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RK: This is an interview with Ms. Sarah Lang, January 27, 2006 in her office in City Hall. Thanks a lot for meeting with me, I appreciate it. Can I ask a couple of, kind of background questions in terms of your own history?

SL: Of course.

RK: Were you born in Tampa?

SL: No I wasn’t. Where I was born doesn’t have anything to do with Tampa, I was an air force brat. I did come by way of Tampa when my father retired from the military, and he was stationed at MacDill Air Force Base. But shortly thereafter he decided to move the family to Bradenton. So I grew up in Bradenton, Florida, and then came to Tampa after graduate school, and that was 1977.

RK: And what was your degree in graduate school?

SL: I had a Master’s in Public Administration from the University of Georgia.

RK: And when did you begin working for the City of Tampa?

SL: I actually was still working on my graduate degree, and I was hired in September of 1977. I was looking for an internship and I was hired with federal funds for a 90-day period, which is what I also needed to fulfill my degree requirements of having a full time internship with a public government—any, any local state or national. So I was hired for 90 days, and then another 90 days [laughs]. And then maybe, I think another year extension—this was the CETA Program, which had a tremendous influence on the city back then. They hired a lot of employees for different programs. Eventually I got a regular position, and I’m still working with the City of Tampa today.
RK: And what is your position today?

SL: Today I’m Employee Relations Manager.

RK: And what are you primary responsibilities?

SL: Well I handle all of the labor relations for the city, all the discipline, grievances, a lot of the traditional areas of Human Resources. Recently had some further changes, I was Director of Human Resources until this past October, and with the redesign in our organization I also now handle all of the employment areas: the recruiting, and the filling of positions, and a number of other areas.

RK: Do you know how many people you supervise?

SL: I supervise about 15 people now.

RK: I’d like to focus in on the Freedman administration if we could. And I’d like to ask, to what extent things changed for you during the administration? I know in your position a lot of things would continue from one mayor to another. Were there any changes or any policies that were implemented during her administration that stick out to you?

SL: Absolutely. At that time, in 1986 when she changed from being Chairman of City Council and she became mayor—Bob Martinez went to run for governor and became governor. And at that point in time I was Employee Relations Manager, the same job title I have today. The job was designed a little bit differently; the department was called the Department of Administration, and the director of the department was Cynthia Sontag.

And I got to know the mayor very early on because labor relations of course is a matter of—it’s a great interest to every mayor. We had negotiations with three unions at that time, and still do today, the Police Union, the Fire Union, and our general Employees Union. And had a lot of attention back then and throughout the Freedman administration on labor relations, probably more focus at that time that has never carried through since as far as media attention to labor relations. When we held negotiation sessions with the unions, we’d have tremendous media coverage. The microphones on the middle of the table from the local news media, and the print media would sit through almost every negotiation session, and you’d have an article in the paper almost every day the next day after a negotiation session. Today, I rarely have a press person even show up for negotiations.

RK: So were negotiations all in the Sunshine?

SL: They are all in the Sunshine, they’ve always been in the Sunshine per state law.

RK: And how do you explain this media attention during just the Freedman administration?
SL: Well I think it was a sign of the times, there were some fiscal issues at the time that—we had hiring freezes, it was not a time where the city had a lot of extra money to throw towards benefits and wages. Any increases that we did; any of those contracts were focused primarily on the wages and not the benefits because we needed to keep our salaries so we were competitive and employing people. It just, I think was part of the times too [laughs].

RK: And when you say part of the times, is that because of the media’s interest in the Freedman administration in particular, or the unions were more vocal?

SL: Well the unions were very vocal during that time and there were a number of hot issues that occurred during the period that Mayor Freedman was in office, [there] were the police officers. There was an issue regarding their take home vehicles that received a lot of media attention, and they were very vocal in their views towards that. There were also a lot of issues that weren’t necessarily labor relations issues that dealt with the police activities and the African American community. And incidents that were very unfortunate that resulted in perception or possibly situations also, of discrimination, of how police treated members of the African American community.

Where the fire department, there were issues regarding their work schedule that led to a public hearing before City Council to resolve an impasse. And they wanted to reduce their average work week from 52 hours to 48 hours. And in that particular year they were taking a zero pay increase and they were able to make it look like it didn’t cost anything because they were taking a zero pay increase. But of course to reduce your hours and receive the same pay is not free. It really was about a five percent increase and Council agreed to it, and they were victorious in their goal of reducing their work week.

RK: I’m surprised the work week was 52 hours, that seems like a lot.

SL: It’s not. It’s an average. And, and that’s probably part of the problem that people don’t understand. They’re used to a 40 hour work week, but firefighters work for 24 hours. They work from 7:00am in the morning to 7am the next day, then they’re off for 48 hours. And so it’s over three to six week period when you do the math, when you say the average. And so it’s, it’s actually a great work schedule for a lot of people.

RK: Can you explain to us the union structure in Tampa? We do have an interview with Mr. Tom Gonzalez who spoke a little bit to this, can you explain the…?

SL: Well, the—in Florida, the union, and for the public sector, unions are regulated by state law, and I’m sure Tom will talk about that. All three of the unions were already in existence when Mayor Freedman took office. She was very familiar with them from being on City Council. And there had been issues during the Martinez, and even the Poe administration with difficult times reaching union agreements. And so she had been involved in that as a Council member and certainly as Chairman of City Council. So we didn’t add to the number of unions or anything like that, they were already preexisting.
RK: Your police, fire, and what is—I think you said there was third?

SL: A General Employees unit. Which is, covers about 2000 employees, did then and does today. The Amalgamated Transit Union, known as the ATU is primarily a bus driver’s union. It came to the city, I want to say about 1977-'78, and it was a result of the Tampa Bus Lines, was a private company that was taken over by the city. They were already unionized, and then they eventually worked to unionize the rest of the city. The irony of that is it later became Hartline and is no longer part of the city. But we still have the Amalgamated Transit Union representing our general employees.

RK: Are all employees represented by unions?

SL: No, but by far the majority probably adds up to about 78% are covered by union contracts.

RK: What other issues arose during the Freedman administration?

SL: Well I—one of the things that she was very instrumental in and very concerned about was discrimination issues in employment. And I think I just read in the paper today they had a history thing—it was interesting, that Gasparilla—we used to be closed on a Monday for Gasparilla, the whole city shut down. I believe the school system shut down also. And it was sometime during, I’m not sure what year, that they did flip that to a Saturday so the city didn’t need to close down. But that was fortuitous for us because at the same time, the issue of celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday started to come to everyone’s attention. And we added the holiday, the city holiday, to close for Martin Luther King Junior’s birthday in January each year. I think we were one of the first governments to do that. And that was an initiative from the mayor. I don’t know that she had been contacted by the community. She was very aware of that issue, and the importance of that holiday. And so it was added on very early on. I remember getting a lot of phone calls from other cities and counties who were surprised that we were doing that.

The other discriminatory type issue related to what I was saying earlier about the police department and the African American community. And we implemented a policy that still exists today that some considered very harsh, and certainly got the attention of police officers and other city employees. It became known as B1.2, and it was a policy and is a policy that is—deals very strictly with any city employee that utters a discriminatory conduct about another employee or person in the community, a racial slur or something to that affect. And it’s basically a zero tolerance policy, that if an employee does that, they’ll be dismissed. At minimum, based on their length of service with the city and other disciplinary record, at minimum, they’d have a 15 day suspension, which is three weeks of pay to lose. It was very controversial at the time, but it certainly got everyone’s attention. And I think it has had a tremendous affect on our employee workforce.

RK: Was it enforced? In other words, did many personnel feel sanctioned for violating this rule?
SL: We, we had quite a few. And those cases weren’t always upheld through the arbitration process, but usually the—you know, it was the message that was important. One of the cases that got a lot of attentions, which was a dismissal of a police officer—the arbitrator put him back to work, but didn’t give him back pay, so he got a nine month suspension. So I never considered that as anything but a victory in my mind as far as the point of the policy was certainly accepted. And ironically that officer went on to have an infraction again after that and, and he resigned before we could fire him. But we would have probably fired him I know.

So I think those were instrumental things, I think that Mayor Freedman should be credited with her leadership on those issues. I don’t know that it was always understood how strongly she felt about those issues. But she certainly always made it very clear to me that she would not tolerate anything but treating citizens with equal treatment.

RK: There was a lot of discussion nationwide during the time that Mayor Freedman was in office and still today, of affirmative action. Does the City of Tampa have an affirmative action policy? And was it adopted or changed during the Freedman administration?

SL: Well it existed prior to her administration. And there were things long before I was with the city that had to do with employment issues. And they continued on you know, through her term of office. Things have changed a bit with affirmative action as far as what you can and can’t do, and federal laws and court cases, so we don’t have the type of affirmative action policy and documents that we had during her term of office because of changes in the law. I don’t know that that’s really made a difference—it’s kind of neither here nor there, but she certainly gave great attention to whether or not minorities were being hired and represented in different positions.

And certainly on that note, something I have thought about a great deal was what she had done for in particular for women in government. At the time that she took office—I was trying to figure out how old I was [laughs] and everything, let’s see, some quick math here [laughs]—I was 31 years old. I’m fifty, just about to turn 51. So to look back on my life is, is an interesting opportunity. I was a young female manager in the city and I had, my second child was born in 1987. So I was also a young mother and was faced with some real challenges as far as what we were doing at work during the time. Mayor Freedman gave me opportunities and had confidence in me to send me out to do some pretty big projects, not only negotiating the union contracts in the latter days, but writing policies. We had a number of investigations by the State Attorney’s office, and other things that I was involved in; that we reviewed, the investigative material to make sure that city policies weren’t violated by city employees. And it was a huge responsibility. And Tom Gonzalez might talk about some of that also with you.

I think that it was a remarkable time and there were a number of women—we had a female city attorney…
RK: Who was that?

SL: Pam Aiken, and she is currently the City Attorney for the City of Clearwater. We had a number of women throughout government, Kathy Betancourt, who was our Intergovernmental Relations Director. My boss, for many—a portion of those years, was Cindy Sontag, Director of Administration. And it was an empowering time for, for me in particular. And I’ve always looked back on my career as that being a critical point in time for me as far as a growth period and the opportunity to really learn how to do things. She selected me for one of the city slots for the Tampa Leadership program. Which was a really great experience, the best part of it though was that, that she selected me. And that always meant a great deal to me. And I think that as government goes on after mayors, what you do with the management team and different city employees’ lives long after a mayor is in office. And it’s very important that they cultivate the leadership of the city employees.

RK: So more women held high positions during the administration?

SL: Oh definitely.

RK: And we saw that to some extent with African Americans--the first African American police chief...

SL: Absolutely.

RK: I believe an African American woman was appointed Director of the Convention Center.

SL: That’s right.

RK: Was that again, kind of a conscious effort by the mayor?

SL: Well I would say that she never would select someone she didn’t think was qualified, but she certainly—the challenge was to cast the net to find who was out there that was available, that was capable of the position. And of course, Chief Holder was an existing police officer, we didn’t do national recruiting for him. We did do national recruiting for the Convention Center Director. And that definitely was a priority.

Prior to Bennie Holder being Police Chief, Eddie Gonzalez was Police Chief, and that was one of the first times—possibly the only time that we really had had a person from the outside become police chief. We had a national search and then we had a committee that included community leaders with representatives from the African American community as part of the panel that conducted the interviews of the candidates, and then made a recommendation to Mayor Freedman regarding who should be selected for police chief. And that was a very progressive approach to filling that position.
RK: And was that the case with both Chief Gonzalez and Chief Holder?

SL: No, we did not do the national search for Chief Holder.

RK: And you didn’t have the panel either?

SL: Didn’t have the panel. After Chief Gonzalez left by then, she appointed Chief Holder.

RK: Most of the appointments that I’m familiar with of African Americans to higher positions occurred—I can’t remember the years, but not initially in her administration. Was anything about the timing, were any of the appointments due to political pressure from the black community? I’m thinking specifically about all the controversy over Gasparilla Day and Ye Mystic Krewe, and desegregating Mystic Krewe and the push by many African Americans to integrate the Krewe.

SL: You know, many of those events were happening, and I can’t remember, some of them were before or after—I don’t think she was really responding or trying to placate anyone ever. She had strong, strong beliefs, and I know she still does today about those things, and she would have made those selections regardless of whether there was media or community pressure. She had a—has a heartfelt concern and care about all people.

RK: Now this next question, I don’t know if you can respond to it, I don’t know anything about the Sunshine Law, but you mentioned several investigations by the State Attorney. And I’m not familiar with those, and no one else has mentioned any. Can you say anything more?

SL: Yeah, there were—the State Attorney—I don’t exactly remember all of the politics with the State Attorney’s office, and that might be something to ask Tom Gonzalez about. But there seemed to be a, almost a witch hunt type feeling and they investigated the Convention Center Director, I can’t remember his name as far as his—and a number of other city departments, and department heads. And interviewed a large number of city employees. And there was also an investigation conducted by the police department into some issues and it was, months and months and months and lots of documentation—led to a lot of rumors while people were going down there and doing interviews. And it was a, kind of a tough situation.

When it was all said and done, I think there was an employee in the Water Department that had some wrongdoing that eventually was arrested. We went back through all of the materials—of course they look at criminal violations, but certainly there was a responsibility to look to see if there were any policy violations and employees that needed to be disciplined. A lot of the stuff that they looked into was really, really old history. And, and the facts had, you know, were very hard to really confirm—or witnesses, there were lots of old stories and things. But there was a lot of media attention on those types of things and I think it gave a misperception to the public of difficulties that really weren’t going on.
RK: Do you recall who the State Attorney was?

SL: [Pauses] Mayor Freedman will, for sure. [Laughs]

RK: People can also look that up.

SL: Yes, but she will definitely remember that.

RK: And we will have one more, a conversation with Mayor Freedman, so I’ll take a note on that.

SL: Yeah.

RK: Any other initiatives in the administration come to mind?

SL: Well I’m sure that other people are going to talk about some of the things that were going on fiscally. It was really tough times when I look at years since Mayor Freedman was in office. There’s been a significant difference as far as the availability of funds. During her term of funds, there wasn’t a lot of extra money around, if any. We had hiring freezes, we had cuts within budgets, where every department had to give up five, six, seven percent of their budget. All of those to enable the finance to gather enough resources to continue to do things to enhance the police and fire public safety issues, which of course were her priorities. And rightly so. So it was a lean time in government. We had to make due with, with what we had and, and probably that made us much more efficient. Because when you have to make due with what you have you find new ways to do things with less. And I think city government benefited a great deal because of it. The Convention Center was built as I recall, the Aquarium towards the tail end of her administration.

Although we had hiring freezes, we did a lot of employee development. One of the things that she had me do in the last few years of her administration, we had quarterly meetings with all of the managers in the city. It was about 100 plus managers. And so every three, four months, we would come together for either a seminar or some sort of meeting. And it was very exciting. We did the, the building across the street here that Sun Bank is in, was being built. We ran up to their floor, close to their top floor with hard hats on, and listened to—and you could have the view of the entire city and you could see all of the different cranes that were up because of the building. You could see where the Convention Center was, where the Aquarium was being built. She had a sense of wanting to make sure that all of the managers, no matter what they did, had the big picture as far as what was going on in Tampa. And then we often had leadership development type training as a part of that. And it was wonderful because the managers in different departments didn’t really know each other unless we had these events. So I thought that showed—and it’s a good example of the great leadership that she provided to the city.

RK: Did you have to participate—I shouldn’t say “have to”—did you participate in the
“road shows” as they were called?

SL: I, I didn’t participate in the road shows because no one was particularly very interested in union or Human Resources at those meetings. I will tell you a story though, because I wanted to go to them. But of course it was community—and then, they had questions about sidewalks and parks and recreation, and somewhere in there we had a conversation about that and she suggested that some of us who didn’t normally participate in those, attend one. So I did attend one of them, and it was in South Tampa, and it was, it was totally enlightening. It was very interesting to see some of the different issues—I knew about the issues, but to actually witness the conversation between neighborhood groups and citizens with the different department directors and the, the bombarding of questions—it was a really eye opening experience for me. So I’m—I was glad to get to go to that road show.

RK: We often hear about cities being bound by state guidelines of one type of another, as well as federal regulations. Does the state and federal government make much of a difference in terms of how you go about your day to day work, as far as having to follow various regulations and rules?

SL: Well there are a lot of federal regulations that we, and some state, that we have to abide by. I think we’re so used to it we don’t even think about it. But certainly, you know as far as the union contracts, how they’re done, their state law and state regulatory agency, known as PERC that handles that. And then of course there’s federal labor laws like the Fair Labor Standards Act, and today we have the ADA and we have the Family Medical Leave Act. You know, there’s a lot of regulations we have to deal with.

RK: It’s difficult to keep up on them I assume.

SL: I—we have to keep up on it all the time, or you’ll, you’ll make a mistake that’s for sure.

RK: Can I ask, you worked for several mayors. Let’s see the first mayor was…

SL: Well Poe was mayor when I came in as an intern.

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

SL: Martinez…

RK:... and Mayor Freedman, and obviously Mayor Greco, and Mayor Iorio.

SL: Correct.

RK: So you’ve got a good historical perspective, and when you look at changes over time with the different mayors, would there be certain policies or a policy that is kind of a legacy of the Freedman administration that kind of lives on?
SL: Well I think the discriminatory conduct policy definitely would fit into that category. I think that as mayor, she got to know so many city employees. If you rode the elevator with her up to the eighth floor, she would know every person’s name in the elevator. I think that was delightful and wherever she went, she knew city employees. They called her directly to tell her things, I think that speaks of her openness and very, very caring—she would be often the first person to tell me about a situation with an employee that was a difficulty and she would reach out to them. I don’t know that people knew that about her. And I don’t think the media necessarily painted that picture of her, of what just, what a nice person she is and was to everyone.

RK: You mentioned the media paid more attention to the negotiations during her time than with other mayors for a variety of reasons. Do you think the media treated her evenhandedly?

SL: I think the media was really rough on her. You know, I, I remember being so angry sometimes with, I believe it was Mary Jo Melone and some of the criticism that they had of—what did she have—she called her “the Queen”. And it just was—I don’t know if a lot of that, in hindsight had to do with her being the first woman mayor. The good ol’ boys network in Tampa; certainly good ol’ boys network within the police and fire departments. I don’t know much about press issues really with what goes on with the Tribune and the St. Pete Times and their inside situation with editorials and stuff. But you know, Mayor Freedman was, and is, just a delightful person. And “the Queen” image was almost silly and it kind of took off in a life of its own.

RK: Did you often get calls from the media?

SL: Yes, oh yes.

RK: And did you find that you generally are quoted correctly?

SL: Pretty well back then. When it was union negotiations I generally would be quoted directly but sometimes the articles would take an anti-city slant that then would cause us difficulties trying to back peddle and make sure that the word got out to the employees that that was—that’s what happened at the bargaining table the day before but that wasn’t the whole story. And those were difficult times.

RK: And now it’s not as complex in that you don’t have the scrutiny?

SL: We don’t have the attention. Now we do sometimes towards the end of the contract negotiations, and then you deal like—you have to deal with the media at any point in time as far as making sure, or trying to make sure that they get their stories straight. But they don’t come and didn’t come during the Greco administration either on a daily basis to sit in through all of the sessions.
RK: Is the city clearly, and has the city clearly been in better fiscal shape since Mayor Freedman left office since 1995?

SL: Well I’m not qualified to really answer that. I’m not the numbers person as far as the budgets and things like that. I certainly have that impression. Whether it’s wrong or right, it certainly seems to me that there isn’t the crisis, the financial crisis that she had to deal with at times, with eliminating positions or freezing positions. I think she had some really tough challenges, and had she not handled them properly the city would be you know, paying for it dearly today.

RK: So [are] negotiations a little bit easier for you now in a certain sense?

SL: Well, I think they have been. I think the issues have changed—not so much about how much you’re going to spend but how you’re going to spend the money. And whereas before during the Freedman years, it was how much we could even spend. And, and our choices were very limited, we really needed to put all of the money into wages. Whereas today we’re really spending and we’re trying to switch the emphasis to benefits and other issues. So the, the issues do change over time but the…

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]

RK: We were speaking about the focus shifting somewhat at least to benefits for workers, as opposed to just wage increases.

SL: Well I think that’s primarily focused on when we compare ourselves to other jurisdictions. When we have been giving, in the past, some wage increases to get our wages up, some of the other jurisdictions, like the county have been enhancing their benefits rather than increasing their wages. So although we often pay more in some positions, if the benefits aren’t there then people are going to pick to go work for somewhere else. So you know, you’re always competing and looking at the other person just like the private sector does to make sure that you can recruit the best candidates for your jobs.

RK: Is the county in a certain sense a competitor? I don’t mean that in a negative sense, with you trying to get qualified people.

SL: Sure, they always are. Yeah.

RK: There’s, I’d just like to ask one or two more questions. Tell me if I’m wrong. With the sanitation department and maybe it’s not even a formal department—but is it true that sanitation workers work for a private company?

SL: No, no. There are sections of the city that are contracted, but I don’t know how
many. But very, very—our residential and commercial solid waste department, and it’s not subcontracted no. In the county it is possibly, or portions are.

RK: OK. I was thinking—I apologize. I was thinking during the Martinez administration there was a change towards that.

SL: There was a portion that was subcontracted out. But we have about 180 employees in that department.

RK: OK, so the majority is not contracted out?

SL: You know, I don’t know where the lines are drawn on that…

RK: Sure, sure. I was just wondering where city functions are contracted out, do you have any responsibilities at all, or is that handled between the private company and their employees?

SL: If it has been contracted out, no, our office doesn’t deal with it. If there is a decision to contract a piece of work out, why then our office is usually involved in handling what happens to the employees whose work is taken over by a contractor.

RK: My final question, as far as Mayor Freedman, how would you characterize her mayoral style? Every leader has a type of style, and I think you’ve kind of hinted at it already…

SL: Well I think she was definitely hands on. She wanted to be in the know. Always briefing her, certainly after every negotiation session or you know, every other one. Certainly briefing her on discipline cases. Anything else that might have attention. She did have a lot of trust and confidence in leadership. We had a Chief of Staff, George Pennington, which I think was a good system of government, and similar to the Iorio administration where we have a Chief of Staff again. I think that that is a good way to manage government. And then she had administrators that also would administer the different departments. It was very orderly and I think she was, with her staff meetings and the way she organized things was able to be briefed frequently so that she was in the know. She did expect her department directors to manage their affairs. So she, rightly so wasn’t into the day to day [laughs] details.

RK: I think I have just one final question, even though I just said that was the final one…

SL: Alright [laughs].

RK: Regarding City Council, did you have to deal with individual City Council people much, or did you have to appear before City Council often?

SL: No, not very often. The only—every time we do a union contract we have to go over and City Council ratifies the agreement. And unless there’s remaining disputes with the
union, it’s just not a big deal at all. So it was rare that I had to deal with City Council. The fire issue that I mentioned earlier with the reduction of the work week, that was one issue that I did have to deal with City Council quite a bit on.

RK: Well thank you very, very much for talking with me, I appreciate it.

SL: Thank you.