sandy,” and he named the fellow, the lawyer that had been helping me identify candidates for the city attorney’s job. And he said, “Did you authorize so-and-so to ask
me if I want to be the city attorney?” And I said, “No I didn’t. I authorized him, along
with the other two people to give me some names—you’d be a great city attorney”—it
was somebody who would have been a great city attorney. I said, “But I didn’t authorize
him.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Well he came to me and told me that he could make me
city attorney as long as I would guarantee him all the bond business for the city.” And I
went ballistic. I had a short fuse for that kind of stuff. And I apologized profusely, said
that he did not speak on my behalf, and I called that individual up and said, “You’ll have
nothing to do with my campaign. You have nothing to do with who the city attorney—
you will never get any bond business from this city.” And he never did. He came to me
years later and kept trying and trying—and never did. And that was another lesson. That
people who are even volunteering in your campaign might not be doing it for the right
reasons, and doing it for their own reasons.

So you had to really be in control of the campaign, and knowing what people were doing.
And not allowing people to do things that weren’t authorized as best you could because it
would come back and bite you. And there were, that was a pretty good lesson to learn
too. And then I wound up getting Mike Fogarty, who was the city—the head of the
Hillsborough County Bar Association one day it just popped into my head that, Why am I
asking you know, Mike to look for somebody? He’d be a great city attorney. And he said
yes and we had a wonderful relationship until the day he died.

RK: You won easily. Did you do roughly the same for each neighborhood in Tampa?

SF: I did. And, and the reason I remember that I did is because there was only one, one
precinct that I lost. And it was called Hooker’s Point. And it was part of the poor area.
And it just always stuck in my memory because of the name, Hooker’s Point. But I think
about 60-something percent of that vote. And so I did well.

RK: Did you interpret your election as a mandate for any particular policy direction?

SF: Well I think that, I, I don’t know if I thought it was a mandate—we didn’t necessarily
have the strongest possible candidates out there, but they weren’t real weak either, and
there were a number of them. I think what it was is that people saw that we were really
trying to make change and trying to help everybody for a change, as opposed to just some
small segments of a community. And, and I think that was pretty much the way people
viewed it. And I think that was indicative of why, throughout the community there was
such widespread support.

RK: Do you think your gender made any difference at all?

SF: I think at that point there was a, a feeling—there were, was always a feeling of, from
some people—is to this day—that you can’t have a woman do anything except stay home
and you know, mind the house. But I think there was a real desire for change and that
there was a new wind afoot that women could do that job, and might do it better or
differently than men. And that was the case nationwide because women, lots of women,
came into office throughout the country at various levels, but in particular there became
several dozen women mayors in large cities around the country. Many more so than there are today.

RK: Did your religion come into play at all? You’re Jewish.

SF: Every now and then I would hear it and it was always kind of sub-rosa and it was something that you knew that some people were concerned about, but I don’t think most people were. Yeah.

RK: By the time you were elected I believe, the Tampa’s business—Tampa business community had changed to some extent, some of the people who had been very active now were elderly or just—

SF: Yeah.

RK: Passed away.

SF: There had been some changes; there was a lot of movement in, in the major institutions. Some of them, prominent bankers were leaving or had left or had retired or whatever. Or some of the—HL Culbreath was the chairman at TECO, having taken over from Bill MacInnes. Bill Starkey, he was the head, he was very progressive and came from the outside and moved here—the head of General Telephone. And Bill was a big supporter and a staunch ally and friend. And so there was a, a change, I think a little bit more modern or progressive thinking. And a little bit more open to more people being involved in, in the decision making of the community.

RK: So you worked relatively well with these new business people?

SF: Yeah, for the most part.

RK: Can I read a quote from you from your—

SF: Sure.

RK: Inauguration? I hope it’s correct. You noted that “Residents cannot allow our lives and/or destinies to be manipulated by those interests…by those interested,” I’m sorry, “only in the bottom line.” What did you mean by that?

SF: Well up until that time, and I think some extent after that time, that people who were the most influential in the community and could make things happen were really only interested in making it happen for themselves, be it financially or whatever. Or their own kind—they weren’t looking at the big picture and realizing that the community could really benefit overall if everybody was raised up and was able to participate in the democratic process of the community and the decision making, but also in the economic aspect of the community.
I never did understand why some of these old time leaders—and some of the newer ones too, never realized that they’d be better off if everybody, if all the boats, you know, rose. It would help their bottom line even more. But then of course they wouldn’t have as much control. But that was what it was. And so there was a very conscious, I mean, not only the words—but the effort—was underway to make that happen for people. And it was widespread in, in many ways. Whether it was expanding the, the women and minorities in the police department, to putting more women in—I, my administration appointed more women at the top levels of city government than ever before, even to this date. We had assistant city attorneys, and I did have ultimately a woman city attorney. I made the first major in the police department who was a woman. And we had people in the fire department, and they really rebelled; they didn’t want any women in the fire department. We had, we had very few [and] when I became the mayor, we had many more.

But what was happening in the African American community in terms of getting them involved, the neighborhood effort—you know, we had very few neighborhood organized groups. I put Steve LaBour in early on and we began organizing neighborhood groups. That was kind of radical, We want your help. As opposed to saying, Don’t organize, we’ll take care of you, and patting them on the head because we were afraid of them. There were just so many ways that we could reach out, and, and hopefully bring everybody along and raise everybody up as opposed to just doing things that benefited a few. But that did rile some people up because the focus wasn’t just on downtown business. It was really expanding opportunity for a lot of people.

RK: So now you’re in office and you know you’ll be there four years, or maybe eight years. What was on the top of your agenda? In other words, what did you look at first?

SF: Well we had to get the African American community interested in being a part of the community. They were interested, but they were afraid of the community and they were very distrustful—that was one of the things that had to, had [to] happen early on. And that took an awful lot of effort. I mean, I went to churches every week. I went to neighborhood meetings. I walked the streets, literally walked the streets and 22nd and Lake and in College Hill and Ponce de Leon. And, and met with community, African American community leaders. I got a lot of heat from some of the white community for doing that. But it was necessary because I thought it was the right thing to do but it was also necessary because it was for the good of the overall community as well.

Then housing had long time been of interest to me. We started a, we did a neighborhood housing survey that, that the fire department took about a year to do, and they didn’t want to do it at all but it was good for them because they learned about the housing conditions in their particular areas, and the housing stock. And we found out, as I expected, that more than half of the housing stock in the city was substandard and we had to do something about that. So we began the challenge fund and the effort with the banks to improve the housing stock and the nonprofits and we did thousands of housing rehabilitations.
Then we started doing some things that were feel-good but they were good. We, we did some community projects like “Paint Your Heart Out Tampa” which still goes on today. That gave people who were privileged, and had a good life the opportunity to go into neighborhoods that were underprivileged and help paint the home of a senior citizen who needed repairs for their home, roof, yard, whatever, one Saturday and in April. And we had teams of people doing this and we would paint over a hundred homes each year with the help—everything paid for by the private sector, and paint donated and everything. But it not only helped those senior citizens and those handicapped people—disabled people whose homes qualified—but it gave a sense of community to all the people who participated. They, for the first time, many of them, most of them, for the first time had never gone into some of these neighborhoods, didn’t know that conditions were so poor. So that was another thing.

We did things like the Hillsborough River Cleanup, which seemed kind of silly at first, I mean to, when I told the staff we were going to do this—we’re going to get all these volunteers and go out and clean up the river, they thought I was crazy. They oftentimes thought I was crazy actually. But first of all, it focused on the river which we had always turned our backs to the river development, and otherwise and environmentally. But we really did make a change in the river, and cleaning up the river. We’d take tons and tons of garbage out of the river with thousands of volunteers. And then people would realize, Wait, we better take care of this river. And that, it continues to this day. I just won a planning commission award actually for the clean up because people now realize the value of the river.

And then we did one of the most radical things I think I, we ever did—and when the staff really thought I was my craziest. I remember going once to a, early on in the administration, going to—I would go to neighborhood meetings and community meetings. And I would go by myself or take one person with me, frequently Buckhorn. And people would ask me all kinds—I’d talk about what the city was doing, what I wanted to do and then they would ask me all kinds of questions on potholes and sidewalks, and street repairs and everything. And of course, I didn’t know the answer to the questions—you couldn’t possibly know the answer to the questions about that particular neighborhood. And I would say, “Well, we’ll write them down and I would say, we have to get back in touch with you and tell you what.” And we would always get back in touch with them. But finally after doing a few of those I came into a staff meeting which we had every Wednesday morning and I had all my top staff and all the department heads there, and I said to them, “Now the next time I go out to one of these civic association meetings or neighborhood meetings, I’m going to take all of you with me.” And there was this giant sucking sound, Gasp! Oh my! And I could see them looking at each other like, Oh boy she’s really crazy. And I was still new to the job. And it was less than a year into the administration, and they still weren't sure about me, some of these hold-overs from the Martinez administration in particular. And I said, “you know and we’re going to know which neighborhood we’re going to in advance, we’re going to—you’re going to be there to answer all their questions because you will have looked up all of their questions in advance. You’re going to know when the sidewalk is going in,
you’re going to know when we’re going to pave the street and whatever.” And they all looked at me like I was crazy, and I said, “It was mandatory.” There wasn’t any question that we were going to do this, and you’re going to be there, and there will be like 25 of us. And I remember they just were, I mean, kicking and screaming all the way. And, and they would go. The one who wouldn’t go—he went a few times, but he really rebelled because he didn’t see any point in it, was Lou Russo. He would have his staff people go, but he wouldn’t go. He was just above it, Lou. And we’d argue about it. And once in a while he’d go, but he’d have the key people there who could answer the questions, and that was the budget stuff that people wanted to know about.

And I remember those first couple of times, I mean, they were really afraid, these staff people. They had never interacted with the neighborhood people before. They always had a buffer, they always had a deputy, they always had a, a somebody that they could get to call them back but they never would. And here they were being face to face confronted with them, and oftentimes angrily confronted with these residents who didn’t think they were getting enough of the pie. And, and being treated in a timely fashion. And we went—we would go to at least one a month and we went to hundreds over time. And they grew to really like them.

And the neighborhood people, at first they didn’t know what to expect. They thought it was all window dressing. But then after two or three of them, and they’d read about it in the paper, and they’d be, Golly, that was—then they would clamor for them. Because this would be the one time during the year that they would get a lot of their questions answered. And they would really understand how city government worked. And it became one of the best things I think that we ever did. And I’m sorry they don’t do them the same way now because I think it’s a, it’s a great experience for the citizens and, and they learn a lot from them, plus they get information that’s vital to their needs.

But it’s also taking that staff and putting them right out there in the field, right interacting with the citizens. And not having an “us and them” kind of relationship, which frequently crops up. Because you can’t always solve their problems and you can’t always help them, and you don’t always save the money or one thing or another or maybe what they’re suggesting doesn’t make sense or won’t work. But you have to be able to answer their questions even if you tell them, No, I can’t do that, but this is why I can’t do that.

And we did that for the longest time and it was a great experience for us as a team because after the first couple of times I suggested that, Why don’t we go out for dinner first. These meetings would always be at seven o’clock and I’d say, “Why don’t we all meet at such and such a place—Carmines in Ybor City or, or wherever, let’s meet and have a light dinner before hand and we can get together and talk about things and, and just you know, socialize.” And not everybody would go to that, they’d have to go home, or they, you know, and then they’d meet us there. But there would always be like 12 or 15, and it wasn’t always just the top administrators, it would be some of the division heads like the storm water head or, or the public works director or whatever. So it really became a, a camaraderie type thing for all us, and we got to know each other better. We go to work together better, and we became a team and a family. That was the hardest part.
about leaving city government, it was this big family and you become very attached to people and close to them when you spend so much of your time with them. Oftentimes you spend more time with them than you do with your family.

RK: One point—I don’t know what year you hired Mr. Steve LaBour to be the liaison with neighborhood organizations—can you say something about your thinking behind that?

SF: Yeah. When I first became the mayor, as I said there were, there were whole areas of the city that felt disenfranchised and were angry at the city for one thing or another. And we had very few neighborhood associations. And so I guess it was maybe 18 months—it was after I became elected as the mayor; Steve worked in my campaign, I got to know him, and then I realized at some point, maybe a year and a half or two years after—it was within that time frame—that I wanted to hire somebody who just dealt with neighborhood issues, who could be kind of like the ombudsman and the, the person who coordinated from all of these various departments. And if a citizen had a problem, they could call Steve, and he could get the information and get back to them. And then he could help to develop a working relationship with the neighborhood groups, and also, we started helping them actually organize, which was really crazy. And the staff thought that was kind of nuts too because we didn’t—Don’t help them get organized, then they’re really going to fight with us! Whereas, it made our life much easier, and certainly made it easier for them if they were organized as groups. And over time, I guess we organized—when I left we had well over 50 neighborhood associations.

We did things like, it was really radical—we let them decide where to put their—what their priorities were, to put the sidewalks in their neighborhoods. We used to just go in and put the sidewalks down whether they wanted them or not. And finally we said to them, you know, If you want sidewalks, tell us your top three priorities, and we’ll try to get to them this year, if not this year, next year—in your neighborhood where this—so it was, every neighborhood got some of the pie as opposed to a few neighborhoods getting most of the pie. We spread the wealth if you will, and it was much more equal.

And then the other thing that we would do with them—I mean, some of the things were simple. Neighborhoods wanted an identity, and so the neighborhood signs that you see all over the community identifying [inaudible] or College Hill or, or Lincoln Gardens—we, we designed a sign, with a, I think we had a, a competition by artists, and then each neighborhood could get two neighborhood signs placed where they wanted them on two different ends of the neighborhood so it would give them an identity and a sense of place, and a sense of community.

And we did all kinds of things. We did neighborhood clean-ups, those were some of the funniest days. [Laughs] I’ll tell you one story—it demonstrates different types of neighborhoods. We would have neighborhood clean-ups, and what we were encouraging the neighborhoods to do on a Saturday morning, we said, We will supply you with the garbage trucks and some garbage men, and they’ll be working overtime, and we’ll come out there if you get your neighborhood together and go out, and clean the alleys and clean
the curbs, and put the junk out, we’ll pick up all your junk and stuff like that—and it’ll be
free. And we’ll have these neighborhood clean-ups, and then why don’t you have a
potluck or something afterwards for everybody, or a picnic, or whatever you want to
have. And that would build a sense of community. Well, they loved the ideas. And we
would have, almost every Saturday morning, a neighborhood clean-up. And I would put
on my jeans and I would go out there with the garbage trucks and the people and
everything and help do the clean-up and then stay for the, for the lunch afterwards or
whatever.

Well this particular Saturday morning, I remember it was pouring down rain, pouring
down rain. And I didn’t think we could possibly do a neighborhood clean-up, but I was
willing to go. And I remember calling John Dunn, who was the Director of
Communications, and would coordinate some of this and get the media there and
everything. Because that would help them and the sense of identity and everything for
the—get some recognition by the media [that] they were out there and everything. This
particular neighborhood clean-up was in Hyde Park. And so I called John and said, “Do
you think the neighborhood clean-up is going on?” He said, “Let me check and find out
and I’ll call your back.” A few minutes later he called me back, it was right here, and he
said, “Yeah, it’s going on.” And I said, “Okay.” So I, I was kind of grumbling because it
was pouring, and I put on a windbreaker and everything and my old clothes and my
tennis shoes. And I go out there, and we’re riding around looking for the neighborhood
clean-up and we don’t see anybody at all, anywhere. And we’re riding and riding. And in
Hyde Park they have all those alleys behind the houses. And finally we go down this
street, we look down an alley, and there’s a garbage truck. And we go down this alley to
the garbage men, and I’m soaking wet by now, and I get out and I talk to the garbage man
and I say, “Well, where are all the people with the neighborhood clean-up?” [Laughs]
And they said, No, Mayor you don’t understand. In this neighborhood, we are the clean-
up. The citizens weren’t going to get out there in that pouring rain. If it had been a sunny
day they probably would have. But not [inaudible]. If we had been in another
neighborhood in a poorer part of town, they probably would have been out there right
there with the garbage men [laughs].

RK: You had mentioned the comprehensive planning that Florida initiated, I guess with
the Growth Management Act of 1985, and one thing that Tampa did related to what
you’ve just been speaking about is to actually formulate a neighborhood plan. I might be
wrong, but I think you might have been the first city—

SF: We were. We did a neighborhood element. You could do—there were certain
elements that had to be done, water, sewer, solid waste—certain elements that were
required by the legislation. But then you could, there were, there were other elements that
you could do. And we decided we wanted to do a neighborhood element. We were so
engaged in the whole neighborhood effort. And we did so much master planning—
everything we, we had a process in place in city government that the budget process
would take into account neighborhood concerns and everything, that we decided to do a
neighborhood element and we were the first city in Florida to do a neighborhood element.
And it helped guide us in that regard. I don’t know whether they still bother with those kinds of things anymore or not.

RK: How did you formulate it? Who, who wrote it?

SF: I’m sure the planning department wrote it, but it was formulated with the help of all of the neighborhood groups. And when we went to them, and we took input from them. And, and then we had public hearings. You had to have public hearings on the elements of the plan before you submitted it. And so that, the public was intimately involved in the planning and development of that neighborhood element. And they were wholeheartedly behind it.

I remember Margaret Vizzi, who remains a community activist, and one of—was one of the founders of the, the neighborhood association’s umbrella organization, THAN. Margaret was very much involved in it and spoke on its behalf; went to Tallahassee I think on a number of occasions to lobby for it and support the element. It was another way to really legitimize that whole neighborhood movement and to try to etch it in stone, if you will, you know, make sure that it, it didn’t go away when somebody else became the mayor.

RK: You mentioned a challenge fund before, and I believe that Tampa was recognized nationally for this housing effort. Can you just say a little bit more about that? About how it was funded and how it was?

SF: After we realized what a terrible situation we had in substandard housing, we had to do something about it. We put together something called the “challenge fund”—“mayor’s challenge fund.” And it was a combination of the city, nonprofits, like Tampa United Methodist Center, and a whole host of other nonprofits, and the banks and some credit unions actually. To come together to help those properties that we identified as substandard, help those homeowners either renovate their properties—whether it was putting a new roof on, or really doing a wholesale renovation. And then later on, actually building new construction, new homes.

And I knew and had talked about even before I became the mayor that there was federal legislation that required the banks to give back to the community—called the Community Reinvestment Act. And in order for banks to continue to operate, they had to give back certain percentage into the community. Now they could donate it to charitable things in the community. There were various ways. And there were various ways they got around it. But I, and they were always looking for ways to make that Community Reinvestment Act valid for them. They had to file reports quarterly and everything—inspectors would come in, they’d find out what they had to do. And they could lose their, their banking license if they didn’t invest in the act. And I knew that they had to do that and that they were oftentimes looking for ways. And thought, Gee, if they would join with us and donate to a fund, that then could become like a revolving fund, that would help them with their community and reinvestment tax credit and it would certainly help the community—we could get some housing done.
So when we talked to the banks and the lenders, we realized that yes they wanted to do it, but the one thing that they didn’t want to do was they didn’t want to have to do all the loan processing and the paperwork and everything that went with it. Yeah, they wanted to, but they wanted to make it easy. So we said, If you’ll put the money in, we will train the nonprofit sector to do the loan processing. They will get a small fee for that so that will help the nonprofit to continue to grow, and and do their good work, and the city will help do the training of all of this and keep it together. And I remember having a meeting with probably the top ten lending institutions at the time, and explaining this to them. Bob Harrell was very instrumental in putting the whole thing together—very creative, creative guy.

RK: What was his position?

SF: Bob was the Director of Housing and Community Development at the time. He wound up ultimately becoming a Director of Finance. And then he was the Chief of Staff for the last few months of my administration—he was a really talented guy, could do anything.

And we made this pitch to them. And they said, Okay, we’ll give it a try. And as a result of this partnership they, we did all this housing. Renovation and then new construction; and all the nonprofits got involved in it, and then we expanded—I think at one point all the banks in the community were involved in it. They saw it as a wonderful way to get their tax credit.

And then we even engaged a—I know the head of General Telephone Credit Union. I knew him personally. We went to him and said, Bucky, Bucky Sebastian was his name, let us explain this, you’re not required to do this, but maybe this will be good for you all too—you’ll get members, you know, and you’ll get customers as a result of this for your credit union. And then they joined in and then the other credit union. So we had banks and the credit unions, and the nonprofits and the city all working together. And it was a really novel approach—nobody had ever done it around country. And it won all kinds of national awards, and it was listed in, in—David Osborne wrote a book and it was the bible for the first Clinton administration; and it was part of that whole book—a whole chapter devoted to that I think. And it became a wonderful instrument to provide housing. Really I, we never would have been able to tackle the thousands and thousands of homes that we did.

Then we got the homebuilders involved who, who would come in and do the new construction. And all of this occurred during very difficult economic times. And the Florida homebuilders actually inducted me in their hall of fame, and I was the first political person who ever was. Because during that time so many of the building trades and the homebuilders locally were actually saved because they did this renovation and reconstruction and new construction work when there wasn’t any other construction going on in residential construction because of the hard economic time. So it was really a win-win all the way around.
RK: You just focused on particular neighborhoods or was it citywide?

SF: We first focused on particular neighborhoods; there, we had, I don’t remember how many census tracks that were totally substandard. I mean lots of census tracks. Most of which were north of Kennedy [Boulevard], I think down in Port Tampa and maybe one other south of Kennedy. And we focused originally on those worst census tracks. But then it became a program that went citywide. Wherever there was need, it was built.

RK: At one point was there a special emphasis on Tampa Heights?

SF: We, we did a tremendous amount of work in Tampa Heights. That was the beginning of Tampa Heights. I remember taking Vice President Gore there shortly after he became Vice President in 1993 we took him. He came to Tampa—one of the first communities that he came to after they took office, I think it was March of 1993, and they were elected—no, yeah—1992 they were elected in November, and March of ’93, Vice President Gore came to Tampa Heights because we had been doing so much and that was the program that we wanted to showcase, and that they wanted to see, the housing stuff.

And then many communities around the country began doing similar type programs. They modified them to meet their needs and everything but it was a way to really do a tremendous amount of housing that we wouldn’t have had any ability to do. We did, if we did 20 homes a year—rehabbed homes prior to that time that was a lot. There just wasn’t a focus. And we used as the backbone, and the backstop of this entire challenge fund, the community development block grant money that was coming from the federal government. Because that would be the loan guarantee money that would make the banks feel comfortable so that they weren’t going to be at risk for all this money. That would guarantee those loans, yeah.

RK: Can I ask you about a couple of development projects through your administration? The Convention Center was initiated I know, during Martinez’s administration. But I think you had to make a decision whether to go ahead with it. Can you speak about that?

SF: Yeah. When I became the mayor in 1986 we were really mired and a mess. We had acquired a lot of land where the Convention Center sits, at the south end of Franklin Street. But we were also in a nasty lawsuit with Bill Mack. And I don’t remember all of the particulars of the lawsuit, but we couldn’t go forward, we didn’t have all of the land. We had spent like, I don’t know, 23 million dollars on land. And it wasn’t a place that I really thought the Convention Center ought to go because it was locked in by water and the roads and wouldn’t be able to expand.

And I remember the entire Christmas vacation—we didn’t go on vacation, but things kind of slowed down, and then of course the week of Christmas and New Years we were kind of off—really agonizing over, Should we go forward or shouldn’t we go forward? Here we had spent 23 million dollars, all we had—we had architectural contracts underway, we had all these things. We spent 23 million dollars, acquired all this land—but it was
just as mess and we had this lawsuit going on. And I talked to a lot of the business
leaders, and, and I really was—had a terrible time grappling with it. From a development
standpoint it was probably the worst decisions I had to make in, in almost nine years I
was the mayor.
But how could I explain 23 million dollars that we had spent? Sure we had the land, but
we’d be sitting with that land for ages. We couldn’t acquire some of the land that we
needed and everything else.

And so finally I said, “I’ve got to go forward with it”—I don’t, I wasn’t comfortable, but
I, we had to go forward and build a Convention Center, and I made the decision. I
remember meeting with Bill Mack, who was the New Jersey developer who had
developed some property in Tampa and wanted to develop the—he wanted to build the
Convention Center, and that’s how the lawsuit got started. And I remember meeting him
out at the Marriot Airport there at the airport hotel, and going into a private room with
him, just the two of us, without any of the staff people. And having been completely
briefed by the lawyers and everything, and he wanted I don’t know how many millions of
dollars. And we didn’t have that many million and we didn’t think he should. And, and
we finally came out of that meeting and we had compromised. I had given him a little bit
more and he had taken a lot less. And we got the lawsuit solved. And then we were able
to go forward and build the Convention Center.

And when we built the Convention Center it came in on time and on budget which has
never happened to this day for public works project in the city at that magnitude. And, it
was such an important project to the city, but it was also important to me because I just
had so much personal investment in it, that I was immersed in every detail. Every
Wednesday morning I got a briefing on the project and if we were a day behind I cracked
the whip so we could get it done on time and on budget. It was a little under budget. I got
involved with the architects—and I even, I picked the carpet; I mean I even picked the
tiles. They, they still have some of the carpet that I picked. I got involved with every
detail of it, because if we were going to do it, we were going to do what I thought [was]
first class and right.

And it turned out to be a fabulous building, and, and still does well, but it can’t be
expanded. And now, time has a way of proving things correct sometimes—and it
certainly has. So it doesn’t, you know, it can’t be expanded—and so it, it continues to
lose a little ground in the industry.

RK: Initially, if I remember correctly with the Mack proposal, you would have a
Convention Center and a hotel; and went ahead of course without the hotel. Did you—I
know you tried to attract a hotel—?

SF: Tried to attract a hotel from, from the time we settled with Mack, and never could.
One of the problems was that the land across the street from the Convention Center, not
on the waterside, where the Marriot currently is—we wanted to protect the water. But we
wanted the land across Franklin Street—[it] was outrageously priced. And it just didn’t,
wouldn’t compute to build a hotel there at what they were asking for. And the economy
was bad; no hotels were being built in cities anywhere in the country. There had been a glut of hotels built in the, in the mid ‘80s, so no hotels were being built—and financing, they couldn’t get financing. So we struggled right up until almost the day I left office with getting a hotel built. And we thought we had a deal worked out in November of 1995 shortly before I left office. And we had worked on it for ages. And it was a very unique arrangement, whereby developers would build the hotel, and the city would ultimately own it and then we would be able to recoup the costs and everything. It was a very difficult deal, and I had to go out of town and when I left town, I was sure the City Council was going to vote for it. And they had all indicated privately to me—not all of them, but most of them—privately to me, that they were going to vote for it. And in the two or three days I was gone and it came in front of the City Council, the hotel when south and by four to three vote they did not vote for it, and the deal was dead. And part of it was the work of Bill, and Dick Greco who was going to be the mayor—he wanted to be able to take credit for building a hotel and he was working behind the scenes and convinced a couple of the council members not to do it. And they knew that he, you know—when you’re a lame duck, that’s what happens.

But it, it truly was a better deal than the deal that he ultimately struck for the city at less cost. I remember Bob Harrell was furious because he had been the architect of the deal. He was the finance director at the time and when Greco orchestrated his deal a couple of years later, Bob looked at the numbers and the numbers were far better for the city with the deal that, that we had tried to accomplish. And it would not have been out on the water. So the water was once again blocked off from the citizens’ access.

RK: Another development initiated during Mayor Martinez’s time was the Performing Arts Center.

SF: Yeah.

RK: Did you have to make any decisions regarding that?

SF: Oh yeah. That was a project that I inherited about half way through it as best I remember. And it was mired in all kinds of problems, all kinds of problems—cost overruns, you name it, it had it. And again, we had to really shepherd that one along, and it was late when I got it—and it was way behind schedule. And we finally brought it along and [took] a lot of criticism of the project for Mayor Martinez, and, and obviously when I was the mayor because it didn’t do well in the first couple of years. And people were—the [inaudible] cry was a white elephant and, and today, people say, How did we live so long without that kind of a facility and without that kind of entertainment and the cultural things that have come along? And it’s proved to be a tremendous asset to the city and a great gem.

RK: Were there particular groups or individuals who opposed it?

SF: Yeah. A lot of the neighborhood people opposed it, didn’t understand why we would do that. It didn’t benefit them, they would never come downtown, they would never go to
a performance. And yet, there probably isn’t a person in Hillsborough County I would say, whose life hasn’t been touched by it in one way or another. They may not even know it and they have a friend who’s worked there. They may have a child who goes, has gone there before. Children’s performances—all the school kids go, you see the school buses lined up there everyday. There maybe, maybe a business that has come here as a result of having this outstanding cultural attraction. And that is one of the major things that new businesses seeking relocation look for—cultural—more so than sports actually—the cultural climate of a city. So a business might have come here as a result of having that great facility and, and they might be employed in that business. Even if they never set foot in the facility, they’ve benefited from it. Plus it generates a tremendous economic impact in the community with all the shows that come in and the people that spend money and all. But takes a while to win people over.

The Aquarium is much the same way. I think that project has gotten an awful lot of criticism and it was the first thing down there on the waterfront in the channel district and it was so alone for so long, which it wasn’t expected to be. We expected the cruise ships to be rolling, and that didn’t happen for many years; and the shops and the buildings and all that. But now you know, Channelside has been transformed and largely because something had to go there first, and the Aquarium was the something.

RK: Is that the development project that you’re most criticized for?

SF: Oh yeah, yeah. People still criticize the Aquarium. And it has cost the city more than we—

[End Tape 1, Side B]

[Tape 2, Side A]

RK: The Aquarium was a difficult project in that it was quite controversial?

SF: Yeah, the Aquarium, first of all was probably overly ambitious in its mission. The people who, the board of the Aquarium and the director and everything—the mission from the beginning was, as much education as entertainment [laughs], and that was kind of naïve to believe, that people would want to come to something that was so educational and not have the, the dolphins or the manatees or something more entertaining. So in its early years, with that mission in mind, people went once and then they didn’t go back again. So then, little by little it became apparent that it had to have more entertainment value and that is what has taken place and much greater marketing.

And now, of course, there are a whole host of things happening in the Channelside area. I think what people forget—they oftentimes liken the Aquarium and that area of town to the inner harbor in Baltimore where the National Aquarium—I think that’s what its called—came—and then the rest of the area developed and shops and restaurants and residences and everything else. And they think that’s the way it should be and they forget
the fact that it took 20 years for that to happen in Baltimore. And it’s going to take 20 years here—but it may take less than 20 years actually with everything that’s happening in the Channelside area now, but the Aquarium is [on] a much greater financial footing now, better financial footing and the area’s developing rapidly and the Aquarium has already expanded once and another expansion is being planned. And their yearly memberships are way up, and all kinds of good things are happening.

RK: You mentioned before recruiting out of town businesses to relocate to Tampa. Did you get involved in that as far as going on recruiting trips?

SF: Oh, I went on many, many trips—in this country and to Canada and even to Europe on trade missions. And it was always interesting to me how there were certain things that people in Tampa thought were the real draws for this community to lure new businesses. But those weren’t really the things that were the lures. Yes, they like our weather. Yes, they like all these sports teams that we have. But they never popped up as the most important things that they were looking for.

I think, I don’t remember all the numbers now but there were two that always came up. One, and always at the top was the educational system. Were we a community that was developing educational opportunities and really developing our well educated workforce? And did we have educational—higher educational institutions as well as good educational system—K through 12? Obviously we needed work and we still need work on those things.

Another one that always surprised me and always surprised the business leaders many of whom never would acknowledge that it was so, was that they were much more interested in cultural facilities and the cultural climate of the community and the area than they were of the sports. We have just bent over backwards for the sports. And that’s alright I guess but it’s only in recent years that we’ve come to recognize that the educational and the cultural attributes of a community have a much greater impact and long term impact, not only on the community itself but on luring new high grade businesses to this area.

There were lots of trade missions. I remember going to, once with a group to Canada in January and, in the snow and the sleet and everything. And the reason we went in January was because it really made the Canadians realize that we were serious. We could be basking in 70 degree temperatures here in Florida, but we really wanted to come to Toronto and Montreal—those were the two cities we went to—to talk to them about moving operations or parts of their operation to Tampa and the bay area. And we were so serious about it we would come in January! [Laughs] I remember.

And then we would take trade missions to Europe, and took a number of those and led a number of those. We went early on behind the Iron Curtain, right after the wall came down. I remember going to Eastern Europe and to Hungary and to Prague and to East Germany with a group. I don’t—you never knew whether those trips, be it the domestic ones, oftentimes you could find out from the domestic ones—but the European ones whether they were as beneficial as you hoped. Because sometimes three, four years
would lapse before you’d hear anything from groups. But helping to identify this part of Florida, as opposed to Mickey Mouse land or Miami was always an important thing because people identify those two areas as Florida. They forget that there’s this whole west coast of Florida that has so much to offer.

RK: Did the companies ask much about tax rates or tax incentives?

SF: Oh always. When the company would come here and relocate they wanted to know about tax incentives and they wanted to know about infrastructure improvements that you could make for them. And they wanted to know about impact fees if they were going to build a new building. They wanted to know about the workforce and, and what incentives they could get by hiring certain aspects of the community—you know, people that were trained, or training people those kinds of things.

There were a whole host of things that they wanted to—they even wanted to know oftentimes about hiring their spouses. You know they if, they wanted to know what effort the community would make to hire you know, spouses of the top business executives in other businesses, you know within the community, so that they wouldn’t uproot a whole family. And there would only be one income producer as opposed to the two income producers of that family in the city that they were leaving. There were all kinds of things, never, you know—was always surprising some of the things they’d come up with.

RK: Who usually went on these trips besides yourself to recruit companies?

SF: Sometimes the, the chairman of the County Commission. Sometimes somebody from the Port or somebody from the Airport depending upon what the—the Airport was always a big draw. I mean we have such a wonderful airport—that was always one of the selling points—you can get in and out quickly. Your people can go off on their sales missions or whatever and travel easily. And that was a big selling point. So frequently you take somebody from the airport—either the staff or the Airport Authority, or occasionally the Port. Then Chamber of Commerce people would go, both Chamber staff people—frequently from the Committee of 100, the economic development arm of the chamber. And sometimes some of the volunteer people form the chamber.

RK: From your perspective, did it make a difference whether they would locate in a city as opposed to the county?

SF: It was good either way. I mean, obviously you’d want the tax base to be enhanced if they came into the city, built a building or whatever. But there were benefits all the way around and so the, the city/county lines weren’t in play oftentimes. Sometimes we’d try to get them to the area to commit to the area and then we would vie city/county as to the location they would ultimately set up in. But the main thing was to get them to Hillsborough County.

RK: Were there any annexations of county land while you were mayor?
SF: Oh yeah, we did a number of annexations up in New Tampa. I can’t remember all of them but we did quite a number of them.

RK: Did the county resist in any way or—?

SF: Really—

RK: Or oppose them?

SF: Really and truly the county, we didn’t have difficulty with the county. That came later. And, and generally it was, I think we kept them pretty well informed and we kind of made it a rule—it was a rule actually in my administration, that we didn’t go searching for the property owners who would get their land annexed. If they wanted to be annexed and they came to us then we would talk. So it wasn’t as, as if we were cherry picking. And I think some years later after I left when, when the city and county got into a lot of wars over the annexation, it was because I think the city began to seek out these property owners and said, We’ve got a deal for you, you know, if we can annex you, this is what we can do for you. And I think that really riled the county. But annexation is not always the solution. Sometimes it costs you a whole lot more to annex then. Because you have to put in all of the infrastructure and things like that—than it does, than is warranted. And you have to do that cost-benefit analysis pretty, pretty clearly before you go into it. You got to know all the, the pitfalls. Sometimes you do it and you know that it’s going to cost you more initially but in the end it’ll build the tax base so significantly that overtime you’ll get far more back than what you put in. But [you] need to know that going in. I’m not sure they always do.

RK: You mentioned impact fees. That’s something that businesses pay attention to. Were there any controversies over impact fees during your administration?

SF: Well [laughs], we probably were the ones who initiated the impact fees in this city. There might have been a very small impact fee under the Martinez administration for transportation. But we did initiate more impact fees. And it was always controversial because no body ever wants to pay them. I don’t know who they think is going to pay ultimately for the roads and the water and sewer and everything. And they still don’t nearly charge what they should charge, what really is the cost. But we did raise impact fees and I think we initiated a few more impact fees and of course the homebuilders were always upset and the general contractors were upset and all the, all the people that you would expect to be—they would be.

RK: Did you have a difficult time getting City Council to improve the increases?

SF: Sometimes they would balk a little bit. I think they always ultimately went along with them—but they would get the brunt of the—I mean, we would meet with the interested groups that, that were opposed to it. But if we thought it was fair, we would go ahead and propose it. But of course the public hearings happened with the City Council, so they
would get the brunt of it, of the, the hollering from the interested parties—the ones that didn’t want it.

RK: During your administration there were major controversies—

[phone rings]

RK: During your administration controversy arose regarding Super Bowl that was slated to come to Tampa for 2001, I believe? I might be mistaken.

SF: No, it was before that. It was 1991; I think that was the Super Bowl—

RK: Oh yes, yes—

SF: Yeah.

RK: 1991, that was when you were out of office.

SF: Oh yes. [Editor's note: subsequent to interview, SF corrected that she had not yet left office in 1991.]

RK: Can you tell just something about that?

SF: Well, you have to first drop back a little bit and remember what took place in the late ‘80s with the difficulties in the black community and the problems that we had. And there, the unrest and everything else. And then here we are, we have a Super Bowl coming to town, and the Super Bowl is usually thought to be benefiting the affluent—they’re the only ones who get to go to the game—you know, all the parties and all the things that go with it. And the Super Bowl committee had scheduled Gasparilla to coincide with the Super Bowl. They had changed the dates of Gasparilla to coincide with the Super Bowl.

And then there was a group of African Americans who came together as a group and protested the fact that this was going to take place because Gasparilla was an all white male organization. And I don’t remember all of the details, but I do remember that the NFL was concerned about that. They had caught wind of it because this group of African Americans had contacted the NFL, told them that, and they didn’t want any negative publicity and here they had agreed to have the Gasparilla event go in tandem with the Super Bowl. And all hell broke loose really. Everybody starting screaming.

The African American community was upset—they don’t want the Super Bowl to be held if, if this white group was going to put on the Gasparilla. And the NFL was concerned because they didn’t want anything to, to cloud the Super Bowl. And the city was right in the middle of it. Because the city has, historically always provided all of the services the police the fire protection, the clean up; provided the sanitation department; the public works department puts up the barricades and puts up the, the parks department puts up
the bleachers and all of these city services are provided. Most of which the city pays for, a little bit of which the Gasparilla people pay for. And here we were in the middle of it, and they all came to me and said, _do something._ And I said, “Well, I don’t think we can have a Super Bowl and Gasparilla if this all white male Krewe is going to that. If we’re going to do that, then the city won’t pay for their services—you’ll have to pay for the services yourself.” And of course they couldn’t afford that, you know Gasparilla people. And I said, “Well then we won’t help with Gasparilla, therefore you’re not going to be able to put on Gasparilla—you need to have an integrated Krewe, and you have to make some accommodations.” And everybody went crazy.

They just and, and—unfortunately I think it could have been resolved but the head of the Gasparilla Krewe that year, the captain of the Krewe was somebody who was really dug in, and he wasn’t particularly receptive—A, to African Americans, and, B, I think he had trouble dealing with a woman as the mayor. And C, he didn’t want anybody to tell him what he had to do. He was above it all. And I think had there been somebody who was a little bit more moderate who had been the captain of the Krewe that year making the decisions; we probably could have worked it out. But anyway, they said they weren’t going to be told what to do, and they weren’t going to integrate the Krewe and they weren’t going to do anything that we asked them to do and we said, Well, we can’t help you put on the event then. And it fell apart. And so here we were, and we had the Super Bowl coming, we didn’t have the parade, and this festival planned, coming along.

And so a group of African Americans, led by Bob Gilder, and some whites, Henry Brown was one of them I remember—who was a Krewe member—and some others, said, Well, let’s try and put something on so the visitors and the people here alike can have something. And they cobbled together this makeshift kind of parade and everything and gave it a name called Bambaleo—I don’t even know why that name came up, and it was going to come around and the city would help with the—it’d be integrated and everybody would be involved. And the city would help with the services, the police and fire and all the other services. And lo and behold, and the day came and it poured. It rained, I mean it rained. And it was a dud in every sense of the word; it wasn’t much of a parade to begin with and then the rain really put a damper on things.

And the following year—and of course, the Super Bowl went on. And that was a tough Super Bowl anyway because we had just had the Gulf War and Blackhawk Helicopters were flying overhead, and all those kinds of things—people had to go through security systems and, and then the following year, the Gasparilla Krewe did integrate. Not very many African Americans were invited to join but they did. And then other krewes began to develop and join in the parade. And now, I don’t know, there are probably several dozen krewes of all types, women and African Americans, Hispanics—

[phone rings]

RK: So now there are many krewes participating?

SF: Many krewes participate and there are—it’s totally diverse. There still aren’t any
women in the krewe of, the Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla and once again the mayor surrenders the key to the City. I do want to back up a minute and tell you a little bit about Gasparilla.

When I became the mayor, for all the years that preceded, the mayor had always surrendered the keys to the City the week—a few days before the Gasparilla parade and invasion. And the pirates had come to the mayor’s office and dragged the mayor out of the office and said, Surrender! Surrender! And the mayor would say, No, I can’t do it! And then the day of the invasion the mayor would surrender and give the key to the city to the pirates and they would take over the city and have their parade invasion.

Well the first year I was the mayor in 1987, the first year of Gasparilla when I was the mayor in 1987, I—it was shortly before the election, and I really didn’t want to rock the boat and so I did the obligatory surrender and it was really not a pleasant experience. And it was really, very distasteful to me, being dragged out, and it was so sexist and everything anyway. And then the following year—and then the pirates would take you to lunch at the yacht club. And I was the only woman that would be in the room and all these pirates, maybe two dozen of them; and they had been drinking before hand and all morning long. And they would tell all kinds of jokes and everything—off color jokes, I mean it was not a pleasant experience.

Well, then, then we didn’t—the next time, the following year, I was already elected as the mayor, and I don’t remember how many years this took place, but it was early on in, in my administration. The next year I tried to be a good sport again and went through the whole routine and they took me to the yacht club after they wanted me to surrender and everything. This is several days before the invasion and the actual surrender by the mayor. And we had lunch and they had been drinking and everything else and it was 25 men or whatever the number and me. And I knew many of them, many of them had gone to school with me and everything.

And then, near the end of lunch, two of the men got into a, an argument but it was a friendly argument kind of thing. But they had a little bit too much to drink and everything, and one of them was a prominent local doctor and the other one was a business man and everything, and I was sitting next to the business man and the doctor was across the table. And he was the captain of the Krewe that year, whatever, and all of a sudden he stood up and then the other guy stood up, and before I knew it, food was flying and then silverware was flying—knives and forks were flying. And everybody was into it, and I was down, literally down under the table. And I remember looking at the waiters at the yacht club, who were standing along the walls, and they were all African Americans, and it was the most demeaning thing I had ever experienced in my life. And I remember walking out of there and saying, “I am never doing this ever, ever again.” And so from then on I did not participate in the—

RK: Surrender?
SF: The surrender. Either the couple of days before, or the actual surrender the day of. It was just something that I could just not abide. And I know it riled a lot of feathers, and, She’s not a good sport, and, She doesn’t believe in history and continuity and all that kind of stuff. But it was just very, very unpleasant thing, and very demeaning, and I just wasn’t going to do it.

And after I left office, my predecessors have started the practice again, and I—to each his own, I guess. I do remember making one suggestion that fortunately has taken hold at that, at that first or second lunch meeting; I remember suggesting to the pirates that perhaps before they came to my office in the morning—they would come at lunch time, like 11:30, 12:00. And we would go out, they would drag me out of the office and we would go out onto the, the mall, the Franklin Street Mall. And people would come and they would shoot cannons and all that kind of stuff, and go through the whole charade. But I remember telling them that perhaps in the morning before they should do something a little more productive than just drinking. And they might—and I suggested to them that they might want to go to the, to children’s hospitals and see the kids. And they have done that every year since. And I think that’s been a nice thing. They’ve not been drinking—they may drink, but they don’t drink to the extent that you’d know it probably. And they take gifts to the kids, and they take the beads and everything else, so that is a nice little touch. That is one suggestion I’m sure they would never acknowledge that I suggested, but nevertheless that’s one good that came out of the whole thing. But not much else.

RK: There was another controversy involving race and in a sense, development involving a ship named the Whydah?

SF: The Whydah.


SF: I don’t recall the years; it was in the early ‘90s I believe. But two business men from Boston—one of them also had a—they both had an interest in Texas too, came to the city. And came to the Chamber of Commerce and some of the business community and they said they were interested in building a museum that would show the history of slavery and the museum would exhibit treasure that had been brought up from a ship, a slave ship during the civil war—or before the civil war—and the name of the ship was the Whydah. And they wanted to build this museum, which would display the artifacts from the slave ship and tell the story of slavery. And they showed how they would do it in an educational and tasteful way. And they talked to the Chamber of Commerce people. We thought it would be something that would be worthwhile; they talked to me, they talked to some other business leaders. And they did talk, in spite of the fact that it was never acknowledged, they did talk [to] a few, a very few, African Americans about it.

When it was publicly announced, the African American community, led by a couple of prominent people went ballistic. They believed that this was going to be a tourist attraction that would only be detrimental to blacks. They pointed to the fact that this same slave ship and its artifacts had been proposed—these people had proposed to build a
similar kind of facility in Boston, and that it had been turned down in Boston. Well, we had public meetings and public outrages and the African American community was ignited if you will; people, some people who didn’t even know what they were talking about were, in the African American community made all kinds of accusations and said even before they knew what they were, had seen the plans or anything, said it was going to be just an attraction and it was going to make a mockery of slavery and the rest.

And of course everything got out of hand and they, African Americans pointed once again to the fact that here was the white community shoving something down their throats that affected their lives. And I’m sure we could have done it very differently, gone to them much earlier, the community—but it was blown way out of proportion and certainly I think that these two individuals had nothing but real interests of education and, and wanted a place to display these objects to tell the story of slavery. But that is not what others thought and the project died. But it once again created distrust, an ill will in the African American community. And they said that no, no African Americans had been involved and, in the decision making to bring it here which wasn’t true. But the ones who were involved never came forward and said, I knew about it. They, they kind of understandably didn’t want to take the wrath of their peers.

RK: Did the city take any steps afterwards to try to promote, I don’t know, joint decision making?

SF: Well we spent the, I spent, and I think our administration spent, the better part of the nine years trying to bring about greater understanding and diversity and we, we started the community campaign to build understanding and diversity with the help of the National Conference of Christians and Jews which was a major campaign as undertaken in 1994 I think it was. We had controversy after controversy. There was a marked sense I’m sure we could have been, we the city, could have been more sensitive over the years, but we really did try and we had a black police chief, we had blacks in prominent positions throughout city government. But the majority community, even though we finally had African Americans and Hispanics and women on the boards of the Chamber of Commerce and all, really still, I think had a marked sense of insensitivity to the African American community.

Another example of that insensitivity was when we were going to have a Super Bowl Task Force—I think it was a Super Bowl task force again or something. And Leroy Selman, no, not Leroy—I don’t remember what we were trying to do, but I remember Joe House was the head of the Chamber of Commerce and I guess we were going to have a task force for something to go get another Super Bowl or something, I don’t remember. And they put together a committee, and lo and behold everybody was white on it again. And I went to him and said, privately, “You know, no African Americans, we must have diversity on this.” And he said, “Well, we’ve got the best group of people and everything.” And had another meeting and it was still all white. And finally I publicly chastised him—I think it was for the Super Bowl task force, to get the next Super Bowl that we were able to get. And again I, I had to make it public and then the African American community was upset, and everybody was upset with me because, Why does
she always make it public? But they, they—unless you made it public, there would be a nonresponsive attitude on the part of the majority community. And ultimately Leroy Selmon and others were appointed to the task force, and we got another Super Bowl and everything.

But it was always, Why didn’t you think of that yourself? Why do you always have to be told of that? I remember early on when I became the mayor we had no African Americans on the Chamber of Commerce board. And the board is like 30, 40 people—I mean it’s not a little tiny board. And I don’t think we had many women, if any women, or Hispanics. And I remember having lunch with the head of the Chamber of Commerce, the Executive Director and the President of the Chamber of Commerce. And saying this, I mean we’d had riots already at this point. We’ve got to make it more diverse, we’ve got to. And their response to me was, Well, we don’t know who they are. They being the African Americans who would be, should be involved. And I said, If I give you a list of African Americans, Hispanics, women, will you consider those people? And they said, Yes. And the first list I gave them completely became members of the board.

And thereafter to their own credit, now they had people to draw on, to find them. But they didn’t reach out. You always had to go to the business leaders who were white, and say, We need to do this. And if they didn’t do it, you have to prompt them and prompt them, and finally sometime you’d have to go public and then they’d get all upset—Why did you do this?

I remember at the time the president, the chairman of the Sports Authority was an appointee of mine and he was so upset that this Super Bowl task force—and they were primarily the movers behind the Super Bowl of course—that I would go public. And his father called me, his father was [a] very prominent businessman who was a friend of mine and up until that point had been a big supporter of mine. And his father called me—and he’s now deceased, I won’t even mention his name, and oh, just gave me what for. How could you do this to my son? And I said, I was sorry but you know, I had privately suggested that they needed to do this and they didn’t do it and they didn’t do it, and then finally I had to be public about it.

And [on] that same occasion I remember the president of the Chamber of Commerce coming to me and he had been a big supporter as well, and saying, “How could you do this?” And I said, I went through the same thing. “Why didn’t you publicly,” you know, “Why didn’t you do it when I told you privately?” [Response to Freedman.] “Well, we should have we could have but” —[Freedman’s response.] “But you didn’t.” [Response to Freedman.] “So how could you publicly do this and ruin my term?” That was all he was concerned about, it wasn’t that, that the city had screwed up, that the chamber had screwed up or anything, it was, How could you have hurt me and ruin my term, rock my boat? So it’s, it’s sad that—I think it still goes on today. Here we are in 2005.

RK: Another development project that I think had a happy ending was the hockey arena.

SF: Yeah, that one—
RK: Can you speak about that, I know you got heavily involved with that.

SF: Yeah, that was a strange project—very strange project. Phil Esposito who was a great hockey player came to me one day and, and said—and some other people I think were with him. And he was behind a group that wanted to bring hockey to Tampa. Well that sounded like the craziest thing in the world. Here we were, 90 degree heat most of the time and everything, and hockey in Tampa? Nobody had ever heard of such a thing. But I’m a big sports fan, and I used to play tennis, and so I said, “Well, okay, let’s see what we can do.” So we went about it, on and on and on. And finally the City Council passed a resolution to go support hockey. And then we went to the County Commission. And there was some involvement by the city and the county in it, and that’s why we had to go to the County Commission. And I don’t remember the particulars of that arrangement, but the County Commission, and the County Commission turned us down. They didn’t want to participate in anything.

And the following week we were supposed to go to Palm Beach. Phil was supposed to go, and I had planned to go and others, to go and make the pitch to the hockey owners, the other hockey team owners to give Tampa, Tampa Bay, the hockey franchise. Well, they were devastated, the hockey people. Phil Esposito and Henry Paul and Mel Lowell were the threesome. And they walked out of there and they said, It’s dead, can’t do anything. And I came back to the office and we talked, I talked to the staff and everything. And I call Phil up and I said, “I think we ought to go down there anyway. Let’s see what we can do.”

So we went to Palm Beach and we went into this room in the Breakers Hotel of all white men [laughs]. It was always me and the white men, I don’t know why, but it was. And Phil Esposito, and one or two other people to make the pitch. And first of all, these men were in awe of Phil Esposito. He was a, a—one of the finest hockey players that ever lived. And he was in the Hockey Hall of Fame and everything else. And they really very much wanted to give Phil a franchise.

As it relates to me, it was, Who in the world is this? There weren’t any other women in the room except the waitresses that were bringing water and coffee and whatever. And there weren’t, the other teams—the other cities that were seeking franchises all had white men, and only men. And there was this woman in there [laughs]. So it was kind of, one of those really weird kind of things that I think, clearly the team, the franchise was awarded because of Phil Esposito. But I do think that it had some minimal impact, that here was this woman coming to make this pitch on behalf of her city. And had to get half a point or something as a result of that. And we got the hockey franchise. And we were not the favored group. And ultimately hockey came to Tampa Bay. [Laughs] But it was a strange, strange scenario with really strange bits and starts all along the way. And then getting the arena and everything else, very, very unusual.
RK: Do you have any recollection of how it ended up downtown? Because I know some other people had different locations in mind.

SF: Yeah. We had a spot on, on Dale Mabry that the, there was a group that had already gotten the land and were going to build a baseball arena or some kind of a facility out there. And they wanted to build the hockey arena on that site. So Phil entered into an agreement with them, and we gave them so much time to come up with the deal. It was on the Sports Authority land and everything.

Well they just never could do it. They, there was always a delay. They had every gimmick in the book going. They couldn’t get their financing and then the, they had some real fast talkers who were part of the group. And it was always something. Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. Well tomorrow, tomorrow wasn’t coming. And finally I remember bringing the group that, that had the land tied up into my office and saying, and I remember I said this, I knew I—I almost got in real trouble for it, or closest I ever came to personally being sued I think. I remember saying to the, the mouthpiece for the group, “If you don’t get this done by such and such a time, I’m going to send a moving truck to your house and make sure that you have to move out of town.” I remember I said that. It was just so aggravating.

And meanwhile, while all this was going on, these people are trying to put it together out there, there was a group that wanted to build it downtown. And I couldn’t—I thought downtown was a better location because it would help downtown and everything. It was near the, they were proposing a site near the Convention Center, but I knew that if I proposed it, since I was involved with the other aspect that then I would, this city would be in a law suit with them. So I was hoping they would fail, but I was saying, Okay now, if you’re going to do it, get on with and do it. Otherwise, we’re going to pack it in. And finally we packed it in, and I told them, “No more. Time’s out.”

And then we had to get the land downtown. And I went to Finn Casperson who was the developer of Harbour Island and I had a meeting, a private, very private meeting with all the parties involved, and Mr. Casperson and his lawyers and all. And, and I was the only woman, again, and there were about 10 or 12 people. And Fred Karl was the County administrator. I purposely did not invite Ed Turanchik who was a County Commissioner who was espousing the downtown site because he couldn’t speak for the County Commission. Plus I knew he would publicly talk about the meeting and everything, and I wanted this, to try and pull it off. And I had the meeting of all these people over dinner at the Harbour Island hotel, and I said, “look, we want to bring it downtown, you need”—I asked Mr. Casperson if he would buy some of the land that needed to be purchased for it—and then turn around at the right time, and sell it to the hockey thing, once they got their—I don’t remember the plan, but as a result of that, it came downtown.

And Mr. Casperson helped out. He bought a bunch of the parcels, because if the city had tried to buy it or the county, the price would have gone up and everything. He bought the parcel. The meeting did become public later on. Ed Turanchik went nuts, Why wasn’t I invited and everything? But it would never have worked had it become public early on.
And we got a great building downtown. And ultimately the team played there after a number of years playing at the fairgrounds, and then at Tropicana Field at St. Pete, and finally they got a home. And then ultimately won a Stanley Cup. But it was an interesting process. I do think it’s helped business downtown and it helped put that whole Convention Center, the space between the Convention Center and the Aquarium began to fill in as a result of these you know, big development blocks being taken care of.

RK: Can you tell us something about the Human Rights Ordinance controversy during your administration?

SF: The City of Tampa passed a Human Rights Ordinance that would ban discrimination based upon all types of discrimination including sexual orientation which was really the part that got everybody so fired up. The religious right was all worked up with petitions and hundreds of people turned out for public hearings. There was a lot of acrimony. And the County also was in the throes of passing a Human Rights Ordinance, and both the city and the county did ultimately pass the ordinances.

And then there was a move to repeal the ordinances. A minister who had somewhat of a checkered past named David Caton led the effort to repeal the Human Rights Ordinance. And again it was terribly heated, terribly—the sexual orientation part of the Human Rights Ordinance. And there was a public hearing held at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center where over 1000 people turned out. And because there was so much anger involved in it and so many protests, we had to set up police protection and we had to put people through metal detectors and some knives and I recall were confiscated. And people yelling and screaming at each other, and, and it was a very unpleasant time in Tampa’s past.

That issue really generates a lot of hostility on the part of some people. People who are homophobic and they believe that it’s against their religion and that people who are gay and lesbian should not have any, what they call, “special rights,” but what some of us call equal rights, you know, human rights—the same was women or African Americans or any other minority.

Fortunately the City Council determined that the Human Rights Ordinance should stay on the books and that the sexual orientation component should stay one with the remaining, with the entire ordinance. So we, today here in 2005 continue to have a Human Rights Ordinance in the City of Tampa. I’m proud of that because I think it says something about the community trying to learn to live together.

Unfortunately the County did remove the sexual orientation portion of the Human Rights Ordinance and it, it remains to this day very, very divided. As, we remain divided as a community over sexual orientation.

RK: Were gays and lesbians relatively well organized during the period that you served?

SF: They were an organized group. I wouldn’t say how well organized, but there was a
group—there is a group called Equality Florida which had a, a name, a different name at the time of the Human Rights Ordinance that was very involved and they played a major role in keeping the ordinance on the books. Because had they not been organized, and had petitions and had supporters to be there and support the cause, the religious right probably would have carried in today just because they turned out so many people. Which oftentimes affects politicians.

RK: Last time we did speak about race relations, but I think I forgot to ask you about your racial slurs policy. Can you mention that?

SF: After the disturbances in the city in late 1986, ‘87, and that time frame into ’88, I realized that there were city employees who discriminated against their fellow employees and citizens when they came in contact. We had instances in the police department where slurs would be made by police officers to one another, both racial and sexual. And also slurs to members of the community about police officers. And I knew that they weren’t the only group of people in the city, personnel to have some discriminatory remarks come out of their mouths—that we had other employees citywide.

So we instituted a policy called the “racial slur policy,” B1.2 I think was the term that it came to be referred by. And what this policy—and it never, never had occurred before in this city’s human resources area. But what this policy did was to require that any city employee who uttered a racial or sexual orientation slur be disciplined. And only in extenuating circumstances would that employee be allowed to continue being employed with the city. It was grounds for termination if it was found to be true. And it was a very, very—it was policy that an awful lot of city employees didn’t like, especially in the police department. They really didn’t like it—they were used to saying all kinds of things often in the heat of their job. But nevertheless they thought they could say anything. They used the N-word sometimes—had used the N-word sometimes, and oftentimes women were referred to in a less than proper fashion. And they really hated the policy. The police union didn’t like it and they fought it tooth and nail for the longest time, for years and years.

But as we began to administer the policy, and we found that there were quite a number of people who continued to make those kinds of remarks. And we disciplined and then terminated a number of people; we got people to understand that we meant business.

In one instance, it was a very unfortunate instance, we had a police major who was a fine, fine officer—Hispanic, who, when walking down the streets of Ybor City, I think it was perhaps on Guavaween night, or some other celebration in Ybor City night, he used the N-word and in the group that was walking with him was Joe Abrahams who was the director of, the administrator for Parks Recreational Cultural Services. And Joe was a good friend of this police major, his name was Gabe Venero. And Joe came back and was torn, really torn, that he had to report his friend using that word, and we had to fire him. And this was a major. This was a really high ranking officer and a really good guy. And I’m sure that he really didn’t mean anything by it, it was just something that came out, which he shouldn’t have used obviously but that wasn’t meant in a really derogatory way.
But nevertheless, we disciplined it, we fired him; he appealed it and he lost. And that really sent a message that we weren’t just talking about the rank and file in the police department, we were talking about anybody in the police department. And we disciplined a number of other people in various other departments throughout the city.

So it, it really got people’s attention. And I think it helped an awful lot. And I think the public recognized that we meant business, and that we really were going to take action, we weren’t going to tolerate people who discriminated against the members of the public or discriminated against their colleagues in city government. I think it did help to create better race relations in particular. And also it helped in terms of those in the gay community recognizing that we weren’t going to tolerate derogatory remarks made towards them. Women also felt, because women in, in many departments—but in particular the police department were oftentimes really put upon by the men and had all kinds of things said to them. And we disciplined people for that as well. So it was across the board.

The policy remains on the books of the City of Tampa to this day. You don’t hear much about it, and I’m not sure it’s administered very often. During the Greco years I don’t think it was administered too often. And I think there were reasons for that because there were people high up in the administration who actually used some of those terms and I think instead of disciplining, or certainly terminating people, I understand from some of the lawyers who were involved and others, that they would find it hard to make the case. Because then it would be brought to light that some very top level people used those terms. So I don’t know whether it’s—I know it’s still on the books—whether or not much action is taken against employees who, who use improper language. I don’t know, I’d like to believe that nobody does anymore but I know better than that.

RK: Another issue that received a lot of attention during your administration relatively early on involving the police was the take home car policy.

SF: That was probably the toughest decision I had to make and the one that I paid the highest price for in the almost nine years that I was the mayor. When I became the mayor I inherited, from the previous mayor, a 16 million dollar deficit. That was right up front—we had to find the money and we can’t have deficit spending in city government, you have to have a balanced budget. And so we set about finding ways that we could reduce that 16 million dollar deficit and make the budget balance.

One of the things we came upon was a study that the internal audit department had done, I think it was a year prior to my taking office, of the take home car policy that the police department had. The police officers were allowed to take home—all police officers virtually all police officers—their city vehicle, and they could take it anywhere that they lived in Hillsborough County. So people who paid the taxes and paid for those vehicles, who lived in the City of Tampa didn’t get the benefit of having those vehicles parked in the residential neighborhoods just in the city. The vehicles went all over Hillsborough County, and it was tremendous expense because not only was it the cost of the paying for the vehicles in the first place, and we had the cars—but it was gas, and insurance for all
of those vehicles. And if you drove from downtown Tampa where the police station was located and you drove every day to Plant City or Thonotosassa or way out [to] some [of the] farthest reaches of Hillsborough County, that could run, and did run up, a very significant gas bill. And then on top of that was the insurance coverage that we had to pay every time a car was used.

So it was a really high price and it was millions of dollars—I can’t remember—that the audit showed that we could save if we limited the take home cars. Well, we began to look at that and I knew it was going to be unpopular with the police department, I just never realized how unpopular. Plus I had a police chief who said he agreed with removing the take home car policy. And then went back to the troops and said, Oh no, I had nothing to do with it. And so there were a lot of things that made it more difficult. I recall going to breakfast one morning with the head of the PBA, the police union. His name was Bob Sheehan, and explaining to Bob that we had this 16 million dollar budget problem, and we needed to have more police officers, we were short on police officers—we need to hire more and we didn’t have any money to do that. And that one way that we could do that is if we took the take home cars. Then we would have some money freed up to hire additional police officers, and also to raise police officers salaries which were lower than the average in the state at that time.

And Bob Sheehan told me, and it was just the two of us, Bob Sheehan told me that he would prefer to have the police officers, additional police personnel rather than the take home cars. Well, he went back on his word when it was announced that we were going to take the cars from the officers and hire more police officers and raise their pay.

Additionally, we talked about, internally, staff; we talked about the possibility of allowing just the officers who lived in the city to keep their cars, because having their car in somebody’s driveway in a residential neighborhood would be a deterrent to crime. If somebody saw a police car there, they’d probably keep on going. And both the police chief and Bob Smith, who was the administrator for public safety over the police and fire department urged me not to do it just for the police officers who lived in the city because they thought that it would cause morale problems as well as problems—people saying they lived in the city and giving their mother in law’s address or something like that. And then finding out that they really didn’t, and the cars were going outside the city.

So I acquiesced and I went along with the police chief and, and the public safety director. And we took all of the cars from police officers. And to this day, I still have scars from that. And the police union never, ever was supportive again. And it, the officers talk about it even now, many years later. My successor, Dick Greco, promised immediately, before he even was the mayor, that everybody would get a car. And now the policy allows take home cars to five counties. You can take the cars not only throughout Hillsborough County but to Pinellas, Pasco, Manatee and Polk counties. So it is a very, very expensive policy, and a big perk to police officers. I used to joke that after that, the fire folks would want to take the fire trucks home. Of course that’s not really so [laughs]. But it, it is a very difficult, difficult policy. And I paid dearly for it. But I still think I did the right thing. Probably should not have listened, and should have allowed the ones in
the city to kept the cars. But the idea of having City of Tampa taxpayers money going to five counties, and having to pay for the gas and paying for the insurance—it is a huge, huge expenditure.

RK: People think of Ybor City in Tampa as an area that has changed dramatically over the past half century, that is, including the times that you became mayor. What was your policy perspective of—how did you view Ybor City and what did you, how did you envision it developing and what did you do?

SF: First of all, many people didn’t realize that I had some background in Ybor City because my father once had a jewelry story in Ybor City. And it was called the Gem Box, and he had that store for a number of years and then sold it to a dear friend. And I used to go to Ybor City as a child so I knew Ybor City. And when I came into office there were many forces—preservation people, business people, speculators, land investors, speculator types, as well as some residents. Everybody had a different view about what Ybor City should be. And Ybor City had pretty much been decimated because of urban renewal back in the ‘60s. And we tried very hard to figure out ways that we can improve the—

[End Tape 2, Side A]

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[Tape 2, Side B]

SF: We tried to find ways that we can improve the business climate and the entertainment climate and the historical preservation climate in Ybor City. But it was really, really difficult. And the main reason I think it was so difficult was because there were so many forces at work in Ybor City and they never could agree upon anything. There were the preservationists who wanted to preserve—and we did preserve many, many buildings there, but we had to make sure that we had public safety in mind for those.

Then there were the forces that wanted the bars and restaurants, the nightlife to be the only part of Ybor City. And we had lots and lots of people who came during that nine years who wanted wet zonings and alcoholic beverage zonings. Many more came even after that. Then there were the young people who wanted to have all the entertainment plus the tattoo parlors and the piercing, and that had a lot of businesses come in with that.

It was—Ybor City is in a unique geographical position because its kind of a gateway to downtown from the East, but also it’s housed between the Port and what was then public housing and an area that was [a] high crime area. And Ybor City had been a high crime area as well. So that was always a problem about how to curtail crime and how to deal with the criminal element. And of course we had a lot of crack cocaine and drug problems during the time I was the mayor. There were just so many forces at work.

And then we had the forces that wanted the city to put in the trolley, and they wanted to see it—there was never—you did one thing and then it, the next day, they said, What can
you do for me today? It was always a problem when we spent millions of dollars in, in physical improvements and the lighting and the decorative sidewalks and that was never enough. Ybor City just remained a problem always. And it continues to remain a problem. I think it’s, it’s way, way, too wet zoned—too much alcohol in Ybor City; too many kids. There continues to be crime problems.

And then of course, we always had so many festivals and, and the night parade in Ybor City and then Guavaween which was—we’d have 200,000 people there making a terrible mess until four in the morning. And police officers didn’t even want to work in Ybor City. I would go to some of the events and they’d have to set up a command post and dozens of people would always be arrested, and it was [a] frightening place. I urged my kids never to go down there because I knew the, the problems that occurred. And it remains a challenge. There are just many, many forces at work in Ybor City to this day that can’t develop a vision that everybody buys into and therefore it just goes off in a million directions.

RK: There’s an Ybor City Development Corporation? That might be the name. Did you establish that or did you work with them?

SF: Yes. We had, I think it was established shortly before I became the mayor but it really got active—and the mayor makes appointments to it. And their job was to help the development aspects of Ybor city to look for new development to try to work with the preservation folks with that development and just be kind of a liaison between all of those forces. But they too were another interest group if you will. You’d have Ybor City Development Corporation, you’d have Ybor City Chamber of Commerce, you’d have the, the preservationists. Then there were residents who continued to live in Ybor City and they were a voice that we wanted to hear from. There were just so many different interest groups all competing for limited funds, all with a different idea of what should be done in Ybor City.

And we tried to get our arms around them and bring them together, and once in a while we were successful. But then, all of a sudden, they’d go off in their own directions again. And that, as I talked to people and as I read the newspapers and everything, it still goes on today. So it’s a difficult thing—it’s, it’s a very unique place and everybody believes it should be something different. Many people thought it ought to be like the French Quarter in New Orleans. And frankly, Bourbon Street isn’t much of a place as far as I’m concerned, and a lot of people are concerned. But Ybor City in many respects has turned into a lot of that with the drinking, and the carousing that takes place.

And then there were a lot of people who used to laugh because they had such an idealized view of what Ybor City was many years ago. And having gone there as a child and as a teenager and as an adult, and my father having a business there and spending so much time there because of that, it wasn’t the same Ybor City that I remember. But that frequently occurs, you know, that, that, vision that so idealized over time. So it remains a challenge.
RK: You mentioned preservationists. You had a issue arise regarding the effort to preserve a couple of buildings owned by the Lykes Brothers businesses.

SF: Oh yeah. That was downtown Tampa. And Lykes has been a prominent family here for well over a hundred years. And they had enormous business interests. And the head of the Lykes family at that time was Tom Rankin. Tom’s a nice guy but he is not too great on public relations. And one day he and the Lykes attorney and a Lykes family member, a distant family relative by marriage, Dave Kerr came to see me. And they sat in my office and we talked and then Tom told me he wanted to knock down the building in downtown Tampa that Wolf Brothers was in—Wolf Brothers was an old and distinguished men’s and ladies clothing store. And it was the first bank building I think in Tampa. And the building above Wolf Brothers was vacant and the building was old. And it actually—two buildings that were attached, and next to it was a parking lot. And he came and said that they wanted to knock that down.

They had just been through a very, very lengthy, expensive and acrimonious fight over some property that they had south of here, agricultural property, rural property called Fisheating Creek. And that property had been, they wanted to close off a portion of the creek and, and residents and other interests didn’t want it, and it went on for years and was very expensive. And finally a settlement was reached with the Florida cabinet and everything. I don’t remember all the particulars but they, they had not handled that very well. And they were really the bad guys in environmentalist minds and property owners minds—other property owners minds. Whether they were or not, I don’t know but they didn’t handle it well.

And I remember telling Tom and Dave, if you want to knock down that building—those two buildings, and you just want to add to the parking lot, you are going to have a real fight on your hands. Because preservationists viewed those buildings as being ones that should be preserved. And I thought they should be preserved, at least one of them. And I, I asked what they intended to do long range, and they said that they, long range, they would have a parking lot for some years. But then long range they would put the Lykes headquarters, a new building on that property. And I said, “Well I think maybe, maybe you might be successful getting permission to knock down the property if you announce what you were going to do with the whole thing, and then actually built the building.” I mean, we were looking for development and this, Lykes had a very, very big worldwide presence in those days. And I guess this was in about ’93, ’93 or ’94. Not too long before I left office. And I said, then I thought maybe some people would come to their side, but just to build another parking lot in downtown Tampa, just to knock down buildings, I didn’t think they were going to be successful, and we would have to oppose it.

And I also offered some suggestions for them as to what they could do with the building until they were ready to knock it down and replace it with their, the world headquarters for Lykes. Arts groups were looking for space, and the Lykes family, Louise Ferguson in particular, Louise Lykes Ferguson in particular for whom Ferguson Hall—Louise Ferguson Hall at the Performing Arts Center is named, had a long history in the arts in Tampa. And I thought that members of the Lykes family would really be supported at
least for a time being, allowing some of the arts groups to pay a nominal rent and use the building for their offices. Arts groups always are struggling, and other nonprofits as well. And they were looking for a home where they could kind of combine all of these arts groups in one building and share secretarial help and, and various costs could be contained.

Tom said he didn’t like that at all. That didn’t make any sense to him. He wanted to knock down the building, and he was adamant about it. And I said, “well you’re going to have a real fight on your hands. And you don’t know what you’re up against.” Because I knew everybody would come out of the woodwork about it. And he was bound and determined to go forward. And they did and when I left office, we were still in the throes of a lawsuit—the architectural review board, and the historic preservation board had both determined that the building should be saved and they couldn’t be knocked down just by getting a demolition permit. And off we went. And there was a big lawsuit and it was really acrimonious and it went on and on. And there were some really heavy handed things that occurred. An architect who was on the architectural review board was fired from a job that the Lykes family was involved in, and things like that that took place.

They ultimately were successful—money does talk. In the Greco administration they brokered a deal and with the help of the downtown development authority. And there’s a beautiful park there now. But there was a building that should have been saved I think. And it certainly wasn’t handled well and it’s a lesson in bad public relations by an often time community minded family. And the family was very divided. I had members of the family who apologized to me for the way the thing was brought about. They didn’t, didn’t much like the way it was handled. But Tom Rankin didn’t listen to anybody including some of his closest advisors.

RK: The Lykes brothers were a longstanding Tampa family going back generations. A newer business person in Tampa is George Steinbrenner, who’s nationally known. Did you have any dealings with him?

SF: Many, many dealings with George. I met him when he first came to town and he is a Doctor Jekyll, Mr. Hyde. He can be, in the course of a minute, he can be the most charming individual you’ve ever met and 20 seconds later he can just be one of the most miserable people, and a bully. So there were [an] awful lot of occasions that I had to deal with George.

[Phone Rings, tape paused]

SF: I had a lot of dealings with George Steinbrenner from the time he came to Tampa and as I said he could be schizophrenic. I remember once, one of the nicest memories I have of George is we were, my husband and I were once on a plane going to New York. And George was sitting right in front of us on the plane and a young boy, I guess about 10 years old got on the plane, his mother was with him, and she was crying. And it was apparent that it was a, that the visit was going to visit his dad—the parents were divorced or separated or whatever. And maybe it was the first time the child had been on the plane,
and he sat down next to George, and the stewardess was taking care of him, the, and telling him to be calm and helping him after the mother got off the plane. And George started talking to him and was as nice as he could be. And he had been talking to us and back and forth, and I was kind of sitting back and watching, and how, how really good with the child that George could be. And then, and then the boy threw up [laughs]. And George didn’t miss a trick, he helped, I think it was even on him a little bit. And he comforted the kid, and he was just as good as he was, could be. He was, George was going to Roger Maris’s funeral in New York. And he signed an autograph for the boy. The boy, apparently the stewardess told him who, who was sitting next to him, and he, and George took his name and, and his address and everything; was going to send him some baseball memorabilia and everything. But he was just wonderful.

On other occasions though, George could be really a tyrant. And he treated his employees terribly, and it was abusive sometimes, sometimes it could be very charming. I remember two other occasions—we were trying to build a hotel in downtown Tampa, we were trying to get a hotel very badly, and we had, we had a request for proposals out to various developers who submitted proposals. And then we were going to make a selection. And as part of the proposal those who gave us the proposals they had to give us $100,000 non-refundable check that was going to cover the cost of all the things that the city had to pay for and, and expenditures and everything so we weren’t out of pocket money. And George and his group were the winning proposal. A fellow named Ronnie Moore owned the property, a local person—long time insurance man. And George partnered with Ronnie Moore. And then we began to negotiate. And we could never reach a deal on the negotiations.

And I remember late into the night once, finally was in Mike Fogarty’s office, Mike was the City Attorney, and we were really trying to reach an agreement, but George was just too difficult to deal with. And he would keep changing the, terms and everything. So finally I told him that all negotiations were over, and we weren’t going to go forward. Well, he was fit to be tied. And he wanted his money back. And it was very clear in the proposals, our requests for bids that these were non-refundable to—they were going to cover all of the costs of the lawyers and the people who were working on our side to get this deal.

Well, George, I think to this day probably still talks about the fact that I did him out of $100,000. And it was very clear but for years after that he talked about it to people at cocktail parties. Every time he’d see me, he’d say, I want my $100,000 back. And it went on and on, it wasn’t real pleasant to deal with.

On another occasion George lived in Beach Park and he lived across the street from a canal. Not really waterfront property, but property that you could have a boat on. And George wanted to build a boathouse and a dock for his boat on city owned property across the street from his house. Well we had an ordinance on the books that said that—that hadn’t been on the books very long—that said that people could not build docks or boathouses on city owned property. Years ago we had had people just go out and build on
city owned property and we had all these derelict buildings and docks that we had to
contend with and we wanted to stop that.

So a couple years before this we had passed such an ordinance and George was bound
and determined that he wanted to build this, this dock. And I kept saying, George if you
want to build the dock, you have to go to City Council and you have to get them to
change the ordinance, because we can’t allow somebody else not to build a dock and
allow you to build a dock. And he was furious about it because he said he’d donated so
much money to different charities, and he had done so much for the city and he was
going to go back to Cleveland. And he was ranting and raving and—he really carried on
and we, I kept saying, “No, you can’t do it.”

So one day he called me at my office, and it was, I think it was about 11:00 in the
morning and this was the final day that I was to tell him that he could not build the dock.
And he really let loose. Four letter words of all types, and he was screaming at me. And I
just kind of figured George’s mother hadn’t spanked him often enough. And particularly
in dealing with women—George, I thought he, he was just trying to bully me because I
was a woman. And I wasn’t going to deal with it. So I was yelling right back at him. And I
remember all of my staff people, because I always had the door to my office open—the
staff had their offices in various places close by. They came running in to see what was
the matter, they thought something was wrong. I remember Bob Buckhorn coming in,
George Pennington, and, and they all came running in and heard me yelling and
screaming and realized who I was talking to. And finally I said, “George you cannot do
it.” And I hung up on him. And he, I mean he was really abusive, really abusive, I won’t
use the language.

A little while later his then son-in-law, Joe Malloy called me up and apologized because
he had been in, in George’s office when George was calling and he was just appalled that
he would talk to me that way. And he just gave me his personal apology, not George’s
apology. So at, the day went on, and at about 4:30 that afternoon, Glenn Permuy, who
was then the director of the Boys and Girls Club of Tampa called me. And he was beside
Tonight is the Steak and Burger Dinner”—which is a big, big event to raise money for
the Boys and Girls Club. And Mr. Steinbrenner is going, has agreed to underwrite the
cost of the dinner which is about 25,000 dollars, and there are going to be 1000 people
there. But he, Mr. Steinbrenner has called and said, if you come to the dinner—and I
always did go to the dinner, and gave out some awards and things like that on behalf of
the Boys and Girls Club—if I came to the dinner, he would not pay for the cost of the
dinner. And Glenn didn’t know what to do. They certainly didn’t have 25,000 dollars to
write a check to the Hyatt Hotel, it was downtown—the downtown Hyatt Hotel, where
the dinner was being held in the ballroom. And he didn’t know what to do. And he said,
What should I do? And he was, I think he was kind of saying, Please stay home, you
know, don’t come. And I said, “Well, Glenn, I’m not going to be bullied, I’m going to
come to the dinner. I’m going to be there a little late, because I had someplace else I had
to be. I’m going to come to the dinner, and I don’t know what’s going to happen, but
that’s just the way it has to be.”
So I went to the other event that I had to go to, and I remember getting there a little late. And the ballroom was filled, the kids were at the tables with the grown ups, 1000 people or more there. The kids eat steak and the grown ups eat burgers at this dinner. And that’s why it’s called steak and burger dinner. And the head table was up at the you know, on a dais, and at this particular night, George Steinbrenner had brought in Donald Trump to be the speaker—and I’ll mention that at the end of the story—to be the speaker. And so the dignitaries were up at the head table and I walked in and walked up to my table, which was right by the head table. And he saw, Steinbrenner saw me, and just, if looks could kill, he, I mean, he was just red faced, he didn’t know what to do. And I looked at him, kind of nodded, I went—the evening went on. And I got up and presented the awards and the things that I had to do and everything. And then at the close of the evening, after the speeches and everything, Glenn Permuy got up and announced, and thanked Joanne Steinbrenner, George’s wife, for underwriting the dinner. George had gotten around his commitment by not doing it himself, he put it in his wife’s name, you know, so he saved face as far as he was concerned. And fortunately the Boys and Girls Club didn’t lose 25,000 dollars.

On that night, Donald Trump, as I said was the speaker. And we were, the United States was in a trade war with Japan that night—during that time. And for some unknown reason, I have, to this day don’t understand why, Trump decided to talk about that trade war and the economic situation with Japan in front of those kids. And this is Boys and Girls Club stuff. And, and it was really one of the most unpleasant nights and dinners I ever went to because of that. He spoke of the Japanese in really derogatory terms, kept calling them Japs, using four letter words in front of the children. And I just, you could see the adults were kind of, wanting to disappear. The kids didn’t know what was being talked about, I mean it was above their heads, most of them, talking about the trade problems, and, and—it was really, really unpleasant night. And that was my limit of the experience with Donald Trump.

RK: You mentioned that the hotel deal didn’t go through with Mr. Steinbrenner and I know during your administration, you didn’t get the hotel to serve the Convention Center. But as far as downtown more generally is concerned, what would be the major positives that you saw during your administration?

SF: I think there were several. First of all we built the Performing Arts Center, a wonderful facility that has brought a lot of people to downtown. And struggled in the beginning but it has enriched the total life of the Bay area. And people have come to downtown who have never been there before. I think some of the hotels around the Performing Arts Center there was a Residence Inn and then a Courtyard by Marriott. And they would not have occurred if the Performing Arts Center had not been there and generated the need.

We built the federal courthouse, and I spent a lot of time working with the Federal Government on the Sam Gibbons Courthouse. The federal building, and that was an interesting project, learned some lessons there in dealing with judges—federal judges
who were going to have their way and the high ceilings that you see in courthouses, no matter what the expense. Because those were expensive—that was an expensive building, way over budget because of those high ceilings and some of the things the judges wanted and that wouldn’t give up. And then, of course, the Convention Center, which has brought many, many people to Tampa, who otherwise wouldn’t have been there. We wouldn’t have been able to get Super Bowls, and a lot of other good things.

Harbour Island was developed pretty much during the time I was the mayor. There had been too many in my mind, changes to the plan of Harbour Island. And all of the greens space has been taken over by development. But it, it is a good development and allows a lot of people to live downtown.

We started the cruise ships downtown, we finally convinced—I think I was the one primarily that convinced the port, the Port Authority and the port administration that with all the land that they had, there could be other uses that would be compatible with the port that would be more community oriented, than just port uses. So we had the cruise ship terminals as a result of that. We got the, obviously the Aquarium is built in the port area, and I think that’s a big enhancement, so there have been a lot of positive things. We didn’t get to do everything that we wanted to, but we did a lot of them.

RK: Was any residential built downtown during your administration?

SF: We worked on residential for a long time, and one of the problems with residential was—and, and I think it’s only been in the last couple years has it worked—is all the property owners wanted too much for their land and you couldn’t put residential together. We did start the whole effort to redevelop Tampa Heights, which has been an asset to downtown. Closed-in living area with the old brick streets and the old Victorian houses oftentimes, and so that redevelopment really started with my administration. And we did an awful lot to clean up that area. The, the central city Y [YMCA] was built when I was the mayor. And that has helped on the north side of downtown. Just so, it, it’s—you know, these are ongoing things that they—downtown’s continuously evolved, and market conditions oftentimes are what you know, allow them to evolve. The residential that’s coming into play is a result of the market conditions really.

RK: Were you able to get funding for the Riverwalk or any part of the Riverwalk?

SF: Oh, we did part of the Riverwalk. We did the Riverwalk behind the, the Convention Center—the Riverwalk is beautiful around there. We did the Riverwalk at Performing Arts Center, that area. So we did some of the Riverwalk, and then, and then over by the Aquarium. I neglected to mention the St. Pete Times Forum came about—we didn’t break ground while I was the mayor, we broke ground shortly thereafter, but the whole concept and the whole deal was negotiated and put together during my tenure. And that’s enhanced downtown tremendously. So, we, we built some of the Riverwalk. It’s been a, everybody’s—I for a long time, it’s expensive to do and a lot of the landowners didn’t want to allow it to be done.
We passed the downtown plan which I’m pleased that we did, and which we had never done. Downtown, when I became the mayor, it was the only part of the City of Tampa that did not have a plan. It was just being allowed to develop and redevelop willie nillie. And I put together a group of downtown business owners, downtown—the President of TECO and other people—people who had an interest in downtown to help advise and develop a plan, along with Roger Wehling who was the staff director of that committee. And we developed a downtown plan, which to this day is still in existence and is used.

And as results of that plan, a lot of the things that are coming into play now are, are coming into fruition. Some of the developers fought some of that. We wanted more open space, and we wanted access to the river. And Riverwalk to be developed on the private property so that we wouldn’t have to develop the whole thing. And some of it has occurred and some of it hasn’t.

RK: I’d like to ask one other business person, I don’t know if you had any dealings with him or not, but he’s relatively well known, Joe Redner, who owns several, I suppose X-rated clubs. He certainly has made a name for himself. Did he ever have any dealings with you?

SF: I had dealings with Joe Redner, not face to face too often. But he, I first met him when I was on the City Council. And he would come to City Council meetings for one reason or another, and he was always suing the city, and that was one of the things. He was always a gentleman, always a gentleman to me personally. He’s a very bright individual; I think he’s underestimated by many people. We sued him when I was the mayor—he wanted to do certain things sometimes that we didn’t think were appropriate. So I’m not saying I’m a supporter of his, but I, I don’t think he’s the devil incarnate either. He, he sees a business opportunity and there’s a demand, and he’s going to supply it. But I think he has been underestimated by many—most people really, because he’s bright, he’s articulate and obviously he has some money to put behind it. And he’s done some good things with his money and helping the city and little parks and things like that that people don’t know about. So I don’t think he’s, he’s certainly not a friend of mine, but we’ve—we go in different circles. But, he, he’s not quite as bad as I think he sometimes reported to be.

RK: How do you think the newspapers treated your administration? You think they were fair and objective?

SF: I think I got a pretty fair shake from, from the newspapers. The St. Pete Times I think I got a fair shake from all the time. And I got a pretty fair shake from the Tampa Tribune until Doyle Harvill came to be the publisher of the Tribune. And Doyle was a good old boy—is a good old boy. He called me, his name for me was “the skirt.” He’s definitely sexist, and he would call me the skirt around the newsroom. I know that he brought Daniel Ruth to the newspaper and created him in his own image, if you will. He had known Ruth before when he had been at the old Tampa Times. And from that day forward I got a hard time. And, and he actually, on one occasion told me, “don’t ever try to do anything without talking to me first”—Harvill. He gave his employees a terrible
time, and the newspaper took several years to recover after he left the paper. They lost a lot of good people and, and they really had a poor reputation. But from that time on when he came to the paper I, I didn’t, I don’t think I got treated fairly.

The only one at the St. Pete Times whoever didn’t treat me, I didn’t think, very well was a columnist named Mary Jo Malone, who—she just had an awful lot of trouble with anybody who had any authority [laughs].

RK: Do you remember any issue in particular where the Tribune was very critical of you?

SF: Daniel Ruth would write one or two columns about me a week, he had all kinds of names for me. And he belittles people in his columns. Sometimes—he’s, he’s not a dumb fellow, he’s a bright fellow, but he thinks he’s really cute, and gives people names and, and is kind of mean spirited I think. And they just would give me a hard time pretty much on most everything.

RK: Your predecessor in office was Mayor Bob Martinez who became Governor of the State of Florida. Did that in anyway help Tampa? His being governor, as—or hurt us—given that he became a Republican and you were a Democrat for example?

SF: Well I don’t think it had, had anything to do with me being a Democrat and he being a Republican. But he didn’t really help us. I don’t think there was any, ever a time that we asked him to do anything, that he did it. But we didn’t ask much.

I have a belief that city government should pretty much stand on its own, with rare occasion go to the legislature. And when you go, you better go for really, really good reason—or to the state. And that’s—most democratic mayors go often, with hat in hand—I don’t think you should do that. And I, I oftentimes with the other mayors around the country, differed with him.

Actually Bill Clinton—this is [to] digress for a second—Bill Clinton put me on the platform committee for the Democratic National Platform in ’92 because the mayors—and I was a part of the mayors—the US Conference of Mayors—came with a huge, huge request to be put in that platform. And, and he knew that I didn’t agree with it. It was, it was really hat in hand—give us a handout, and billions of dollars. And I, along with some others were there to stop that from going into the platform because then he would have had to have to try to produce it. And he wasn’t supportive of it, and we did stop it.

But, so I didn’t—we didn’t go to Tallahassee for very many things. It’s more prevalent today, they go for lots more funding and pension changes and all kinds of local bills. We, we really kept that to a minimum during the time I was the mayor, so there really weren’t times where Martinez you know, helped us.

On the other hand, he could have helped us a lot, just as being the governor and, and saying, Would you like—? You know, for his hometown. But he never did that either. I think he, he knew he was the governor, he wanted to remain the governor, he didn’t want
to be criticized for giving more to the Tampa Bay area than other areas. So, we, we never got and we rarely asked.

RK: You mentioned President Clinton—I know that you endorsed him around 1991, is that true?

SF: Yes. I was the first mayor in the country actually to endorse him.

RK: Can you say something about your experience with the Clinton administration? With the—

SF: I met Bill Clinton—well, I had met him a couple of years earlier when he had come to the state convention and spoke and, or somewhere I met him, I don’t remember. But then I met him in, in ’91, yeah, ’91 I guess it was. And really liked him, and thought he was very bright and articulate and had that charisma factor that I thought he—just so personable. And so when he, we were talking before he announced he was running for mayor—I mean for president [laughs]. And then when he announced, he contacted me and asked, he came—I think he came to Tampa four days after he announced that he was going to run for president. And nobody knew who Bill Clinton was. He was the mayor—I keep saying then he was the president—he was the governor of a small state, Arkansas, and who knew who he was.

So he came to Tampa and he wanted to visit a school that had a lot of kids at risk. He only had a fellow named Craig Smith with him who was his chief of staff in Arkansas and was going to be one of his principal people in the presidential campaign. And there were no secret service, there were no camera people, there were no newspaper people—nobody paid any attention to him. George Bush, the elder, was president and I think at that point of his, he was at like 94% approval rating. The Gulf War and all that was going on. And Clinton looked like he was touting a, jousting at windmills. But anyway, he came and I took him to Alexander Elementary School, and I knew one of the teachers there. And she said, “Sure, come to my class.” And she taught kids at risk, and most of that school, I think about 80% of the students at that particular school were at risk, and were on the, the school lunch program, the breakfast program, and all that. And it was, it was really a funny day.

He came and we went to the classroom, and we walked in the classroom, we looked up at the blackboard, and over the blackboard was a big banner computer aided, designed banner that said, Welcome Bob Clinton! And he started to laugh, he really thought it was funny—I think other people lesser people, who didn’t have that kind of self-deprecating humor that he has would have been upset, oh dear. But he thought it was really funny. And the teacher really didn’t know who he was either. She was doing me a favor. And so he talked to the kids and, and talked about, he was going to run for president, what he did, he had a lot of exchange with the kids. And talked about, asked them about their lives, and school, and I remember the one thing he stressed was staying in school and getting a good education. And we, we came out and there was one reporter from Channel 8, Diane Pertmer was there with the camera. And she did a little interview and he never forgot
that. He actually invited that teacher to his inauguration, his first inauguration, and she went with her parents. And he saw her several times after that. And always remember[ed] her, and always mentioned that incident. He has a remarkable memory, absolutely remarkable, and he remembered it. And we laughed about it many times after that when I’d be in Washington, or he’d come to Tampa or something. He’d always ask about that school and, You remember the day that they had the banner that said, “Welcome Bob Clinton!” He’s quite a unique individual.

RK: Did he appoint you to any type of commissions?

SF: Oh yeah. I don’t know why. I, he, he really was appreciative for, for the fact that I endorsed him so early on. And he would call sometimes or he’d, I would see him in Washington and he invited me to come to Washington. I had to go to Washington once, and he asked me to stay in, in the White House and sleep over in the Lincoln bedroom, which was a real treat. I was up all night but it was a real treat—it was a, I think it was in July, it was hot, and for some reason they had an electric blanket on the bed [laughs], and I couldn’t turn it off—I just couldn’t turn it off. I wasn’t too familiar with electric blankets. And so I didn’t sleep with any covers in this hot bed. And there was an old ancient clock on the mantle in the Lincoln bedroom that was like a metronome, it would go, [makes ticking noises] all night long—so I really didn’t sleep a wink [laughs] that night. But I remember getting up in the middle of the night and reading the Gettysburg Address, which is, in, in that room. One of the signed copies is there in the desk. It was funny.

But anyway, he did appoint me to a commission that was to try to figure out solutions to the problem of the entitlements and, and taxation. It was the National Commission on Entitlements and Taxation, a big long name. And it was to deal with solving social security—and this was [laughs], way back and we’re still trying to solve it—and Medicare and Medicaid, and taxation in general. And how we’re going to generate the revenue to come up with this.

And he appointed some of the members, and Republicans and Democrats from the Congress were other members. And it was an even balance of Democrats and Republicans and it was pretty clear, from the very first day that not much was going to get done by this commission. John Danforth was a co-chair, the co-chair, and Bob Kerry, who was then the Senator from Nebraska, was the co-chairman. And everybody staked out their claim really early on. And it was so frustrating to have to go to Washington and be curtailed in what you could ask the people who were testifying before the committee. I remember Alan Greenspan being there one-day and we weren’t allowed to ask him his particular view on what we should do with, with social security, how we should solve it. We could only ask him a particular question you know. But not very pointed—we couldn’t get into—and they, you could always see that, that things were never going to get solved by the commission. Or any of these problems. And to this day, all three of those haven’t been solved because of the partisan nature of it.
It was a really frustrating thing. I remember when Leon Panetta called me, Panetta was Clinton’s chief of staff. And he called me, and he said, “This is Leon Panetta,” and I didn’t believe it at first, and, and then we talked and he said, “The President would like you to serve on this commission.” And I thought, Oh boy, that will really be neat, we can get something done. Well, it was the first meeting and I realized we probably had a dozen meetings, and they were all day sessions and, and we had all these experts testifying. But you knew pretty quickly that it was just another one of those things that was more window dressing than anything else because partisan Washington had taken over. And what, even the final report that was drafted was so wishy-washy that it really didn’t say anything of value.

RK: Did you meet any foreign heads of state while you were mayor?

SF: I did meet a few while I was overseas, and I was honored to go with a group of mayors to Israel. The mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek had this, he was the mayor for over 30 years. And he would invite a dozen or so mayors from around the world every year to come to Jerusalem for a week and come to Israel for a week. And it was part good-will, and meeting people from around the world who were colleagues, but also to show what Israel had done. And when, when I was in Israel we met with the prime minister, and the president, [Yitzhak] Rabin was in power, and Shimon Peres and Benjamin Netanyahu, who was to become the Prime Minister. He was the opposition party but he met with us.

And then in, in Prague, on a trade mission I remember being in the square and being introduced to [Vaclav] Havel, who was, had just become the president because they had just overthrown the yolk of the Soviet Union. The Queen of England came to Tampa once. [Laughs]

RK: What was that like?

SF: Well first of all she, about six months after the Gulf War, we got a contact from the Queen, the Queens secretary, or the secret service type person. And they said that the Queen wanted to come and come to MacDill. She wanted to knight Schwarzkopf, and she wanted to come here. And so we began this elaborate secret planning that went on for months and months—six months it went on. And her emissaries would come over in the dead of the night practically, because nobody was supposed to know she was coming. And we would do all this planning and, and everything.

And then before she came, she invited Mike and I down to, Mike and me down to her yacht—which was more like a barge, the Britannia, to have dinner, at a dinner party in Miami which was her first stop after leaving Washington. She’d come to meet with Clinton I guess. And I don’t remember whether it was, it was Clinton or Bush. It was Bush actually who was the president at the time. And so we flew down to Miami and we had dinner on board her yacht, and it was a very elaborate thing, and long gowns, and she was wearing a tiara, and, and the whole thing. And the yacht is really an old barge. And the Reagans were there, and Gerry Ford was there, and his wife, and Jimmy Carter and
Rosalyn Carter were there—I had met them several times before as well. And then after that dinner she took the yacht and came around Florida, stopped in Key West and whatever, came around. A couple of days later came to Tampa.

And she came to Harbour Island, the yacht docked at Harbour Island, which isn’t as developed as Harbour Island—wasn’t as developed as Harbour Island is today but had some of the hotel was there and some development. And it was raining, drizzling that day when they docked. We had all these school children there to greet her with flowers and everything. And she walked among everybody and shook hands, and then, and then she was going to come downtown to walk along what we called the esplanade between the city’s center building, the Hyatt Hotel and across the street from City Hall. And I was supposed to meet her there and greet her and walk with her and everything.

Well, the rain let up and the sun came out and her limousine pulled up across from City Hall right at the entrance to the esplanade. And I was waiting for her, and no umbrellas or anything. And I remember that as she got out of the car, and the sun was shining, and she leaned back in, not a very graceful position, and brought out her umbrella. And I said to her, and she had her handbag with her, and I said to her, “You won’t be needing that because the sun is out now.” And she said, “One never knows.” And so she carried her umbrella and her handbag and walked through the throngs of people that were there to greet her and everything, with Prince Philip walking behind her, and I was walking beside her.

And then after that we had a reception for her over at the University of Tampa. And in the ballroom—

[phone rings]

SF: We, we had a reception for her and a receiving line and everything at the University of Tampa. And we had a lot of the local business people and government officials and all. And presented her with, we had had, a glass artist—and we have to give gifts to the Queen. She puts them all in a warehouse or something, but this is what we were told. We had to present her with a gift and she would give us a gift or something. And we gave her a beautiful crystal palm tree that we had had fashioned for her by this glass artist named Hans Fräbel, who I happened to know of, and Jimmy Carter used him for a lot of presidential gifts. And he was there to help present it to her—the artist and everything. And it was very nice.

And then she went to, on a motorcade down the Bayshore to MacDill and she knighted Schwarzkopf in a private ceremony there. And then, and I went along, and people were lined up on the Bayshore waving to the Queen with American flags, British flags, and it was quite unusual for you know, a city the size of Tampa. And then after she knighted Schwarzkopf, there was a little ceremony or whatever and then she—the Concorde was there to take her back. And she went back to Britain.
RK: Did you ever hear from her again?

SF: I did. I got a letter with a little bracelet with the crest or whatever—not a valuable piece, I’m sure they’re produced by the hundreds if not thousands, but I still have that.

RK: What is the “sister cities” program that Tampa’s involved with?

SF: The sister city program was started I think under Eisenhower, many, many years ago where cities in this country, in America would learn more and pair with cities abroad and they would have exchanges, cultural exchanges, business exchanges, whatever worked for them. And Tampa has, had I think Barranquilla, Columbia was a sister city when I became the mayor. Perhaps one other.

And then during the time I was the mayor we had a very active sister city committee and a group came to me, first wanting to pair with Oviedo, Spain which was is in Northern Spain in the Asturias province where many Tampans, Spanish families from Tampa, their ancestors had come from. And, and we worked out a sister city program with Oviedo, and I went with a group from Tampa of about 30 or 40 people I guess to sign the documents—it’s a whole process that’s dictated by the Sister City International Committee—it’s worldwide now. And we spent a week touring the province, meeting with government leaders, meeting, meeting business leaders, cultural exchange type things. And hooking up—if you will, people to people, and learning more about each other. And then they sent a group to Tampa, you know the two mayors meet and the mayor came here with a group.

And that has continued as a very active sister city relationship to this day. In fact recently, about 100 people went to Oviedo and they have sent dance troops and other cultural groups here. And I think there have been some business relationships developed as well.

And then we did a, there was another group that was interested in having a sister city relationship with a city in Sicily, very close to the towns where many of the Italian families in Tampa had come from. And this city was, is called Agrigento. Very much like Tampa, it’s a port city, beautiful city. And I went there for the sister city signing and they have come here; and back and forth again. And many families from Tampa, Italian families came from two cities, small little villages nearby—Alessandria della Rocca and, I can’t think of the third, the, the other one—the—

RK: Was it Santo Stefano.

SF: Stefano. And so we went to those little villages and, and some of the people who were with us saw their aunts and uncles and great aunts and grandparents and things like that. So that was very neat. And, and then there was a third one that we developed with Le Havre in France—again, a port. And we took a trip with a group of people who, of, many of French ancestry who came from villages nearby there, and some people who had business dealings and knew of Le Havre. And we also entered into a sister city relationship. I think all of those remain active.
And additional ones, one in Turkey, which we began working on before I left office, and I think there were one or two more since then. One in Mexico—Vera Cruz I think. And perhaps one other.

RK: Can I ask some general questions about changes in Tampa during your administration? How would you characterize the economy? We historically have been a manufacturing town, now of course, we’re not. Can you express any general trends that you noticed?

SF: Well during the time that I was the mayor we suffered through two very severe recessions. And we got hit harder than we usually had gotten hit here. The housing industry was just at a real low at one point and fortunately we had our challenge fund to offset some of that, and keep some of those people working.

Interest rates, I remember were in double digits, so there was very little development occurring because you couldn’t get money to help finance it. So we were always struggling financially as a city—city government was, because of the poor economy—and business was suffering. We, we were shifting from the manufacturing; we had lost a lot of the manufacturing. The cigar factories were closing and, and many of the things. And the Chamber of Commerce folks were, they were forever having studies done as to what we should be looking for, what kind of business and development and everything. And we started going after these call centers, and we’ve got a lot of those here. They pay better than what we used to pay but we still don’t have any Fortune 500 companies, we, we don’t have—

We had a big shift from the local banks that were homegrown people to banks being bought out by the big national banks, and not having any really, people who had a stake in the community running the banks. That shifted completely during the, the almost ten years that I was the mayor—those nine years.

And then Tampa Electric had a change of leadership. We had always had people in Tampa Electric who had lived here and Tampa Electric, H.L. Culbreath retired and became the Chairman of the Board, but for all intents and purposes retired the day-to-day operation. And they brought in someone from the outside—Tim Guzzle, who didn’t know the community and took a long time to learn the community. And [he] then developed poor health and had problems, health problems. So we lost a lot of leadership because of the change in the economy, the change in businesses.

During the time that I was the mayor, there were five presidents of General Telephone, five. So you really couldn’t—and it’s not even General Telephone now, it’s Verizon—you really couldn’t get these people, they didn’t know the community, they had to learn their companies first of all because they were coming in new to the company. And then they had to learn the area. And about the time you could get them involved in the civic life of the community, they’d be transferred, or retire or move on somewhere. And it was a constant problem in, in the business community of, Who could you lean on to help
make the community better? Whether it was for philanthropy purposes or whether it was for recruiting purposes for other businesses, it was a real problem.

And it hasn’t settled down that much, really I think, although it settled down a little bit. Now, even though the economy is much better, we still lack those major, major companies that helped to define a community. Like Minneapolis has Dayton Hudson and—

[End Tape 2, Side B]

[Tape 3, Side A]

SF: Until Tampa has some very large homegrown businesses or Fortune 500 headquarters, we’re going to continue to suffer from the, the brain drain, the leadership drain that makes it difficult. I mean we’ve got a lot of good people who can work on projects, but they’re stretched thin oftentimes. And you need some people who, who are going to be here for the long haul and can see things through, and not be in and out. And, and that is an ongoing problem. It’s a problem not just in the, in the people power side of things, but in terms of really giving back to the community, the corporations obviously do so much more if they’re based there for community. And we just don’t have that.

RK: What did the call centers find attractive about Tampa?

SF: They, well they would pay less than they would if they were in New York City. A lot of them came out from the New York area where it, the salaries were higher and also cost of doing business are greater. And their employees could have a better lifestyle—they wouldn’t—they were always interested in the commute time. Now our commutes [are] getting pretty bad because the, the transportation network isn’t what it should be. But I remember I think, I’m sure when I was the mayor we recruited the first call center that ever left—the back office operations, not a call center per say—but the back office operations that ever left a bank in, on Wall Street. And I don’t remember which one it was but that was unheard of. But now everything was computerized, and the, the technologically you didn’t have to be right there. And so we brought them here and others followed.

I, I can remember that Marc Sternfeld was the name of the guy who came but he was head of the company—I can’t remember what. But Chase came and others came. But that had never been done before. But once they found out that they could do that then it became easy. But we, we have to strive for a little bit higher wage paying job, even in the call centers. I mean we did—the technology jobs and other kinds of jobs.

RK: Did they hire many high school graduates from Hillsborough County?

SF: They hire a lot of local people, yeah. And they do a lot of training when they come in. And, and as I think I mentioned in an earlier interview, it’s interesting what they’re looking for. I mean obviously they’re looking for a work force that can do their work.
And they, they, they involve themselves tremendously with the school systems, interestingly enough. Which I think is a healthy thing. But they also are looking at the education system. Are these people qualified as a workforce? Are they producing educated people that can be their future work force?

But they also look at, they look at the climate, they look at—they always look at the, the hurricane back up provisions. Can the power company give you back up that you need? Because of our weather conditions—although they like the climate for the most part but they know that we occasionally have a hurricane and, and that power is out, and will they have the ability to continue to, to function for days sometimes? They look at that.

They look at the cultural climate. They rarely talk about sports. We make such a big deal out of sports, but they rarely talk about sports. Sports is so universal. You can turn on the TV any day of the week but it’s, it’s a whole lot tougher to, to go to a ballet or a Broadway show or something. And so they’re interested in the cultural climate. So there are a whole host of things that they look for.

RK: What about changes in politics in Tampa during the time that you were in office? Did you notice certain organizations becoming stronger, others weaker, anything along those lines?

SF: Well from a very local standpoint, there has been a, a marked change, and was a marked change from the time I was, took office until I left office in the neighborhood empowerment movement. I think that we, we had a large hand in that but people wanted to take more control over what was going on in their neighborhood, have more say about the things that would affect their daily lives—the streetlights, the sidewalks, the landscaping, those kinds of things.

And as a result of all of those neighborhood organizations being organized and being really active, and encouraged to be active, many of those people got involved in the political life of the community. Some of them ran for office. Rose Ferlita was a neighborhood activist before she ran for office. That’s how she really got interested and involved. Several others, John Dingfelder was the president of the Davis Island Civic Association at one point long before he ran for office. So that was helpful and I think changed it.

And, and the fact that I think every local politician now knows that you can’t just give lip service to neighborhood groups, you’ve got to go—I mean, you really have to be interested, and they want you to be interested, they want you to come to their meetings when they’re invited and to their forums and all. And so, there’s, there’s a whole change that way.

Obviously we’ve had a shift in Hillsborough County from being [a] very Democratic county to a county, which is much, much more conservative, particularly in the eastern part of the county—in [the] Brandon, Valrico area. Much, much more conservative, so that we’ve had a tremendous shift in our representation from Democratic legislators to
mostly Republican legislators. And redistricting by the Republican controlled legislature has only made that stronger. So I think we’re going to see many, many more years of much more conservatism. And more conservatives in, in city government as well.

RK: Now when you say conservatism, do you mean lower taxes or social issues or both?

SF: I think both. Actually, the tax rate, the millage rate is exactly the same today as it was the third year at, or the second year after I became the mayor, 6.39 I think is what we set. And it is still that—even though the property values have raised—been tremendous increase in property values so there’s more money to work with. And there was the community investment tax that came in, which has given them a windfall since I left office. And in money for capital improvements—but I don’t think you’re going to see tax increases.

Social issues are—people are much more conservative. Or I, at least in the city, I think they think people are more conservative than they used to be. I’m not sure that they are—but I think that’s because of the national issues and, and what’s happened in the county, I think that’s the perception anyway.

RK: Are African Americans more influential now than when you first took office?

SF: I would say about the same. I had constantly been surprised and distressed by the fact that the African American community really doesn’t get more involved in, in the life of the community—political life of the community. I don’t know exactly the percentage now in the city, but when I was the mayor the percentage of African Americans was roughly 22%, 23%. I think it probably is pretty much the same now. And yet voting was [a] much lower percentage than, than white population, and the involvement. And that’s sad to see. It’s hard to identify who leaders of the black community are.

I’m a believer in we should have more democratic bottom-up kind of government and leadership. We should [not] look to two or three people to tell us how, how to lead our lives and how to run our government and everything. However, in, as I said in, in the neighborhood movement and everything—we’ve gotten more bottom-up, but with few exceptions in the African American neighborhoods, some are well organized, but just a few. There isn’t really nearly as much interest and involvement and I’d have liked it to be. You can’t identify five—I can’t identify—people always call me and ask, and always have—Can you tell us who we should talk to in the black community and the African American community who might help us identify other people and so on? It’s very hard to identify even a handful of people that, that really have the ear and, and of African American citizens.

RK: What do you look, when you look at your terms in office, what strikes you as your greatest accomplishments?

SF: Oh, I think the housing programs that we did were far and away the best thing that we did. Because we provided affordable housing for so many people that otherwise
would not have had an opportunity to have that. And it troubles me that we don’t do it today. We’ve let that lapse, because so many people—we didn’t solve the problem. And so many people still need to have a helping hand for affordable housing.

The other thing that I look back on and I think that we did make a difference, or I do think that we made some inroads, we didn’t solve it but I think we made some inroads on—learning to live together a little bit better. And the racial slur policy, the fact that I appointed more African Americans and women to top administrative positions. The first black police chief, the first woman who was a city attorney—those kinds of things, I think all had a big part in helping us learn to live together a little bit better. And I think we still see some of the effects of that.

RK: And what about your major disappointments?

SF: Well obviously I am disappointed that we had such a, a brouhaha over those take home cars. I mean at the end of the day when I left office we had many, many more police officers than we had. They were much better equipped, and they were the second or third highest paid department in the state. All that was done, and could not have been done had we not taken the cars. But that is always overshadowed by the taking of the cars. That was disappointing. I don’t know that I would have done it differently, except for the fact that I would have definitely given the cars to the, those officers who lived in the city.

But I was disappointed that we couldn’t get a hotel built to go with the Convention Center. I think we could have done that. The deal that fell apart right near the end of my administration was a better deal than the one we ultimately got. And we would have had it many years earlier, so it would have bettered the city.

I don’t look back too much and it’s dangerous to do that. People, there, there are a lot of things that I would have personally done differently—I say that and then I say, Well, maybe, I probably say that but I wouldn’t have done it differently. I was never very good at promoting myself. I was always more interested in just getting the job done. John Dunn and Bob Buckhorn and Steve LaBour used to be after me to do a TV program that would, you know like, “the Mayors Hour.” And I always thought that was kind of fluff—you know, I don’t have time for that, I’ve got really, real work to be done. And that probably was something I should have done.

I never did lay out a game plan for my own future political career. That was just never on my mind. Had I done that, I probably wouldn’t have done some of the things that we did and, and some of the—some of the good things that we did. So I, it doesn’t disappoint me that we didn’t do it. But, but people will, Oh, you should have had a game plan—you know everybody’s looking to the next job and everything. I never did, I really had the job that I wanted and didn’t aspire beyond that. There, you know you look back and you think of all these kinds of things but I, it was a wonderful run for me. And it was exactly what I set out to do—is to be the Mayor of Tampa, and I was lucky enough to do it. Then I had to figure out what I wanted to do when I grew up [laughs].