June 2005

Sonny Oppenheim oral history interview by Robert Kerstein, June 22, 2005

Sonny Oppenheim (Interviewee)

Robert J. Kerstein (Interviewer)

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RK: …Sonny Oppenheim who was the Administrative Aide to Mayor Freedman. Thank you for speaking with me, Sonny.

SO: You’re very welcome, it’s my pleasure.

RK: Can I ask a little about your personal history? Where were you born?

SO: In New Jersey, but I grew up in New York in Brooklyn.

RK: And…

SO: And got married at nineteen and came to Tampa with my husband, and raised my family here. And thought eventually if something interesting came along I would go to work outside the home, but I stayed home with my children until my youngest was in college. And something interesting did come along. I volunteered on a political campaign and was invited to go to work for a State Legislator, George Sheldon.

I had known Sandy Freedman since she was a little kid, socially. She was a little tennis player and we met through her parents. But I went to work for George, and when George lost his race for congress, he went to work for Levine Freedman, the law firm, and took me with him. And we, we re-met Sandy at the time. And George went to Tallahassee for a year and I went with him, but I really didn’t want to stay there, and Sandy was about to run for mayor. And I said *what I’d really like to do is go back to Tampa, and help Sandy in her political campaign*. And he said *we have a better idea. When Sandy becomes mayor, she’d really like you to go with her as her Aide*. Because she knew me, she knew my work at the law firm. And I thought that she wanted to bring in one person that was her own. She didn’t make any changes when she first became mayor. She kept the whole staff. Because she’d become mayor as Chair of City Council. She hadn’t gotten elected
until—she became mayor in July, the election wasn’t until the following March. So there was that interim period. So she didn’t make any changes, but she did want me to come along with her, and that’s how I got to work with Sandy.

RK: So you were there from the very beginning?

SO: From the very beginning. From July 1986.

RK: And what were your responsibilities as an Aide?

SO: Well, I kept—of course I answered the phones, took all the calls of people calling the Mayor. [I] kept her schedule, went through her mail and directed it, although she liked to see it too—you know, the appointments, to see if she was open or not open, the complaints, whatever; [I] did the proclamations. But mostly it was directing the telephone calls, because people would finally call the Mayor if they’re angry about something, they’re pretty angry. And she took a lot of them, but I tried to direct people to where they could get the help they needed without harassing and haranguing the mayor. I was her gatekeeper.

I also made her appointments; did a schedule—a daily schedule for her; presented a weekly schedule to the press because they wanted to know what she was doing. Every Friday they would get a list of the following week’s appointments. They also wanted to see her mail, which they did, after she did. And then they realized it was kind of boring and so they gave up after a little while, but a lot of them wanted to see it for you know, two, three or four weeks and then they’d finally not bother with it anymore.

We had a lot of interesting phone calls, we had a lot of regular—regulars who called to complain. And when you first take office, everybody that has a gripe about City Hall, starting with the new administration, figures they’re going to “start over again.” But that was basically what I did, which was a busy day. It was a great job.

RK: How did you determine who would get appointments because I assume many more people wanted appointments than you had time for?

SO: Well not necessarily, not necessarily. I always ran it through her, I never made those determinations by myself. So she determined who got the appointments. Most of the time, when somebody called with a complaint, we could deal with it without having to come to see the mayor. Because we gave it to the right department. And when it came through the Mayor’s office, they responded, which was very nice.

RK: Did you follow up? How did you know if they responded?

SO: Well I worked with the other folks on that floor; there were, she had—the Mayor had Super Chiefs as you probably know. And each Super Chief had an assistant. And so when someone called complaining that a ditch in their neighborhood was a mess, we would go—I would go to the person who handled the Department of Public Works, or the Parks
Department, whoever was responsible for that particular thing, and they would handle it and follow up. Sometimes someone would call and say, *look I have this problem and I don’t know how to deal with it, who do I talk to?*, which was easy, because I would direct people, I would know who to contact to get people’s problems solved without them having to go through the mayor.

RK: Is there any way you can recall what were some of the major complaints…

SO: They were little…

RK: …not specific instances, but did many more people call about the water pressure…?

SO: People would call about—no, code enforcement I think. That was probably the major complaint. And that was very frustrating too for some people because you can’t foreclose on a homestead. So you can only give them notices, and they go before the Code Enforcement Board, and they get fined, and it’s a very long, tedious process. And we still have the same problems, a lot of them.

RK: So more code enforcement than anything else?

SO: Probably more code enforcement…

RK: And that would be, for example, houses…

SO: Debris in the yard; there’s an inoperative vehicle there; the place is a mess, it’s a falling down mess—that kind of thing.

RK: Anything else that you recall in terms of types of complaints? Anything about inadequacy of police protection for example?

SO: No. No, I don’t remember anything, anything like that. It was mostly neighborhood kinds of stuff, you know. *Speeding in the neighborhood, can’t we do something, can’t we put speed bumps in*, that kind of thing.

RK: I just spoke with…

SO: It’s local stuff, it’s all local stuff.

RK: OK. I just spoke with Steve LaBour recently, as you know, who was the liaison. Did you have neighborhood organizations calling—like the presidents of different neighborhood organizations?

SO: Occasionally we dealt with a couple of those people but they, they knew who to deal with. Yeah, [there were] a lot of very good programs when Sandy was the mayor, some of which have kind of dissipated. We had a program called “Peer to Peer”.
RK: What was that?

SO: Where the neighborhood people were given postcards, and if they had a problem in the neighborhood with the Code Enforcement, they would directly fill it out and mail it to our office. And it was handled that way. So then the neighbors got involved in what was happening in their own home. Sidewalks too. We asked them to give us priorities on which side, which streets they wanted sidewalks on. We were very neighborhood oriented and most people who deal with the city or any government, are interested in their own—it’s the “not in my backyard” syndrome. All government is local, everybody’s interested in their own crime, the hookers on Nebraska Avenue, the code enforcement problems. Those are mostly...

RK: What about builders? Because some used to suggest it was too difficult to get permits and so on. Did you get complaints?

SO: Sandy well, we streamlined the—a lot of the building permits at the time, because there were complaints about that. Sometimes trees, they make—they won’t let me cut down the tree. The treehuggers are...which they got no sympathy from me, but I tried very hard you know, not to inject myself. The only people that really upset me were the bigots, and I put them on hold. Until I would realize I’m talking to a citizen who I—let them, let them jam up for a while and then I’d put them on hold again for a while. But otherwise you know, people have legitimate gripes sometimes. And generally I was on their side. I mean these are citizens who have complaints with the city, and I would...There was a guy in engineering who would call me that woman in the mayor’s office because he would have to explain to me why we couldn’t put stop signs on the corner, if we couldn’t put speed bumps in and these people have a speeding problem in their neighborhood—and why can’t we do something about it? So I tried to advocate with for the citizens who were making the complaints.

RK: Now what about the City Council people, do they often call for appointments?

SO: No.

RK: So then...

SO: Not that I can recall. I don’t even remember who was on City Council when she was mayor to tell you the truth. I didn’t keep up with that.

RK: So there wasn’t that much person--personal communication?

SO: No. No, no—Sandy would initiate a lot of appointments herself. You know, she would say I’d like to see, I’d like to see so and so, or I want to have lunch with this one or find out when so and so can come and see me. She would—I mean, she was the boss, she was the one who determined who she would see and I was the one who would fit it in to the calendar.
RK: Did you ever get to meet any famous people?

SO: Oh sure. Henry Winkler was here when he made that movie with Burt Reynolds—he’s a very, very nice man. Really nice, very accommodating. Of course Richard Simmons was a real character. The Queen was here. I was among the many who stood in the line when she walked through. Sandy had some good stuff happening. She had dinner with the Queen; she met Ron Brown when he was visiting Tampa during the Clinton campaign.

RK: And he was Head of the Department of Commerce at that point?

SO: No, he was working with the Department of Commerce when he was head of the Democratic Party at the time. [I] met the President a couple of times because Sandy was one of the first people who welcomed him to Tampa. The first time he came to Tampa, nobody knew who he was. Then President Clinton…

RK: President Clinton, did he actually come up to the office?

SO: No. No, he didn’t come to the office, I went to a couple of the events—I can’t remember—one of them was in a gymnasium. And the other was after a speech he made when there were demonstrations about NAFTA, I don’t remember the particular occasion. But—and she was invited to the White House a couple of times. She was invited to the White House—to me it was exciting—for the signing of that peace agreement between Arafat and, was it—it wasn’t [Menachim Begin], it was [Yitzak] Rabin that day. They called, the White House called, and I—we didn’t have cell phones then. And I tracked her down because I was so excited about that invitation. And she and Mike—she and her husband went. She was in the audience that day.

RK: Do you have any, kind of, funny stories?

SO: Other than the Japanese, I’m sure there were things that happened that were funny and…

RK: Can you tell us about the Japanese?

SO: Oh, the Japanese—well, we did a lot of proclamations. We proclaimed practically everything, from diseases to honoring people retiring, to organizations that were doing good work. So there were a group of people who were clowns, and they would visit children in hospitals and do all kinds of nice things, and so they had a week or a month—I can’t remember which, and we did a proclamation. And when they would come up to get presented with proclamations, Sandy would don herself in clown outfits. She had big shoes, she had a little red nose, she had funny glasses. And she’d march out there into the lobby and present the proclamation, and they would get their picture taken. And there she was in her little clown outfit with the red nose, when the elevator door opened, and there was a group of visiting Japanese business men who were a little bit early for their
appointment. And the look on their face was priceless. When they looked at the Mayor of Tampa with her little red nose and a clown. So they must have been thinking, so this is what’s wrong with American business! [laughs] It was funny. Of course, you know, we all laughed and they, they kind of bowed and grinned, but I’m sure they didn’t realize what was going on. We’ve had—that was one of the funniest ones, that’s the one I remember the most. But I’m sure we did…

We had, we had a lot of nice things happen with—when we became an “All America City” and we went to Arizona and we won one of the awards for our programs. One of them was the “Peer to Peer” program. The other was “Paint Your Heart Out”, which was another program that Sandy started which was—is—still going on.

RK: What did that involve?

SO: It involves painting the homes of people who can’t afford to do it themselves. A one day, one Saturday in April, we chose, we had armies of volunteers, we had a group who determined which houses to paint. We did as many as one hundred homes that day. Luckily it hardly ever rained on us, on that Saturday of April. Once it did, I think. And almost every business and organization in the city would field a team, and we would paint a house of some deserving—generally seniors who needed the work, and we got that through code enforcement people. And the idea for “Paint Your Heart Out” came from the gentleman whose name I can’t remember now, who was in charge of the code enforcement office. Because it was something I think had been done I think in Pittsburgh, which was his hometown. He came to us with the idea. I don’t remember what the third thing was—we go three things. One was “Paint Your Heart Out”, one was “Peer to Peer”. Maybe some of the others will remember what the third thing was that we won the award for.

RK: I want to ask another question about people calling. Every city has different organized groups that try to influence public policy. Did you have many representatives of groups call trying to get an appointment who were concerned about housing policy or economic development policy or whatever it might be?

SO: Oh sure. I wouldn’t say many, I think when other people did want to meet with the mayor about policy, she always met with them. There was no reason not to. She met with a lot of different people. I wonder if she still has copies of her schedule. Probably not, I don’t know whether she kept any of that.

But every day I would print out, I’ll show you because I still do it for Everad [shows Kerstein the schedule]. I would print out a schedule, what time and where, and usually, what it was for. And then the weekly one of course, would go to the press. And then put it on her desk with a folder. On one side—on the front of the folder would be the schedule, and inside the folder would be the copy of the invitation or whatever information was about that particular event. You know, she always was—there were nights when she would go to two or three dinners and never get a bite of food, because the mayor was expected to attend. There were times when there was an emergency, and remember
particularly—I don’t know whether it was a riot or a fire or a disturbance, but something bad had happened, and she had showed us—she had showed up with a fancy outfit on because she had been to a formal dinner. But that happened too, a lot—not a lot but, it happened, where she was pulled away from something important. But there were always events, those kinds of events, and I would, I would just merely put on the invitation whether she was open or not, or whether she had two or three other things going that night. As long as she was out anyway, she may as well stop and visit. Organizations I don’t remember specifically.

RK: What about the press? Did you get many calls from the press?

SO: Well they were there almost everyday, they were always around. And whatever we do is public information. And that was my attitude toward it, and that was her attitude toward it. And so when they wanted to see her, they generally got to see her. When something was happening—she didn’t have a, she had press conferences when she was making announcements, when something was going on, the room was full of press. But there was generally somebody there from the Tribune or the St. Pete Times wanting to know what her schedule was, and would ask about this particular appointment or that particular appointment.

RK: Do you think she got a fair deal from the press in general?

SO: Mostly yeah, mostly yeah. There were a couple of columnists who weren’t. But one finally—I never understood why she continued to talk to her but she did, and finally she got fed up with her. Because whatever she said never got to where it was supposed to, or it was garbled, or it didn’t make it at all. And so she just stopped talking to her, but I can’t remember.

RK: Who was that columnist?

SO: Mary Jo, Mary Jo Melone.

RK: From the St. Pete Times?

SO: Who has a, had a dismal view of the world, poor thing. But generally people like Troxler—Troxler actually called once and said, *do you think I was unfair?* I said—and I told him, and Sandy felt the same way (we generally had the same reaction to things), *no, you were not unfair, you—you know, you disagreed with her, which is fine. But you weren’t unfair about disagreeing with her.* Which is, you know, that’s the way it is when you’re in public life. But I think generally, you know, there were times when they—you felt like they were intrusive, but that was their job.

RK: What type of, kind of managerial style would you say that Mayor Freedman had?

SO: Very inclusive. She would listen to what everyone had to say, and then she’d make the decision. She wanted people to tell her what they really thought. She wasn’t a yes-
person. She didn’t expect people to agree with her all the time. She would discuss—she would argue, they would argue sometimes. But she always wanted to hear what other people had to say.

RK: Was she a tight manager, in other words, did she try to ensure that the bureaucracies carried through on whatever was the policy?

SO: She wasn’t no, she didn’t. She expected them to, but she wasn’t a what-do-you-call-it kind of a manager that’s got to have….

RK: Micro-manager?

SO: Yeah, she didn’t micro-manage. She expected people to do their job. And when they didn’t… I think one of her regrets is that she didn’t let enough people go. When they didn’t do their job, she was pretty, pretty easy with them. More often than she should have been probably.

RK: Why was that do you think?

SO: I don’t know. I think a lot of—I’ve only worked for a couple of people who are at that level. They don’t like to fire people. They feel a responsibility. And they don’t like to let people go, you know, they think of the family and the whole, the whole nine yards. And she’s like that, she was like that. She didn’t like to fire people. George was like that too—he used to send somebody else to fire people.

RK: Is that George Sheldon?

SO: Yeah.

RK: You used to work for him?

SO: Yeah, [I] worked for him. He actually sent someone else to do the firing which was really bad. But Sandy fired very few people during that, almost ten years that she was mayor.

RK: Now you were on the eighth floor then, is that correct?

SO: Yeah, the mayor main floor.

RK: And were there several other heads of bureaucracies there?

SO: There were all—the Super Chiefs. The so-called Super Chiefs were up there.

RK: Can you explain that?
SO: Yeah. Instead of just having, well, we called them “Super Chiefs” for lack of a better word, I think. It was Bob Smith, was Head of Public Safety, which included the Fire Department and the Police Department. Joe Abrams was Parks and Recreation. Now they were each two separate departments who had their own directors, but he was over them. And Mike Salmon was Public Works, which was Waste Sewer Department, the Solid Waste Department, and then Public Works Department. And so they kind of oversaw the works of—and those were the people that were senior staff. They and Lou Russo, the Finance Director and George Pennington, the—I forgot what his title was…

RK: Was he Chief of Staff?

SO: Chief of Staff. And then there was John Dunn who was Government Relations, I guess you’d call it. Kathy Betancourt was Government Relations. She was senior staff when she was in Tampa, but of course she was in Tallahassee and did a lot of traveling for the city. [I’m] trying to think of who else was senior staff…

RK: Was Bob Buckhorn senior staff?

SO: Bob was senior staff. And, and then LaBour, was—when he came in and worked with neighborhoods that was very big too. That was something that she started from scratch. Absolute scratch. There were no—there was no communication. There really were no neighborhood organizations. There was a loose amalgamation, but she hired LaBour to do just exactly that. When she left office, from nothing—I forgot on what the number was—there were fifty, sixty, I don’t know what they’re on now, even more.

RK: Is there anyway you can describe a typical day, in other words, did the mayor meet with the heads, with the Super Chiefs like weekly or daily?

SO: There was a senior staff meeting every week. And of course she was always available to them, we were all, you know—I don’t know whether you’ve ever been up to the eighth floor, but it’s not a very large area. It was her office and then right across the hall were the Super Chiefs and their aides. As a matter of fact, in those days, each one shared an aide; they didn’t even have their own secretaries. There was one woman who would work for two of them. And… [phone rings]

SO: She was available to them on a, you know, regular basis. They would come on in when she wasn’t meeting with someone and to see her, they didn’t make appointments to see her, because she was right there. And she was very good about always letting me know where—I mean even if she was going around the corner to talk to the finance people, she would let me know that she was leaving her office. So I always knew where she was, because as I said, we didn’t have cell phones in those days.

RK: Were there many, do you remember any kind of, difficult times? Because any mayor goes through good times and bad times so to speak?

SO: Well there were, yeah, there were things. Like when we were building the
Convention Center and the budget started to escalate and she was concerned about that. There was the time when, when her husband was involved with that bank thing, which was the most difficult time. Mike, who had been falsely accused of being involved, in some sort of—I don’t even remember the details...

RK: I remember it was Keys Bank...

SO: Key Bank.

RK: Key Bank.

SO: He had been falsely accused and it was very difficult for both of them. It was a tough time. But that was personal and, and she, you know, she kept on doing her job. But it was difficult for her. Because the press was after her. And I remember this one time, when she was going down to her car and one of the reporters—one of the good guys as I used to call him—shoved the microphone in her face, and she just kept on walking; it was hard, it was hard. Because she always had a good relationship with him. But as I said, they were doing their job. There were difficult decisions; there were always things that came up. But with—she would confirm with the folks that she, whose, you know, whose opinion she respected. And it was the business community too—the Chamber of Commerce people. Then there was the Bamboleo thing. That was when she was mayor too.

RK: Yeah, do you have any recollection of that?

SO: Not a whole lot. I remember Bob Gilder with his Bamboleo, which I never thought a whole lot of. And it was time for something like that to happen, it was time.

RK: That was when the Super Bowl was going to be in...

SO: The Super Bowl was coming, and they didn’t want to come because they found out that the Krewe was very discriminatory, very—it was a very elitist group. It always was. It still is. But now there are 25 other Krewes so it doesn’t matter. But they actually cancelled the parade. She also was offending by this “kidnapping of the mayor.” She felt like it was sexist. And there were a lot times when she was the only woman in a meeting. And those were the days too when there were very few women who achieved in politics. And there was always that sexist thing, always. There was—the police didn’t like her, because they didn’t want to work for a skirt, and she was actually told that by someone who is still in the police force whose name I can’t remember—I get mental blocks with people I don’t like, it’s true.

And then she took away the cars, which really…but that was a budget thing. And 80% of the police personnel were living outside the city—those cars weren’t being parked in the city. So that was a difficult time too. That was at—she was not reluctant to make difficult decisions, and she took the flack when she did. But that’s part of being in public life. It’s not always easy.
RK: Do you remember any especially good times?

SO: There were a lot of good times. The, as I told you, the invitation to the White House to witness a historic event was a wonderful thing. Meeting the Queen—you know, meeting the celebrities and getting the fun stuff, that was, that was nice. The award for the “All America City” was nice. You’d get a lot of nice feedback from people that actually say thank you for doing nice things. Mostly it was good, mostly it was always, it was really good.

I think she enjoyed being the mayor. Because it’s the kind of a job, as anyone will tell you who’s ever done it, where you can get things done. You can actually initiate something and see it through, and see it happen. There aren’t many jobs in politics where that works.

RK: Were you involved in her campaign in 1991 that she won?

SO: I was working at the time in the ’91 campaign. Well you know, you can’t be involved in a campaign and work for the city unless it’s on your own time. So I don’t remember. You know I remember doing volunteer work on Saturdays or I remember going to the campaign office on Saturdays. And I remember making phone calls once or twice in the evenings, but not especially, no.

RK: So the office still carried on as usual?

SO: Oh yeah, absolutely. It has to. And you’re very, very careful. Because if you’re politically aware at all you know, that perception is reality. I mean that’s the number one rule—perception is reality. And so you’re very careful, particularly so that there never is a taint, that there’s never a problem, that you’re doing everything that you’re supposed to do. Because you know, you don’t want to reflect badly on her, that’s the last thing you want to do. So you’re very, very careful.

RK: How was the transition from Mayor Martinez, who preceded Mayor Freedman, and your administration? Was it smooth? Did they assist you in terms of getting going?

SO: Well you know I didn’t actually—I actually started the day she became mayor. That was my, that was my first day of employment. And so the transition had really already been taken care of. And as I said, she kept the whole senior staff. So I doubt that there was any transition at all, because there was nobody left. And they stayed on—Pennington was there for most of her administration, so was Russo. The difference is, and now I don’t know about the Super Chiefs. I think she initiated that, but I’m not sure because I wasn’t there. I walked in and picked up the phone and tried to order supplies. I mean, I was not—I am not in the bureaucratic world, and then I found out I needed forms and, and…

RK: Were things tight fiscally, just in terms of your role?
SO: Oh no, oh no. Well I didn’t, I didn’t have any money spending—the things that we purchased for the—the frames for the proclamations were about as far as we went. I had walked into the office and there was a computer there, with a system I had never used. So I spent a day with a, with a disk—an instructional disk, and I learned it. You know, you learn what you have to learn.

RK: What about the transition from your administration to Mayor Greco’s? Did his people start coming in and just learning how things worked?

SO: You know, I was moved. When Sandy—when we knew that that administration was ending, in those days we had a ten year vesting—you had to be with the city for ten years—Sandy had been mayor for eight and a half. So she wanted—and I wanted to stay on so that I could be vested. Because as I said, I didn’t start working outside the home until my youngest kid was in college, so I was no kid. And I felt, well, I better start thinking about getting vested at least. And so Sandy moved me to a—we have classified and unclassified positions. When you work in a mayor’s office you’re unclassified...[phone rings]...

RK: There’s classified and unclassified?

SO: Classified and unclassified. Anybody that works on the eighth floor is unclassified which means they go when the administration goes. I don’t know what Greco—well, Greco did make a lot of changes. But he allowed me—and she moved me to go to work with Everad who was doing graffiti at the time...

[End Tape 1, Side A]

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[Tape 1, Side B]

RK: So you went to work with Everad?

SO: So I went to work with Everad, and became a classified position, and Mayor Greco allowed me to stay. I knew Mayor Greco from I can’t remember where. But you know how gregarious he is, he’s—everybody’s his friend. And so we knew each other from somewhere, and Lee Duncan, and Parke Wright Jr. both contacted him for me on my behalf, and asked him to allow me to stay on with the City. And I don’t know that ever had any concern about doing that, because there was never a problem with me staying on.

RK: And who was Lee Duncan?

SO: He was City Councilperson. He was on City Council at the time.

RK: And who was Parke Wright?
SO: Parke Wright III was a very prominent Tampa citizen whose idea—what was his idea—I don’t remember what he started…

RK: He was involved with THAN early on, I know.

SO: Was he? He’s the one that started it then. He was a great—he was fine man, a very nice man.

RK: And what is Everad’s last name?

SO: Archer.

RK: And what does he head?

SO: Women and Minority Business. Which is what he—we started doing, after graffiti, which seemed to become under control. He was moved to the Women and Minority Business office, which is what we do now. We notify—we have a list of certified women and minority owned businesses. And we notify them, I—my job is to notify them of bid opportunities when they come along. From the City of Tampa, from Department of Transportation, anywhere I can get information. I notify folks that do that particular kind of work that there’s an opportunity to bid on it. Which is all we do, which is what we do.

Everad does a lot more. He actually monitors projects that women and minority businesses are working on within the city.

RK: And did this program begin during the Freedman administration?

SO: I’m not sure, I think it started about then. She also started, what did we call it—the language, the thing about language—what did we call that, did anybody mention that...?

RK: The “racial slur policy”?

SO: The “racial slur policy.”

RK: Yes, yes. Do you have recollections of that?

SO: I remember that, and she started that, and I don’t know [that] anybody ever—I think we actually tried to fire a couple of people, but I’m not sure anybody ever was actually punished. And I think that kind of went by the wayside after a while. That’s what happens in politics, you know. Somebody starts something that’s really good, and the next person doesn’t find that a priority. The housing programs—we had a wonderful housing program. I mean there were people that, there are people who have homes now who wouldn’t have been homeowners had it not been for Sandy and the programs that we started. But they don’t always stay when the next mayor comes along and that’s not a priority. The concentration goes elsewhere. And that’s the way it is in politics actually.
RK: Did you work for the housing program for a while?

SO: Well we were housed in that building. Everad and I have been vagabonds. We’ve been, we’ve been in about four or five different locations. And that was one of them—we were over at the German-American club. And that’s where the housing program is, and so I know those people. And…

RK: Did you notice the change from when…?

SO: Oh yeah, well, you know, with the LaBrake scandal and all the rest of it, I don’t think they’re selling houses yet. Part of it was a scandal, but part of it was Greco’s concentration on Ybor City, which was a whole other thing, and the trolley and all the rest of it. It’s a question of priorities, it’s really a question of priorities, and that’s what it’s all about.

RK: And what was your impression of Mayor Freedman’s top priorities?

SO: I think she, her—her priorities were neighborhoods and how—and that’s how the housing program evolved, that’s how “Paint Your Heart Out” evolved, that’s how all of those kinds of things evolved. The Convention Center was wonderful, I mean that was nice to have. Having the Ice Palace downtown, those were important things, and it was nice, it was good. Curtis-Hixon Park was another one. There were a lot of nice things, and they were all important. But basically I think, it was the neighborhoods.

RK: And do you think that was appreciated by the citizens, that priority?

SO: You know it’s funny, I don’t think it was at the time, I think it is now. I think a lot of the things that she did weren’t appreciated until after she was out of office. And people come up to her and tell her that, oh, I wish you were back, this, this and this. I think that probably happens.

RK: When you look back at your, I guess eight years with the mayor, how do you reflect on those years in general?

SO: They were wonderful, they were great. It was, it was the best job. Because it was right there, where things were happening. She’s a great person. I really love her. She was easy to work with, easy to be with. There’s not an ounce of—she, she did things that I was so proud of. When men would sit…

[skip or pause in tape]

SO:…when someone would say, well, we can’t find any Hispanics or we can’t find any African Americans, or there aren’t enough women for this particular committee. Because she’d look at a list and she’s say, there’s no—there’s no diversity here. I want to see some other names, throw them, throw in. And they’d say, who, who? We don’t know. And
she’d give them a list. She was always making lists of these are the women, *these are the men, these are the black, these are the Hispanic, these are the people that should be involved in this program, let’s have a balance*. And she did that a lot.

RK: Did some people resent that?

SO: Probably. I mean, I don’t know whether they resented it or not. But she was the mayor and they generally went along with it. It’s interesting that way. [laughs] That’s what happens. But those are the kinds of things that tell you a lot about a person, that tell me a lot about her. She was always doing things like that. She expected other people to do that too.

RK: So it was a very positive eight years for you?

SO: Oh very much so, very much so.

RK: And now you’re working for the WMBE program, and do you expect this to continue for while?

SO: Oh, I hope so, I hope so. Well it’s an ordinance, I mean, it has to be a balance. It gives small—first of all, it’s great for small business, it’s great for local business, although we do have members who are from St. Pete, or even as far away as Miami and even out of the state. But I’m a believer in hometown hiring. Like keeping—you know, developing your own community first. And these people mostly work in the city, they’re small business people who have an opportunity. We have a new program, just an SBE program, a small business program. You don’t have to be a minority; you just have to be a small business. And they’ll also have opportunities to bid. Only against one another, which gives small businesses a leg up, a chance to move in. And that’s all good, I mean, it can’t be—small business is supposedly the backbone according to Republicans.

RK: You’re housed here in West Tampa on Howard and Main Street in the City office. Mayor Freedman emphasized neighborhood rehabilitation. And this is many years after she’s left office. Do you see changes in this neighborhood, which is historic, Hispanic and African American neighborhood?

SO: I don’t see it yet. I think they’re talking about it now. Now they’re just beginning to talk about it. But our next door neighbor’s just done a lot of remodeling here. The people—there are businesses that have been in West Tampa for a long time and they’re starting to do things. This, this particular one did a lot. And it’s happening slowly. It’s, it’s a different—this mayor is going to hopefully concentrate on things like that. It doesn’t happen overnight. You can’t bring economic development just because you want to. There have to be—I wonder where these people, who live in this public housing, where do they buy their groceries? A lot of them don’t have cars. There’s no supermarket here, they go to this little bodega. I mean there’s things like that going on in different pockets all over. And you don’t—you have to do something to lure the Publix’s and the Winn-Dixie’s and whoever. And they try it and sometimes it doesn’t work.
RK: Thanks a lot for spending the time to speak with me this morning, Sonny.

SO: My pleasure Bob.