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Margarita Gonzalez oral history interview by Robert Kerstein, February 23, 2006

Margarita Gonzalez (Interviewee)

Robert J. Kerstein (Interviewer)

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RK: This is an interview with Ms. Margarita Gonzalez, who was a Community Public Relations Coordinator under Mayor Freedman, and it’s February 23, 2006. Thanks a lot for meeting with me, I know how busy you are.

MG: Well thank you for the opportunity.

RK: Can you tell us about what your responsibilities were under the Freedman administration?

MG: It’d be a pleasure. Actually I felt very fortunate that I was asked to serve on the Mayor Freedman’s administration. My official title was Community and Public Relations Coordinator. But it had a very special emphasis on Hispanic affairs. Even though I did not do exclusively Hispanic affairs, I was charged to create programs that did not exist previously with the goal of reaching out to the Hispanic community and making sure that the Hispanic community had access to the city’s services and also that the Mayor would know what the needs of the Hispanic Communities were. So she could also serve all the members of the community. As you know, she was very interested in doing [that].

RK: Now in Tampa, we often use the term “Latin community” historically to describe people from Sicily, Spain and Cuba. But you use the term Hispanic. Who does that include?

MG: That includes everyone. The difference—OK, “Hispanic” is a term that was created by the federal government to identify anyone that was of Hispanic descent. And that basically is every country in the Americas of Spanish speaking country and descendants from Spain. Ironically enough, Spaniards are not considered Hispanics. Therefore, when you use the word “Latin,” which is—then it goes back to Latin countries—then that includes Italians and includes Spaniards, and actually Brazilians. So the word “Latin” is a little bit broader, but as far as the federal government goes, they created this term because they were seeing an increase in numbers from different countries, and that spoke Spanish. And they needed a term and they needed a way to be able to create demographic
information on all of us. Like I’m of Cuban descent—actually I’m from Cuba, so I didn’t know I was Hispanic until you know, I heard the first thing about this terminology. But here in Tampa that term is used intermittently because Latin was used very often.

RK: And do you work…

[phone rings]

RK: Did you work with a lot of new immigrants to Tampa?

MG: Yes. And, and I wouldn’t call them old, but I also worked with fifth, fourth, third generation Latins, Hispanics. Hispanic is a term that is self determined. So no one can be a Hispanic unless they decide to designate themselves Hispanic. But that was just only part of my job. Another part, a main part was communications. Because I’m a graduate of USF; USF is my alma mater too, and from the Mass Communications Department with a minor in Spanish. So basically I did a lot of the public information campaigns, not only for the Department of Community Affairs, but also assisted all the departments within the city whenever they needed their own communications, but also interpreting and translating.

And there’s a really funny anecdote, that before the mayor asked me to come on board with the city, I was, I’d been always involved in many Hispanic organizations and causes. So we had put together the first Latin festival for—to raise funds for muscular dystrophy affected individuals. With the help from John Dunn, who I’m sure you know was the Communications Director—we got the mayor there. And the mayor asked me when she go there to go on stage with her so I would translate. And this was being broadcasted live on Spanish radio. So the Mayor spoke, and right after that I spoke, and I could see the reaction in the audience and everybody’s faces are like, something’s going on that I’m not aware of. As soon as I finish, the mayor tells me, Margarita, my Spanish must be getting so good that I understood all that! [laughs] I had gone right after her in English again! [laughs] So all I could do was switch channels and then try to remember everything that she had said again, in Spanish. So I guess that caused a great impression on her because a few months down the line I was asked to come aboard with the city to do this work.

And actually I was very fortunate that she was willing to outreach to the Hispanic community in a way unprecedented before. I was able to set up a live Spanish radio program with her that we did—I think we started on a weekly basis, I don’t know if, or if it went on to biweekly or so on. But we would do live Spanish radio. And she would set the topic, and I would do the simultaneous interpreting for her. We also set up a column in one of the Latin—of the Hispanic papers, Spanish papers, called [inaudible]. And you know, that was provided to the Hispanic community. So there were many different opportunities that you know, she took advantage of. And in many other occasions when she went before different groups, I had the opportunity to translate or interpret for her. And she knew, she understands a lot more Spanish than people give her credit for. But she wanted to make sure that everything was interpreted correctly, and that the message
got to, to the people. And there was no precedent—precedence of that caliber of attention to the Hispanic community before.

RK: You had worked where prior to the city?

MG: With the Tampa Port Authority. And there I was assistant to the Director of Public Relations.

RK: So the City of Tampa had never had a position such as this before as far as you know?

MG: As far as I far as I know, no.

RK: Did you know what motivated the mayor? Was it just outreach to the Hispanic community?

MG: I think that the mayor was aware that the Hispanic community was growing. There was—it was also a segment of the community that needed to have information. And, see, this is the rationale, and I also credit my previous mentor and friend, Raymond Fernandez. He had been the Chairman of the Mayor’s Hispanic Advisory Council. And the council was formed in 1983 to look at the needs of the Hispanic community. But it was just, they were a volunteer group, so they could provide input, but there was really not much implementation of what was going on.

By bringing someone on staff, then there was the implementation. It was—I’ve also had the, the, how can I say this? You know, you always—I had worked prior to the Port Authority actually—let me just back track a little bit. So maybe this will make it more, more reasonable choice for—that the mayor picked me. [laughs] Way back in 1980, I was part of the staff for the governor’s Commission on Hispanic Affairs that opened an office in Miami, and an office in Tampa through the efforts of the legislative delegation under Governor Bob Graham. I worked for them a couple of years, went back to school full time—then I got stolen, or recruited by the Latin Chamber of Commerce which is now the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. And at the time they didn’t know that they were bidding for the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Convention, so we hosted an International Business Exchange in addition to a convention here. And we had for the first time, the visit of President Reagan, after being installed as the President. So it was the first time that a President of the United States was attending the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce convention. So there were several things that were, what do you call it—they were trailblazing at the time.

As a matter of fact, shortly after the President was here, he appointed someone to deal with Hispanic affairs in the White House, who was one of the persons that I got a chance to work with here. So, so then, I got hired by the Port Authority after I graduated from USF, and I liked—you know, some of the folks from the Port Authority remembered me through our interaction with the Hispanic Chamber Convention because I served as a contact to bring them in touch, especially to market—their marketing department. A lot of folks that we had here from Mexico, Guatemala, mainly Mexico and Central America
and some South American countries. So they remember me from those days. So in addition to that, I think Mayor Freedman just got tired of bumping into me at events. [Laughs] Because we, you know, every time there was something Hispanic I was there [laughs], so you know, I think she figured, *hmm, this might make sense to...* So when she actually asked me if I would, thought of leaving the Port Authority, I thought I was being fired. And she knew it and I didn’t—but at that time, I actually had already, I was already a member of the Mayor’s Hispanic Advisory Council. I had an opportunity to work with Bobby Bowden from her staff. And I had also been appointed by her through—to the Henry B. Plant Museum Board of Governors. And that was quite an experience. So, so I was being you know, was involved in several things when I came on board with the city. And she just gave me the opportunity to continue to do what I loved—and pay me for it! [laughs]

RK: Can’t beat that.

MG: Can’t beat that, can’t beat that.

RK: How would you characterize the new Hispanic population in Tampa. Is it one dominant country or a few dominant countries?

MG: Well, yes. Traditionally, they call—they give the title of dominance to who has the highest number. And traditionally it used to be Cubans, I believe now it’s Puerto Ricans. But it’s understandably so because we get Puerto Ricans migrating to Tampa, not just from the Island, which is a lot smaller than Cuba, but from all over the United States. So some of these Puerto Ricans might not be first generation, they might be second, third generations that have developed lines in other places like New York, Chicago—and they’re doing the natural transition that most of the people from the North that want to be in Florida. Having Tampa a Latin flavor, that becomes a natural for them, to be here. Then we also have a very large Columbian community. And so, but it used to be when I first started working with the city, like I said, the majority was Cuban, but we have also representation from a lot of different countries. Actually all the Latin-American countries. What I have seen is that the numbers have grown. So it’s been a process, but all the numbers have grown tremendously.

RK: In the past several years?

MG: Yeah. I would say, well, I’ve been with the city 18 [years]...it’s been gradual. Within the last ten years it’s been incredible.

RK: Is there a particular neighborhood, or neighborhoods where new Puerto Ricans tend to move to?

MG: Not that I’m aware of. It’s not like, for instance, in the Orlando area. There was a large majority of Puerto Ricans in the Kissimmee area. In Tampa, that’s what was so interesting about my job. A lot of people thought that all I had to worry about was West Tampa and Ybor City. And that’s not the case. We have Hispanics living in every inch or
every neighborhood of the city. There’s no longer a traditional Hispanic neighborhood. I think that was one of the wonderful things that the mayor was able to create. The mayor was very adamant about making sure that everyone had opportunities to do and be who they wanted to be. And she created the Challenge Fund, I don’t know if anyone else has mentioned the Challenge Fund.

RK: Only in passing.

MG: In passing? Well, she provided an opportunity for people to have homeownership regardless of the previous barriers that might have been there before. We also—the other phenomenon is that traditionally a lot of the Hispanic migrants that came to Cuba—I mean to Tampa, came for, looking for job opportunities but mainly to work in what was Tampa’s main industries, which were manufacturing. Whether it was tobacco, later on clothing and so on. Now, Tampa has such a variety of opportunities, and also we have seen a variety of migrants. Not just a labor pool of people to come into the manufacturing area, but there’s a lot of migrant workers doing the fields, but there’s a lot of people that are professionals. And there’s a lot of people that might be first, second generation Hispanic—they have college education. And they’re being recruited by companies because they’re bilingual. So it’s a total, it’s a totally different dynamic as far as the demographics. It’s very interesting.

I say now that it’s popular to be Hispanic. When I started working for the city, I had people that would not admit to being Hispanic, or who were ashamed of their heritage. And then, who would not speak the language. And then, after what I call “boom in the 90’s,” now you had a lot of Hispanics coming out of the closet.

RK: Really?

MG: Yeah. So, a lot of people are showing more pride in their heritage, and showing an interest in the language, and the importance of being bilingual. Especially because, duh! We finally realized, we’re a port city! We have—Miami made a tremendous boom when they started trading with Latin America. We have been sitting here—if Tony Pizzo was alive, he would tell you about the 1500’s and how we were doing already commerce, selling fish to—and exchanging cow between Tampa and Cuba. But you know, there, it’s already been a natural for us to trade with our closest neighbors, and they’re Latin America.

So there’s a lot of different opportunities, there’s a lot of entrepreneurship; and that’s another project that I like to give credit to the mayor in the sense that, I remember there was a little organization that spin off from the Hispanic Chamber which was called the Hispanic Business Institute. They asked Mayor Freedman, because we, we kept seeing that there was a lot of interest for businesses to develop. But there was always the problem of gaining capital to either establish a business or to grow. And the mayor was very wonderful in acknowledging that need, and she made a commitment to provide funding with this, with the caveat that the county needed to come in also and hopefully the state. So that meant that the city did not have to get a large chunk of funding, but if
the three agencies came in, then there was funding there to help some of these businesses get start up money or expand.

Today that organization is the Hispanic Business Initiatives Fund. And has become viable for many years and is doing a tremendous job as far as teaching people how to start a business, how to secure capital, all the different things that someone needs. And, and she planted that seed, and she made that possible, because she also, as you know she created the Women and Minority Business Enterprise for the city. Actually I was part of that disparity study. And I was, and I hate to say “token” because I didn’t feel like a token, but I was the Spanish speaking person on a lot of those committees. And it really gave me an opportunity to [inaudible] and learn about a lot of the things that were going on in the city. And through the Women and Minority Business Enterprise program there were a lot of efforts to get people certified, there were a lot of situations to help that going. And I was part of, again, providing opportunities for everyone. So it, it’s been, under her 10 year—I tell you, it was quite a, quite an incredible opportunity for the world and to learn and to impact this community.

RK: In addition to the groups that you mentioned are there other not for profits that focused primarily on the Hispanic community?

MG: Oh goodness, there’s so many! [Laughs]

RK: There are?

MG: There’s so many I have lists and lists and lists. Just at one point, because that was something else that I think I was able to, to take care of for the mayor, and which was little delicate, but I think she had—she gave me the opportunity, she trusted me to be able to do a good job for her on that. We had a lot of people leaving Cuba, and there was, we started having demonstrations on the streets, there was a lot of situations, because the people were concerned about the safety of the people, and so on and so forth. So at that point I had a list of at least 25 different Cuban organizations. So sometimes, I would be attending a press conference at one organization and we’d call it at ten o’clock in the morning, another one at one o’clock, another one...You had in the corner, they—they used to demonstrate in different places including the front of Sam Gibbons’ office when he was a congressman....

RK: And I’m sorry, what was the demonstrations focused on?

MG: People that were leaving Cuba on rafts, and they were capsizing. And then, so there was a lot of issues going on with that. And a lot of public sentiment. And we, I was able to work with Tampa Police Department to make sure—because the mayor wanted to make sure that if a demonstration was going to take place, that it was done in a safe manner; that there would be no one hurt, that they would have their right to demonstrate. But on the other hand, that everything would be done peacefully. And so I worked on a lot of that.
So like I said, going back to the organizations—there was like, at the time, like 25 different—so it’s like, I needed to keep in touch with who’s on first, what’s on second and so on. We also did a lot with the Jose Martí Park. Because through the years, there’s always—every two or three or four years, that issue surfaces in the city. The Jose Martí Park is the only free Cuba soil in existence in the world.

RK: Now how did that come about?

MG: That, according to Tony Pizzo again, is a pilot that visited Tampa, went ahead and donated the land. And then Tony, as a person of the Rotary Club at the time, I think it was in 1955, went to Cuba and then they brought Cuban soil and it was deposited in the park. How much soil, I don’t know. But it was designated as you know, free Cuban territory. It was designated Cuban territory. Back then they didn’t know they needed to add the free. After Castro, it became they gathering point for the Cuban community. Because they had statue of Jose Martí, and, and so there was always something going on with the park and that.

So I was the point person on trying to figure out wherever they were going to demonstrate, whenever something was going on. So, so eventually the mayor was able to provide the custody of the park, because there were issues about [inaudible] and different situations…

RK: Where is it located exactly?

MG: It’s right in the corner of 13th Street and 8th Avenue. Right across from the, from what used to be Ybor Square. And so there were many a Sunday that I would be there—or Saturday….

RK: So you didn’t have a 9-to-5 job, did you?

MG: Definitely not, definitely not. And—no, no, not at all. And then you know it was funny because a lot of people don’t realize it, but a lot of the Hispanic events coordinated by these groups took place on the weekends. Because everything is volunteer. So during the work day, not much was going on. So if there was a meeting, if there was a gathering—and we love to gather and showcase our culture, our food, our music—all of those things traditionally took place on the weekend.

But in addition to that, I was, I also served on the Tampa Hispanic Heritage Inc. Board of Directors for 25 or 24 of their 26 years in existence—26—I couldn’t remember the numbers now, but I know that I resigned on the 25th anniversary, which was I think last year. And then I had been there 24 of the 25. So that created a different set of circumstances.

And actually the mayor was wonderful. I remember catching her as she was exiting the Black History Month celebration, that at the time Bobby Bowden initiated for the City of Tampa, and I asked her, I said, Mayor, do you think we could do this for the Hispanic
community? And she said, of course! She told me that she always you know, you always had perimeters in everything we did, but keep it to an hour, because we did a live broadcast for the City of Tampa television, so I said, no problem. Well, my only problem was that my first keynote speaker was Tony Pizzo. Keeping him to an hour [laughs] was just you know, we had a varied program, and we had city employees you know, performing; and we had so—it turned out to be a great event. And the mayor kind of looked the other way when we went to an hour and about 15, 20 minutes. And then you know we kept—but that first year, in 1988, the first year—well, the year that I was President of Tampa Hispanic Heritage was a year. I started my presidency like three months after I had been appointed to the City’s position. I had been second in command for years, I had never been president. Now they had me be president elect, and they told me there’s no going back, you have to be president. So, so we did for the first time, we did the Tampa Hispanic Heritage Gala. And it was kind of—the Mayor was really cute when she got to the Gala and she sat down at the table and we started right away. And she says, my God! You, everything started? I said, yes ma’am, we were just waiting for you. And we started, because poor thing, she would go to some of the events. And sometimes you’d have to wait for a long, long time. I don’t know—I never get specific on time or organization—but she had to wait a long time for things to get going, or whatever. So we tried to establish a tradition that just because we’re Hispanic, it doesn’t mean that we cannot do things in a timely manner, in a professional manner. And I think we tried to establish that through the tenure and on Tampa Hispanic Heritage. And also, create an opportunity to showcase other Hispanic organizations throughout the community.

RK: Do Hispanic organizations often include groups [of] different nationalities? You mentioned Puerto Ricans and Columbians. Are they often together in the same group? Or generally separate and different groups?

MG: Everyone had their own group. Many according to nationality. But they started realizing that unless we did things together, there’s far more numbers. And that was part of the reason of being of Hispanic heritage. We had a general calendar who promoted every one. And the reason for the Gala was that I wanted an opportunity for everyone to be together in the same room. I wanted to also provide an event where the hardest working members of the committees of the other groups could have a good time. Because then everyone was working really hard, and everyone had a real opportunity to interact with the rest of the community. So in that sense I think the Gala provided a wonderful, wonderful opportunity for recognition.

We’ve had, we’ve had gosh, two or three Spanish clubs for people from Spain. I think there’s one active right now. We’ve had two Peruvian clubs, there’s only about, what, maybe three hundred now, or four hundred Peruvian families, and we have two clubs. So we’ve had Columbians, we’ve had—there was at one point, three or four Columbian organizations. And guess what, I had—I went to all of them. [Laughs]

RK: [Laughs]
MG: So whenever anybody combined anything, I was so happy—it was one—I would be saving money, I would be saving, you know on a luncheon or a dinner or whatever. So it was, a little time—so but it was also a matter that everybody wanted to hold on to their roots and show what you know, was important to them and pass that on to their kids. The funny thing was when then, a few years down the line, I started getting messages at [the] City—the IRS wants you. They wanted me to speak on, about Hispanic affairs, you know? [Laughs]

RK: [Laughs]

MG: They wanted me to be a speaker, you know, the VA hospital, MacDill Airforce, I would, you know, even the federal aviation—what do you call it—the…

RK: The [inaudible] administration?

MG: No, no.

RK: Authority?

MG: Control? The, the guys that did the control. They, they asked me to speak because the federal government was also making sure that they dedicated a time to celebrate Hispanic heritage. So it started—then it became very interesting, because we, we took it from the local clubs onto the agencies and they took all their organizations in to private businesses like Chase Manhattan, that would do things to honor their Hispanic employees.

RK: Oh really, that became common?

MG: So, and I remember one of my biggest satisfactions regarding Hispanic heritage was, when the day that I walked into the Henry B. Plant museum, and one of the ladies on the Board, they asked me, Margarita, it’s September, and you must be so busy because of all the Hispanic heritage stuff coming up. I thought, she knows about it? I got it out of the vacuum you know? We took it, we took it community wide. And that was part of, of what we were trying to do. Because what did they say, that was, if you, once you know something you don’t fear it. There was a lot of situations, and sometimes just because we’re ignorant about something doesn’t mean that it isn’t any good. It means that we don’t know about it. So getting people to understand the community a little more, whether it was the Hispanic community—I also did a lot of different things with different facets of the community. Whether it was, I was involved with Girl Scouts; I was involved with many, many different organizations. But once you let people understand what the people are about, it creates a lot better communications. And I, you know, it was quite a great opportunity.

RK: Is there anything at all now among any of the newer groups comparable to what we had beginning 1890’s with the mutual aid societies in Ybor City and West Tampa?
MG: Not that I know of officially. But the other day, I run into a friend of mine that is working for a group of doctors…

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

RK: So we were speaking about doctors actually visiting people.

MG: Right. And so I’m guessing that eventually some of that where you belong to a group of doctors and you pay, you know—there’s doctors, there’s places, clinics—there are no—that don’t require insurance so you know and stuff, I think it’s per procedure fee, so I don’t know, I’m not aware of anything in particular. But knowing, knowing that the community is self contained and there’s many things like that in Miami. So, eventually—and that’s something else that I’ve seen more recently. I’ve seen a lot of migration from Miami…

RK: Oh really?

MG: As far as, I guess, Miami’s so saturated in so many different ways that people are looking for an alternative with a similar Latin flavor or Spanish flavor.

RK: And people from different ethnic groups?

MG: Right…are coming.

RK: That’s interesting.

[Tape paused, interrupted]

RK: How closely did you work with Mayor Freedman?

MG: How closely?

RK: Yes. Did you see her often, did you, or did you—was it more…

MG: Yes. I think there was, I think I was in a very privileged position not being a director, because I was just a manager. I had a lot of interaction with her because of, I was brought in to do issues management which I thought was probably the main value of my being there. To make sure that we looked at the issues before they became a problem, and look at solutions for them. I think that I was also, since I needed to provide information to the community of what was going on—so I had a lot of interaction with the other departments also.
But the mayor realized that that was very important, in itself, not just in my case but for all of the city managers. And at the time you know, the Tampa Chamber had the leadership of Tampa class. But the city was only allotted one or two people to attend. And she felt it was time where if we needed to talk to each other, needed to solve issues and problems and make sure we reacted properly to whatever was at hand, or plan properly. And she created the first managers position class. And that created a wonderful opportunity to—and I was a member of the charter class—and that was a wonderful opportunity. Because then you got to see the face, and got to know the person that whenever you needed some action from that particular department, was the person that you needed to call. They got to know what your role was to a certain degree and know—so we were able to identify resources; we were able to identify people’s interests and were able to create it a lot easier to just pick up the phone and call someone that you know as opposed to someone you’ve never met, someone that you know, you might not have access so easily. Now that you know that person it makes it a lot easier because you might even bump into that person in the hall, take care of some business without having to go through other things. Just—so it made it wonderful.

Actually they teased me—that manager, I was always getting teased—at that first class, because we brought a professional facilitator. And one of the exercises was that he asked every single person in the room to line up in order of stature. And I was the only person there, let me just say that I was the first in line. So then everyone started teasing me about, that’s why the mayor had hired me. [Laughs] So it, and she was—she is a woman of such stature that that did not matter. But, but it was—you know, everybody started giving me a hard time about that so. I know they would not dare tell her that, but they would tease me about that. So but it was a great, great thing.

We mentioned the [inaudible] programs, we mentioned—she started a lot of, a lot of programs that had not been done before. I think she was a role model and a mentor to a lot of people in very different ways. The female population of the city, they were able to you know, they had someone that understood their issues. That understood what, that it—that a woman like the mayor could be a female, could be a professional, could take care of things, and also have a wonderful, beautiful family. So, and I think she made it real. And she created a lot of respect for the professional woman. She was incredible, as far as her vision of what needed to happen. She knew—I think—I thought she knew everybody that worked for the city by first name. Because every time I was with her, we’d run into someone, she would know the name.

You mentioned the Hispanic community under her tenure. The Hispanic community had the opportunity of, to have an event called “Carnival in Tampa.” And also the Puerto Rican Parade started. Because she looked at the lists of all the different special events that were taking place in the city. And she wanted to make sure that that list was as inclusive and as diverse as, as the community was.

At Al Lopez Park she created a—and this is, this is something that I had never seen anybody do so well, public-private partnerships—she came on to the, with the city as mayor when the economy had a really, really difficult time. She was faced on
downsizing, and she didn’t. She tried not to terminate anyone. She, she did a lot of creative things to make sure that the city kept functioning. I think she established for the first time a reserve fund for the city to make sure that the city would never be placed in a situation of, of not having the funding to be able to operate. And going back to the park, she also cared a lot about persons with disabilities. And there was a—a playground was built for children that were disabled, so they could also play. And there were also stations where persons with disabilities can walk along the park, ride along the park in a wheelchair and stop and be able to exercise. So there was a lot of different things.

The arts and public places programs—it was, you know, we sold more art around. As far as my community and the Hispanic community, we were very proud that she chose for the fact—the first art and public places that had to deal with the Hispanic community, a piece of art that was created by local Tampa artist of Latin descent. And that art depicted the influence that Cuba had had in Tampa because of Jose Martí’s visit. Because Tampa has been known as a cradle of Cuban independence. So that was a very special time, we had a very nice dedication for that, so you know, she touched so many aspects of every recreation. My God, you know, the Friends of Recreation started, Silver Spoons and Sandcastles started. So and I was very, see—and see my role was all these things were, were happening and I didn’t create everything. I created some things, but I tried to create support from my community to those things. And get people from my community involved.

So it was, it was very rewarding. Tampa Museum of Art—I served on, on some of their advisory committees to make sure that we had—actually the first two Hispanic Heritage, I managed to get a poster contest reception hosted at the Tampa Museum of Art, which was unheard of. For the Hispanic community to...but that created opportunity for the Hispanic community to know where the museum was, to experience the museum. On the other hand, the museum was saying, we’re paying attention to Hispanic artists. And I remember there was one of the first things that I went to was a Cuba USA art exhibit that opened actually at the contemporary museum at USF first, and then the photography part and some of the other programs went there.

So there’s been so many, from Mexico, and it would make it easier for me to be able to disseminate this information was my two television programs. Because I hosted one that was called Community Affairs Reports, because that’s the name of the department that I worked for, which was Community Affairs. And I started doing that by accident. We lost one—we only had two cameras at the time. The one camera operator quit, so the host became camera operator—Bobby Bowden told me, you’re public relations, you can speak in front of people. And I said, that’s right, with my [inaudible] Cuban accent! But I’ll do it! How can you say no to your boss, right? And to the Mayor? And so we kept on doing it and then I was approached to do one in Spanish, and why don’t you? And I said, well we don’t have... We were very limited. The cable communications office at the time was only very few people. And I said, they don’t have right now, anyone that’s bilingual. And so they said, well, how about if I provide a Director and a camera person? The person that was telling me this was the manager—the local manager of the Univision network here in Tampa. And I said well, let me talk to them and if it goes, we’ll do it. I
got approval from the city, and when the time came to do the first show, guess who the
director was? He, who had never directed in his life. And the camera person was one of
his staff members that used to just put in the tapes for the commercials and had never
touched the camera before either. So from then, which was—we started taping in 1988,
‘89—I believe the beginning of ’89. We—no, March of ’88. ’88, end of ’88. We
trained—to say that they would give me a camera operator—we had to train everyone
that they, that volunteered with them and sent them. But that gave me an opportunity to,
you know, to reach out to the community and to be able to showcase all of the different
wonderful things that were going on.

The mayor had the chance to host the Columbus quintcentenntial, and we hosted the, the
Carabell’s, the cruise ships at the Convention Center which was quite a sight of the—five
centuries ago, next to an ultramodern Convention Center like ours. She dedicated the
Convention Center, she dedicated the Aquarium, and some people were punished at the
Aquarium, whenever they listened to the Spanish tour, because it’s my voice…

RK: [Laughs]

MG:…when they walk through. And so they have no choice but to hear me in their ears.
So, there were so many wonderful things that she did. But like I said, some, some
projects were going on very difficult situations.

For instance, we did Super Bowl XXV. And great, never did I ever dream that I would be
assigned to the Super Bowl Task Force. But I guess they figured, they didn’t ask me if I
knew anything about the game—that’s what saved me. So but then, then we went to the
community, and they argued—are you Mass Communications? You know, so…but it
was the same year of Desert Storm. So think about all that took, and all the planning, and
all the stress that the mayor had, thinking that there could be a situation that was not
going to be very pleasant. Because we had, we had thousands and thousands of people
gathered at the stadium and many more thousands visiting. So you know, in the midst of
all that wonderful feeling—and that’s what a lot of people don’t realize. What a job like
the Mayor’s job entails. You know, it’s, it’s a 24-hour job.

And, and that someone—I ran into someone the other day, and you know Mayor
Freedman’s name came up for a second and she says, yeah, she always knew everything
that was going on in this town! And she did! And she had the pulse, and she knew exactly
what was going on. And she was not—she didn’t like to be surprised. And she, she
surrounded herself with great people, and, and you know, and I, as an employee I always
appreciated though that she entrusted me with a lot of responsibility, but she also gave me
the authority. And trusted me to do a job for her. And I think that’s priceless—from any,
from any employer.

RK: We always hear a lot about leadership. How would you characterize the Mayor’s
leadership style?
MG: Style? [Laughs] She was wonderful, she—really, because you know, how can I... I know that some of the other staff members probably saw her a different way. I already mentioned that we had a lot in common [laughs]. So—but something that I really liked about her was in any time we were discussing any issue, she would, she would listen, she would think, and if it was no, she would tell you, no, it cannot be done. Within the city realm of things—if there was a possibility she would know to, who to assemble and who to put together to make it happen. Or if it wasn’t within the city, she would tell you, this needs to happen outside, and this... An example: when all the situations with Cuba came about again, it was—you know the Cuban issue resurfaces every so many years—so now, the governor established a Free Cuba Commission. Of course, now the mayor doesn’t call—well how come the city doesn’t establish a Free Cuba Commission? Well, the mayor understood the issue very well. And realized it was not just a, a business issue, it was not just a community issue, it was a very complicated issue. So she asked me to spearhead that and work on it from the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce under the trade arm that they had. And [we] started gathering—you know, we met and put some things in place, but politically I think that was a very smart move to be done. Because how can she—I mean this is [inaudible] that, that needed the coordination. We got a lot of other agencies involved. We got my friends from the Port Authority, we looked at you know, because there were many issues that needed to be looked at from—we as far as the city, we were ready. Our responsibility was to make sure if there was a demonstration or a celebration, where? How? How could we handle it? We brought in, you know, different other agencies, like immigration, other issues that we looked at—housing—what if everybody comes? You know, because everybody’s thinking, everybody’s going—but what if everybody...?

You know so there’s so many possibilities and, and you know same thing with international. We didn’t have any structure within the city specifically to do with international, but there were some things done through the Convention Center because it was an enterprise, a free trade zone designated there. And there were some other things that were going on. And, and she allowed me to participate and be part of anything that had to do with international, because it also—see, my, my thing was assign you so our local community, they would represent—they would provide us the link to local Hispanic—the link to some of these countries.

And whenever, I can give you an example: we hosted the wife of a mayor of one of our sister cities. That’s another program by the way. She was the person that actually signed up the city of Oviedo, Spain, officially to be sister cities with Tampa. The city of Le Havre, France; Izmir, Turkey; and there might have been another one but I don’t remember. Because we were trying to create relationships with all these cities. In many cases, what these cities did, for instance, Spain came. And they, there’s a protocol, there’s agreements signed, and then there’s exchanges.

Actually Oviedo, Spain had had several student exchanges at USF. And there was several professional exchanges with our sister city in Columbia. They came and I took them to our fire department, to the water department, because they had aqueducts there very similar to the Tampa original aqueducts. And they were able to get some parts and we
were able to send people from Tampa to Columbia to help. So there’s technical, business, educational, cultural exchanges of many different kinds. So that was, that was also something that was very, very interesting. And now I forgot why I started telling you about the sister city program and the mayor’s involvement in that….

[Remembers] the connection, of creating the links. So we had one of the mayor’s wife wanting to come to Tampa, and I get a call, and somebody asks me, well, maybe we could give her a tour of the city, a tour of Ybor City, and I said, well, have we asked the lady what she would like to do? And it’s, well, so and so knows her and...OK, so I talked to so and so and I asked them, I said, look, we can put together an itinerary while she’s here, but I would really like to know what her interests are and whatever’s she’s trying to accomplish with her visit. Well, guess what, when I got the reply, the lady wanted to find out, see how we did the—how we handled the problems of drugs in the schools. She wanted to talk to professional women’s organizations. So I put her in touch with the school system, we created some appointments for her, we did some things with the local Hispanic Professional Women’s Association. I brought some people from her original country to the luncheon. And guess where was she on her way to when she left Tampa? Nothing but the United Nations to present a paper on women’s issues.

So but here we are you know—so these are some of the things that, that made my job very interesting as far as you know, creating, connecting people, and doing things like that.

RK: And the mayor encouraged this obviously?

MG: Of course, of course, of course.

RK: You stayed on with the next administration is that correct?

MG: Yes sir.

RK: Mayor Greco….Did much or most of what was initiated under the Freedman administrations continue?

MG: As far as I was concerned or...

RK: Yes, yes...

MG: …or as far as everybody else?

RK: …as far as what you were involved in, yes…I know that....

MG: OK, because I, [laughs]….I was thinking, that’s quite a job!

Well, some of it did. Some of it got shifted. [Pauses] how can I say? That’s a very good question. I continued to do the TV programs. I was asked to, I continued to get involved
with some things but the difference was that under the Freedman administration I had, I reported to the Department Director and I had direct access to the mayor, directly with the mayor when the, when the situation merited.

Under the next administration some of that changed. Because the, the structure was not like that. Let’s see how I’m going to put this. Eventually, you know, I was given different roles. I was moved from my original department to a different—well, I was still with Community Affairs, but they physically moved me to a different office to be part of city’s new economic development center. Which was a place, an office that was set up in Ybor that housed TEDCO, Tampa Economic Development Corporation, some enterprise zone situation, the free trade zone person that had been hired part time, and a couple of other people. And, and I was there—and Ybor redevelopment [was there]. My director was somewhere else, but I was still, I was there. So I was asked to help promote and publicize what these agencies were doing and creating this, you know, visibility for the development center. That was a year—that was for about a year and a half. Then we were moving. Then, my Department of Community Affairs was moved from, from being now under the new administration what used to be the Housing Department, which became, became Housing and Community Services. Now Community Affairs moved back under a different director, and I was kept under this new department, under the direction of Fernando Noriega.

RK: I see.

MG: OK. So then, I was—then we hosted a—we at the time, we had been in the—towards the end of the Freedman administration the, they had—there was a Mexican Chamber of Commerce who were looking at setting up this secretariat for the Gulf States here in Tampa. That action materialized later into the Greco administration and we were able to get—actually, we just hosted first the convention here, the conference. So we hosted all of the governors from all of the states that border the Gulf of Mexico, whether it’s the US or Mexico. And so that was one of my roles that had not happened before. Other than that, things just kept snowballing. Because now we have more people, we have more organizations, we got more—so, it became very interesting.

RK: Looking at the Freedman administration historically—I know you have a long history, but just in terms—well, you’re knowledgeable about [the] history, and you’ve seen administrations follow. What would you say, just in terms of in your eyes, and what you were involved with and what you saw, would be the dominant legacy of the administration? In other words, facts when people [are] writing about Tampa, Tampa politics 50 years from now, and they’re looking you know, for points of time and different mayors. What would you want to highlight, or what would you expect to be highlighted?

MG: She made Tampa livable. In the sense that she took—Tampa was starting to become more, you know, looking more into economic development and to creating more, more tall buildings, whatever. But she realized that we, Tampa could not attract anyone here if we had slums, if we have a lot of—so she actually, I remember going to Miami once, and
I was at a gathering and I mentioned I was from Tampa, [they] said, *oh! You, you work with the demolition mayor?* Because the mayor started a program that she demolished drug holes, the drug—crack houses, to clean those areas where people were hiding with drugs. She also started the quad squad to clean the city of drugs. So she looked at the basic needs of the people. Because you cannot build if you don’t have the foundation.

I think she looked into infrastructure. She wanted to make sure that things were very solid. So I think Tampa has been very lucky to have the progression of going from a mayor like—you know, Martinez started trying to put Tampa on the map. But then for her to take care of the, what I called the “nitty gritty,” that you know, the foundation, and to, to make Tampa a city that people wanted to come to. And then Greco, sold Tampa to the rest of the world! [laughs] Because he brought in, you know, all the development or whatever.

But, but if she hadn’t done and taken care of some of the things that, that might not have been so glamorous, I don’t know where we’d be today. We, you know, it’s—she opened the Performing Arts Center, even though, you know, I know that Mayor Martinez had a lot to do with it, but you know, it was opened under her tenure. A lot of things, a lot of things to, to make Tampa a very viable place.

And also, then, the diversity and realizing the diversity that we had in the community; paying attention to the resources that that community provided I think was a great asset. She, she first looked—I think she took a look at what was at hand before going abroad or going outside of the [inaudible] and saying, *OK, we need to really know who we are, what we are, before we can tell the world about it.* And then she was able to tell the world during Super Bowl XXV. Super Bowl XXV was wonderful and everybody knew that Tampa was you know, on the map.

So she, I, I, you know—she I think did a lot of wonderful things for this city. And she’s, to this day, she still commands a lot respect in this community.

RK: Thank you very, very much for speaking with me. I appreciate it a lot.

MG: Thank you.