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Bob Seth oral history interview by Robert Kerstein, November 10, 2005

Bob Seth (Interviewee)
Robert J. Kerstein (Interviewer)
RK: This is an interview with Mr. Bob Seth, on November 10, 2005. Mr. Seth was a personal bodyguard for Mayor Sandy Freedman. Thanks a lot for coming down here.

BS: Thank you.

RK: Can you tell us a little bit about your background, where you were born and so on?

BS: Yes I was born here in Tampa, 1940. Spent most of my life down in Port Tampa, which was a, at that time a separate little town, has since been incorporated into the city. Went to school locally, was in the service and came back to Tampa. Got married and moved to Seminole Heights and also went to Land O’ Lakes later in life. But in 1962 I joined the police department, was a traffic patrol officer on a motorcycle for a while, investigated accidents, hit and run detective. Moved over to check detective and towards the end of my career, I was in the intelligence, Criminal Intelligence Bureau. And they were charged with all the dignitary protection details.

When Sandy Freedman came into the office, we were charged with—our unit was charged with protecting her during the—she wanted a bodyguard during her working hours and we did that. As time went on, I became eligible for retirement and I talked to her and she decided that she’d like to have me full time with her. So I retired from the police department and became her full time bodyguard, personal protection person. And stayed with her for the full eight years she was in office.

RK: Do you know if the preceding mayor, Mayor Martinez, did he have a bodyguard as well?

BS: I worked with Mayor Martinez on, just on special events. He didn’t use a, a full time like Sandy Freedman did. He, if he was going to a large event, like Super Bowl—I went to Super Bowl with him, to all the Super Bowl parties and that kind of stuff when it was a real large crowd. A lot of times he would carry a person. And I think it was primarily to get the car parked easily [laughs]—that’s just my opinion [laughs].
RK: And do you have an understanding of why Mayor Freedman wanted you as a full time, during working hours, bodyguard?

BS: Well, as you probably know, Mayor Freedman was kind of a private person, and she was the first female mayor coming into Tampa. And I think her husband felt a lot more comfortable with her having somebody with her all the time. To the, with someone there, if she had to go a various times—particularly at night. So that’s how that originated I believe.

RK: In discussing the Freedman administration in the past with a variety of people. Some voiced a concern that the mayor had a bodyguard feeling there was a, perhaps a waste of tax payers money. I’m not sure what the motivation was for criticizing. Did you come across that at all?

BS: From time to time we had some people question why she had a bodyguard. But we never had anybody that I thought was upset about that. They just wanted to know why she would have one if the others hadn’t had it. But when you explain to them that she was the female, the first female mayor and that we did go out—we we were out quite a bit at night. She very seldom came home before nine, ten, eleven o’clock at night so, a lot of our activities were at night. And we did go into some unusual areas. She was, she really responded to anything involving city employees. If we had a city employee hurt, we went no matter what time it was. If it was any kind of riot or upset, any of the service or anything, she wanted to go to that which was really a little bit hairy at times in those situations because she probably shouldn’t have been in some of the areas she wanted to go into.

She wanted to ride through some of the areas at night to see how people were doing, what they were doing, that kind of stuff in the areas which was probably not done by most mayors before her. So she was real interested in how everybody in the city lived. And [she] wanted to go see if there was other areas they were doing something that she hadn’t seen before. She just wanted to go, she was real, I guess, curious about how the rest of the city lived and we, we visited parts of the city that probably most of the people haven’t seen. And we would go over there and you know, several times a month just to see what was going on.

RK: When I spoke to the mayor she suggested you might have some interesting stories about some of the events that you and she attended. Can you tell us a few?

BS: I had a, a couple of, I guess humorous stories. I guess the first one I can tell you about is, whenever we decided to start bringing—we brought other people on board. We had a regular team, security team from the police department. Everybody was a full time police officer that was on the team with the exception of me. And we picked these officers, we’d bring them in, try them out and see if we liked them and she’d have to approve them, naturally.
And we had one officer that came in who has since become a very high ranking individual in the police department. But at the time, he came to us, he was a, I believe a patrolman, could have been a detective. But he was a person that was wanting to do everything exactly right and was really on edge when he was with us. He wanted to make sure that what he did was right. And the first assignment he got by himself with her, he took Mayor Freedman and Bob Buckhorn to a party at Swann and Howard. And it was a private Christmas party for, I believe a civil engineer or an accounting firm, I’m not sure. There was quite a few people there. And of course this guy was real straight laced and was doing his job, standing by the wall. And Buckhorn, being the kind of guy he is, he’s kind of a, a guy that likes to—if he finds a weakness he likes to jump on it. And he knew this guy was, was real straight laced.

And Buckhorn happened to know two of the ladies that were there. And he talked these ladies into really putting the moves on this detective that was with us. And I guess embarrassed this guy really, really bad. He kept moving around the room trying to avoid these women and they were doing, telling him things that they probably shouldn’t have been telling him, what they were going to do to him. And it got to be—of course Buckhorn thought that was the funniest thing he had seen in a while. And that was talk of the City Hall for a while after that. And this, this fellow has since gone on. He is a very conscientious individual and has since gone on to become a high ranking individual in the police department.

But Buckhorn used to really do unusual things. We would go to churches. And sometimes churches have donation envelopes. I probably shouldn’t be saying this but anyway, Buckhorn would fill out one of these envelopes for like a thousand dollars and put this guy’s name on it, and of course they’d call the guy and wonder where his donation was. And that was just, just, add more fuel to the fire for Buckhorn. That was, that was one thing.

Another thing that happened to us that probably was the funniest thing that ever happened to the mayor—and I wasn’t there when this happened but I’ve heard about it many times. There was a fellow that was kind of my partner, police partner named Bob Wright. Now on the weekends he would drive the mayor because I was usually off on Saturday or Sunday. Back when she had probably been in office a couple of years, we had a pretty good program called “Q Zoo in the Mornings.” And the Q Zoo used to, one time a year go out to Lowry Park and do a Zoofest. And they’d bring in bands, it was really quite a big operation and, had thousands and thousands of people show up to this thing.

So the mayor was going—as she was going to either open it up or talk or something, I don’t know what she was doing, but she had to go. Bob Wright was driving, she was riding in the right front seat where she usually rode. Buckhorn was in the back. And as they came down Sligh Avenue headed west toward North Boulevard, there was a police officer in the street directing traffic. This was a young officer, his name was Leon Green. Leon has closed North Boulevard into Lowry Park because all the parking lots were full, so he was directing all the traffic to go straight on past Boulevard, go down to another entrance into the park in the backside. Well as Bob Wright came down the street, he
turned on the right turn blinker like he was going to turn onto Boulevard. And of course Leon was flagging him on. And as Bob got closer, it was obvious he was going to make the right turn. Well Leon stopped all the traffic on the street, and walked over to the car. And as he walked over to the car, Bob Wright was lowering the window down. Now you couldn’t see in the car because it had the heavy tinted windows. And Leon knew Bob Wright. And as he approached the car, Bob rolled the window down, and Leon as he walked up to the car said, *I should have known it was a fucking cop.* And at that time Bob Wright said, *Leon, do you know the mayor?* And of course Leon panicked, Bob Buckhorn was just rolling over in the back on the floor. Leon ran into the park, and it was unusual because Bob Wright’s wife was a sergeant, street sergeant. She was working off duty out there. Well Leon run up to her and said, *I’ve just been fired!* And she couldn’t understand what was going on of course. And by that time Bob had done pulled up and related the story to her and up to this day if Mayor Freedman sees Leon Green, she goes up to him, and makes sure—because he’ll, he’ll run if he sees her…. 

RK: [Laughs] 

BS: …he knows she’s coming. He’ll take off. But she always manages to speak to him. And she thinks that’s probably one of the funniest things she’s ever had happen. And poor Leon, he, he, I don’t know if he ever got over it or not. He was really upset about that. 

The other thing that happened, I was with her one night at the Shriners, I, I guess its Club, I don’t know, Memorial Highway. We had a big function. After the function [was] over, she said she had to use the restroom. So she went in the restroom. And I waited probably twenty, twenty-five minutes until she came out. And you know, it’s kind of hard for me to go into the ladies restroom to find out what she’s doing. And of course everybody basically is gone from the building because, because we were right at the end of it when everything was over. So when she decided to go in there, and there was a good thirty or thirty-five minutes before she finally came out. Well I asked her what had happened in there and what had gone on in there. Well she had gone into the stall, and when she closed the stall, the handle came off in her hand. And she couldn’t get out of the stall. And there was nobody in the restroom. So about after 20 minutes of waiting for somebody to come in, she managed to put her coat on the floor and crawl out under the stall, to get outside. Well, after she got out, she realized she had her purse on the hook inside the door. And Mayor Freedman, being pretty short could not jump high enough to get her hand in the door to get her purse off the inside of the hook. Well luckily towards the end, there was, a, a lady that came in that was tall enough to do that, and that’s why it took so long for her to get out, because she wasn’t leaving without her purse and she couldn’t get to it. So that was, that was another humorous little incident we had. 

RK: [Laughs] Any dangerous occasions where some harm was almost done? 

BS: Well, we had, we did have threats from time to time come to the police department for various reasons. And they never really panned out—the ones that came from the police department wasn’t much. We had a, a young man named James, I forgot his last
name, I’m sorry. But he used to come into the eighth floor where her office was out in the lobby. And at that time, the AIDS epidemic was going and this, this fellow was homosexual. He was real upset that she wasn’t doing more to combat the AIDS problem. And at one time he brought a, a bloody t-shirt in and had started throwing it around the room, and then we had to restrain him on that and, and get him out. But strange enough as time went on, he became a very good friend of hers, and he really liked her. So he went from being the bad guy to the good guy. And would go out of his way to do anything at all for us towards the end there. He, he did pass away but he was, went from one side to the other.

That’s a, we really had never had anybody come up and actually personally threaten her, no, on the street.

RK: Did you ever encounter any hate mail?

BS: Oh yeah, we used to get all of kinds. When I was in charge of the crayon mail, [That’s what] we called it, because we would get all kinds of people writing with crayons and things of—saying crazy things. And I had boxes of the stuff. Everything that would come in and if it looked like it was a nut case, I would get it. And there was some really crazy things. Not necessarily threats, just writing things I didn’t understand what they were talking about even though it was just, nutty, that’s my take.

RK: You resigned from the police department—oh, you retired, I’m sorry. When?


RK: Can you talk at all about some of the changes that occurred in the police department during the Freedman administration?

BS: Well the biggest thing that occurred that everybody always talks about is the fact that she took the police cars away. As you know, up to her, probably, I guess Martinez gave the police officers their cars to take home. So every police officer had a car. And one of the reasons they did that was because of parking at the police department was a little tight. And if you had the cars left off with shifts, it gets to be a problem in the parking down there. And the other thing was, officers took better care of their cars when they got to take them home. It was their car, and it also [would] give the supervisors a little hammer over them if they didn’t take care of the car, then they could lose the cars. So the cars were kept in pretty good shape. But somebody, and I, I don’t know who it was, convinced Mayor Freedman that that was costing the city a lot of money. They shouldn’t be spending that gas for these guys driving home. So she took the cars. And that probably did more to damage her reputation with the police department than anything she did. That was what they always talked about, was—and they still talk about it today, the fact [that] she took their cars. Now today they have their cars back, so, that was—but that was the one thing that really changed the police department’s feelings towards the mayor’s office.
RK: Was there an effort to recruit more minorities during the mayor’s office to the police?

BS: Oh yeah, she was very, very intent on, on having a balanced minority, you know—diversify the department, yes. She was, that was one of her major goals.

RK: Can you recall back to when you started, was it 1962? Were there any African Americans on the police force then, do you recall?

BS: I know of, of about four. One of them was a detective, and two of them, three of them walked the beats. They were all in the black areas of town. They didn’t know, stop whites, and they didn’t have anything to do with white individuals. They were strictly on that. I, as a white officer had a black problem with the, that would give me some problems, I would usually call one of those officers and they’d take care of the problem. And there was a, it was different world.

RK: In the police department itself at that point were the whites integrated with the African Americans?

BS: At that point?

RK: Yes.

BS: No, no. They would roll call with us, but they went on their own, did their own thing and we did our own thing. We didn’t, we didn’t deal with them during the day.

RK: Were there any other significant changes prior to the Freedman administration in terms of minority hiring?

BS: Oh yeah, well that stopped probably I would imagine, probably before Bobby Martinez took his first term. We started riding together, the blacks started to ride with the whites, and then we put a lot of the black areas and the white areas of town [inaudible]. And, and whites in black areas—because we didn’t you know, whites didn’t, we didn’t do much in the black areas of town either truthfully. That was pretty much two separate nations. And they controlled their areas and we controlled—try to control the white areas. But yeah, that, that was a different, different world.

I mean, the amount of force we used to cause arrests and that kind of stuff was completely different back then because we didn’t take the kind of abuse that the officers take today on the street. It was—you got hurt real quick if you messed with an officer back then. There was a lot of respect for the officers back then, a lot more than there seems to be now. And, and the tactics was a lot different. We didn’t I say, we didn’t put up with a lot of mouth and a lot of problems because you were going to go.

And of course back then we a little situation too where you could actually arrest somebody on suspicion. You didn’t have to have a crime, and you cold hold them for
three days on that suspicion. And detectives would go in usually the next day and talk to
them, and see if there was enough evidence to hold them for a charge. And they would
actually do the charge. But if he gave a detective a problem, the detective could put an
initial hold for another three days. So we could actually take a person out of service for a
week and your family wouldn’t know where you were. And that, you know, whether that
was good or bad or not, I don’t know. It seemed to have an affect on a lot of people.
They, they were a lot more cooperative back then [laughs]. So just, it was a different kind
of police department.

RK: And just so I understand it right, the whites—police officers only patrolled the white
areas?

BS: Well we went into black areas occasionally, like on a traffic stop or an accident,
something like that. But black officers didn’t investigate accidents or any of that stuff.
The white guys were the accident investigators. So if you had an accident and they would
want something like that. But if you had a, you know, problem in the, one of the streets
down there or something, we didn’t usually go in. That was usually—the black officer
who was in that area, he would take care of it. Well he, he didn’t have a lot of it—we
didn’t hear a lot that going on. They, they pretty much kept their areas pretty, pretty well.
It was very, very seldom you had any problems in black areas that I remember. I never
heard—I don’t remember ever going to the black areas, to do anything except maybe if, if
they got into a problem where they had a fight or something, whatever that—then just
help them out, but no, they would take care of it. And they knew everybody. And they,
mean everybody knew them, and they knew everybody. So if you ever had an incident
where they would say, you had a black suspect, you’d go to one of those black officers.
He could pretty much tell you who that was. You, you’d give him the description, he
could probably name him for you. So that was, it was a great thing.

I mean I remember the black detective was Sam Jones. Sam knew more about the black
population in Tampa, it was just unbelievable. If we ever had anything at all, everybody
always went to Sam, because he was the man that could probably put you on that guy. If
he didn’t, he put the word on the street, and shortly he’d get some information back about
it, about who that was. So, it was a, it was a different world. Like I said, it was just
different back then, it wasn’t like it is now. It’s—everybody was—we were tough,
probably a tighter knit group back then too, everybody looked out for each other a lot
more and, I mean, I don’t know that the [inaudible] but it’s a little different for me.

RK: You know if Mr. Jones is still alive?

BS: Not the elder Jones. His son was on the police department but he’s since retired and
gone down to the islands somewhere. I don’t know where he’s at. There is a couple, I
think it was, one black that actually made Captain, Dixon. I don’t know where he is or if
he’s still alive or not. He was the highest ranking black that I knew back then you know.

RK: In the ‘60s?
BS: Probably in the ‘70s. Something like that. But, that would have to be after they started riding together and everything. And, and then the blacks started making rank, you know. Up to that point you never saw a black sergeant or anything, I never saw a black sergeant. I, like I said, we had a black detective, but I don’t remember ever seeing a black sergeant. But then after he started moving up, then we, you, the whole thing started [inaudible]. Several of them moved up, and made rank and, was a little different than it used to be.

RK: You said that you, when they [inaudible], a group in the police department that guarded dignitaries?

BS: Yes.

RK: Can you tell us about some of the dignitaries?

BS: I was on, any time the secret service came into town, I stood—I was on with Reagan, I was on with the first Bush, I was on with Reagan’s daughter, I was on with Gerald Ford, and I think there was some people running for office back then I’m sure I should remember—I don’t remember their names, but I have—the secret service, when the local law enforcement works with them on these details, they give them a pin, it’s called an E-pin. It stands for law enforcement, it’s just a multi-colored pin with the letter E on it. And these, these pins, change color every, every city. So you never have the same pin. And I’ve got a, a, full case of these pins at home that, with, identifying who I was with for each pin, so, it’s interesting.

Yeah, I, I did that for five years, and I was kind of the guy in the intelligence bureau that did all of the stuff for the secret service for protection, so I kind of got an early start at that.

RK: Were you with the mayor when Queen Elizabeth came?

BS: Yes. I was.

RK: Did that work smoothly?

BS: It worked very well yes, we didn’t have any problems with that at all. We really didn’t anticipate any; we didn’t have any at all, it worked really well. Yeah, she was quite a, quite a lady.

RK: I remember when she came to the University of Tampa.

BS: Yes, yes.

RK: Did you have any dangerous situations with any of the dignitaries in Tampa?

BS: No, no. I don’t know if you know much about secret service stuff, but they’re pretty
detailed in what they deal in. You know, they know where to get through their defense you’d have to be pretty good. And they come out like a week ahead of time and start laying everything out, so it’s really—they’ve done it so many times it’s just, you don’t usually have any problems with that.

The only problem I ever had was, Sandy was in this Gasparilla parade, so, you know, they would throw things at her from time to time. That was just, drunks just being drunks. And Cuban sandwiches, beer cans, you know, not a lot, but occasionally we’d have one of those fly out of the crowd. And that was about the most dangerous thing we had in a large crowd that I remember now.

She went into some areas where we could have had some really, really good problems because of the fact we didn’t have the time to lay out the perimeters like we should. When we had some, some civil disturbances on the eastside of town, she wanted to go in there and she went in, but she probably shouldn’t have gone where she went as fast as she should—we should have had a little more coverage on that before she got in there. But it worked out fine, there was no problems, just made me nervous as the person who was responsible for her getting out of there safely. And you know, to go into those areas without the proper protection was not probably what I would have elected to do. Being not the one in charge, we went, so [laughs].

RK: How would you characterize Mayor Freedman as your, whatever term you want to use, supervisor, I guess?

BS: Oh she was, she was great. She’s probably the most considerate person I’ve ever seen. As an individual she’s, she’s just great. And she, Mayor Freedman always, always says she was the ideal politician, because if you ever told her about your family, she would remember names, and she would remember what your kids did and, and I mean, it was just amazing because she’d go back to, she’d see guys, people she hadn’t seen in you know, probably a year and she’d go up to them and it was just like they had ended the conversation and started over again. She could just talk to them about their family and, you know you said he was going to college—does he still have so-and-so for a teacher? And just, I never saw another mayor like that, I was just—it amazed me to watch her. She was, she was the ideal, I think, the ideal politician, I respect her. Because she, she has a memory like it is unbelievable. If you ever told her, she remembered it, I tell you.

RK: Did you go with her when she would for example, attend, just have personal meetings with members of the business community? Was that…?

BS: A lot of times. Now, a lot of times she would be go into a, a room with them, and I wouldn’t go in there with her. As long as I knew is she was in a room where she was safe. Yeah, I’d go, lead her up to the part where she would go into a private meeting or something. I wouldn’t go in that with her.

RK: Were there certain people in the business community she would meet with often, do you recall?
BS: Yeah, she had some, I’m trying to recall, not exactly—I know she had some she talked to quite a bit. They were always coming to the office. It was, you know, I remember specifically one, that’d be, let me think. I can’t tell you that she had, that she favored one over the other. I mean it was, being the mayor of course she’d have people always in there for various reasons. And then they’d come in there everyday she had meetings. We were, she was scheduled in meetings all day long usually. And from the time we hit the office until we left to go home at night, she had meetings. And then when she got home, we’d go out to functions at night. So…

RK: So it’s not an eight hour day?

BS: Oh no. We’d stop—they’d usually pick you up around seven, we’d get home between you know, nine, ten and eleven at night. So it was a, it was a full day. It was automatic.

RK: Do you have any memories of the later days of her administration as far as her feelings towards leaving office?

BS: No—I don’t know that she wanted to leave, but she knew she had to. But I, no—she, Mayor Freedman was, she was a super person. No, I can’t tell you anything like that.

RK: Mayor Freedman is known for trying to improve race relations in Tampa. Did you observe anything along those lines?

BS: Yes. Mayor Freedman really, really did go out of her way, I thought, to bring the black community in line with the white community as much as she could. She would, we went to a lot of meetings with them at night and during the day too. She was always trying to think of ways to improve their living conditions. She, we did a lot, I told you, a lot of going around in the evenings and seeing how people lived and what they did and why they did it. She wanted to know a lot about it. How those people lived and, and why they lived they way they did and how we could improve the ways that they lived. And I know one of her big things was trying to get the, what we called 22nd street, the assisted living areas over there torn down—she wanted to tear those down and rebuild them. And at the time there was some problem with the federal government not allowing that to happen. But now that since that has been changed and they have been torn down, and there is some new building going in there, so, I don’t know that she was instrumental in getting that started, I know that was her goal. At that point was to, to change people’s standard of living as much as she could.

RK: So you would say you had a, a good eight years or nine years with the mayor.

BS: Oh, oh yeah. We had a, we had—yes. It was a great, great time. Except for the hours, I, that’s the only thing that I would say was a—if there was a negative it was amount of hours. As far as working with her, you couldn’t ask for a nicer person to work with. And anything she could do for you she would. She was, she was a great, great person and
everybody that was on the team with us agreed with that. She would, some of the people in the police department didn’t care for her because of the car situation, but that was all, that was what it all went back to, the fact that she took the cars. They don’t want to tell you about the fact that she raised their salaries considerably while she was in there. They, they went from mediocre pay to very good pay while she was there. But the police department was kind of like that. When they get on something, they, they stay on one thing and the police—when the cars got their attention, that’s where they’re at. So—sad but true.

RK: And now you’re happily retired?

BS: Oh no, no. I went back to the police department when she left. And as a civilian, and I’ve been there for, I guess 18 years now. And so I’ve got actually 43 years with the city right now. And I’m still working with, with the police department. I work in the Westshore Business District and I’m in the, call it the Alliance police department. I take care of any problem the business district has, and any problem we can solve in the police department we solve it.

RK: Did Mayor Greco also have police protection?

BS: He, he was kind of like Martinez, he only used a driver when he needed one for a particular reason, just for an event that he thought it’d be nice, I guess to have a driver. Like I say, majority of the time, that was more for parking and getting them in there and taking care of the car, that kind of stuff. It really wasn’t that they wanted a personal protection guy, they wanted—now Mayor Iorio does use a person from the police department. I don’t know, she uses them during the day, I’m not sure at night what she does. But he’s with her during the day. Just uses one guy, so I, I don’t know what the schedule is or anything, but I know he is assigned to her.

RK: Thank you very, very much for speaking with me, Mr. Seth.

BS: Thank you Doctor, Thank you sir.