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Paul Wilborn oral history interview by Suzette Berkman, January 12, 2006

Paul Wilborn (Interviewee)
Suzette Berkman (Interviewer)

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Tape 1; side 1 begins

Suzette Berkman: —History program of the University of South Florida Library, it’s Thursday, January 12, 2006, 5, 6. A warm sunny day in Tampa Bay, it’s gorgeous, and I have before me Paul Wilborn, who is currently Creative Industries’ manager for the city of Tampa. Hi, Paul.

Paul Wilborn: Good day, how are you?

SB: I’m great (laughs), thank you.

PW: I’m glad to be here.

SB: I am so glad you are and thank you for agreeing to this interview, ah—

PW: It’s a treat; it’s an honor. I am glad to be asked. No one ever wants to interview the guy who has always interviewed everybody else. This is fun.

SB: Oh, my gosh. Well that’s true; you have quite a history of interviewing, for sure.

PW: I have always been on the other side of the issue.

SB: We’d kind of like to start at the beginning, and I was wondering if you would share with us where you born, the year, you don’t have to say your age; we can do the math. (Wilborn laughs)

PW: I was born at Tampa General Hospital. It was March 30, 1952. A date, which will live in infamy—

SB: (laughs) As it is for all of us.

PW: And, ah, the first child of Boyd and Louise Wilborn. And my mom was the granddaughter of Sicilian immigrants who came to Tampa around the turn of the century,
and were part of that whole immigrant experience. And my dad was the other big experience of the twentieth century. I guess [it] was World War II and he was in the Air Force during the war and was stationed in this area and met my mom at a USO dance.

SB: What did he do, Paul? Aside from the war.

PW: He was an educator. He had a Master’s in English and well, he ended up at, in vocational education for Hillsborough County and at the time of his death, he was running all the vocational schools for the Hillsborough County system. He got to design, design schools. He really was a frustrated architect too, so he built Tampa Bay Tech and redid the Erwin Center, which is on Hillsborough Avenue and started at Brewster, but he was ultimately over all the vocational programs. He loved that.

SB: My goodness, that’s something. Did your Mom work?

PW: She didn’t work until we were about 12 or so and then she became a guidance counselor in the school system. She did some other jobs but mostly she kind of, waited until we were a little bit grown.

SB: You have siblings?

PW: I have a brother that is four years younger, who won’t admit to being four years younger; he’d rather be ten years younger and he’s, ah, his name’s Steven, and he is a professional singer and lives in San Francisco.

SB: Like a church singer?

PW: He’s a church singer, he did Broadway, did a bunch of Broadway road shows and really had some good success in shows. But ultimately that lifestyle; on again, off again, employed, unemployed just did not suit his constitution and he got to an age where he was no longer cast as the young leading man but not old enough to be the dad. He was sort of, in the middle, and he decided it was time to pursue—he always had a church singing job so that’s turned out to be a better career than ever and he travels 30 weeks a year, makes CD’s in New York, and magnificent CD’s with the Harlem Boy’s Choir and sells them like hotcakes on the road and people. It’s been very successful.

SB: Does he have a family?

PW: No, no, he’s never married. He’s always been a pistol. He’s danced to his own drummer.

SB: Were kind of, the two of you pistols? I don’t know, that would have been interesting growing up—

PW: (laughs) I was the sweet one.
SB: Oh, okay, that was interesting. Were you bossy as an older brother?

PW: No, I was always the nice one. My parents had me and then four years later said, This kid is so good, we’re going to have another one. And my brother was trouble from the start.

SB: But you grew up in Ybor City?

PW: My mom’s family grew up in Ybor City. We grew up in Temple Terrace. We moved—my parents built a house out there. It was the height of the baby boom and everybody in Temple Terrace had kids our age. And it was [a] shock, a block full of kids everywhere you turned and there was a river there and a golf course and woods. It was a real idyllic place to grow up and go to school.

SB: What was it like then?

PW: Temple Terrace, it was a fairly well developed place. You could go two blocks and there’d be deep woods and so for a kid—and there was all this stuff on the river, so we could be like little Huck Finns with our little boats and you could disappear and go into the woods. And you know, there’d be houses not far from you but you’d be in deep, deep in the woods. What a great place for a kid to play and so it was a really, it was a nice situation. Both sets of grandparents lived nearby. It was a very stable neighborhood and stable family.

SB: Where did you go to school?

PW: Ah, Temple Terrace Elementary, a junior high right near there. That was back in the days when there was a junior high—

SB: Greco?

PW: Uh-huh, and then King High School, which was where my future boss, Pam Iorio, also went. And then the University of South Florida. It’s hard to break away. My parents—my dad was an educator and we never thought we were not rich or something, but we certainly just well budgeted I think, and so they saved money for my college but, You got to go somewhere where you don’t have to pay for a dorm. So it was USF and it was a good experience.

SB: Now in high school, did you show particular interest?

PW: I was a journalist in high school. I was the editor of the paper for two years. And kind of fell into that—

SB: So it began then.
PW: Yeah, in ninth grade at King and then my first week at USF, I went and tried out for the newspaper and got hired. So, it was always something that came easily to me and it was a way to make money and make friends and those doors, you know, how you just kind of fall into those things and those doors seemed to open for you.

SB: Oh, sounds like you did. What did you do with the Oracle? So you were a journalism major at school.

PW: Yes, journalism major at USF and, ah, did virtually all the jobs at the Oracle except editor-in-chief. And they elected the editor-in-chief at the time and the election, there was me, who had hair down to my shoulders and looked a little raggedy and had a girl who was head of the young Republicans. And when there was a tie, one of the school administrators gets to pick. Well, for some reason, he didn’t pick me (laughs). I don’t know why (laughs again).

SB: I don’t either (laughs). Certainly political.

PW: I ended up really concentrating on my writing and became the editor of the campus magazine. So I did a lot, but it was fun. It was fun.

SB: That’s wonderful. And what was the campus magazine called at that time?

PW: It was called the Omnibus, kind of a dumb name but it came out quarterly and I did it for two terms. One was a literary magazine and one was sort of a news features magazine.

SB: Do any incidents in school stand out in your mind? Favorite teachers?

PW: You know, I was in school when Nixon bombed Cambodia and there were huge demonstrations on campus that fell into the streets and we had to cover them as journalists but also you were in the middle of them as journalists and it was just, it was really a wild time. Very turbulent time to be in college and, ah, at the same time, fun. It was a huge whole era of the late sixties, early seventies I started in college in 1970 and 1971 and, ah, you know, that was still kind of the sixties in a way. It was very turbulent and crazy and, ah, radical but you know, fun, too. It was a fun time to be in college.

SB: Were you involved in other things or concentrating on the paper?

PW: Mostly the paper. I mean, it was, ah, between going to school and the paper, the paper was a job that you did really from the end of school to until 10 or 11 at night often times. The nice thing was that you got paid. So you, ah, it really was an all consuming. To me it was, fraternities and sororities were kind of out of fashion at that point; they still existed but it was not really cool to be in them and so I considered the paper my fraternity. So, you lived it. It was great because it put you in the middle of everything going on, on campus.
SB: Absolutely.

PW: You knew the president of the school, you knew the big radicals, you knew this, you knew that. You just, so—

SB: Did you start your music career at that point? Or dabble in it?

PW: I was dabbling, I played—I had taken lessons in piano as a kid, played a little bit, played a little bit in college but really, ah, nothing serious, but I was always, always played, if that makes sense. I always played. If that makes sense.

SB: So you had lessons when you were young?

PW: I had lessons for six or seven years when I was a kid. The church organist who lived in Temple Terrace also taught my brother and myself and, ah, but, but after that I just played on my own and would practice in the music rooms at USF. And go find those practice pianos and play. So it was always something that I was interested in but wasn’t doing it anyway professionally or anything.

SB: So then you graduated, what did you do?

PW: Ah, graduated and it was toward the end of the seventies, ’76 or ’77 and the U.S. economy was in the dumps, terrible time [to graduate] from college, they all say. I expected to have all of these job offers because I had great experience. And, ah, the one job that was actually out there was working for an afternoon paper in West Palm Beach, which was not what I expected but, hey, it was a job and I needed a job and it was an interesting place to go check out. So I worked there for a year and a half and then the economy pretty much was getting better and, ah, I got a full time reporting job at the Tampa Tribune.

SB: That’s terrific.

PW: I had been an intern at the Tribune once before.

SB: That’s great. What exactly did you do at the Tribune?

PW: I did a number of things and I stayed with them for a while and, and the reason I think I did was every couple of years they let me do something completely different. But I was a hard news reporter, feature writer; I covered the New York fashion collections for a year and a half, two years, believe it or not. That was a fascinating experience and that took me to New York a lot and out to LA to cover fashion out there. And, ah, it was totally out of character and it just was great fun. I loved—the thing about journalism is you can be, ah, for a little while—you can be, almost be these things. You’re deep into the fashion industry; you’re deep into the film industry; you’re deep into the mind of a criminal; you’re deep into the mind of a cop; you’re flying on a jet at MacDill. You know, there’s—
SB: A variety—

PW: A variety of those things and, ah, and [pauses] you know, I used to think it’s a character flaw that you like to just experience them but not be them, but I’m finding it was an asset to my career.

SB: And you were a columnist?

PW: I wrote a column. Ultimately, about my last thing for the Tribune, I wrote a lot of little Sunday pieces for them, but I wrote a three times a week column—

SB: That’s great.

PW: That was just under my name and you could write about anything you wanted to write about.

SB: And how long, total, at the Tribune?

PW: I was there in ’78 and left in the very beginning of ’91, I think.

SB: That’s a long time.

PW: Yes, it was a long time, a little too long, I think. Tampa was so interesting, Tampa, ah, a lot of stuff happening outside of the paper in Tampa kept me interested, a lot of growth. We were laying the groundwork for lots of stuff. And it was very exciting time to be in Tampa and you could do a lot of stuff and we did it.

SB: Yes, you did, uh-oh, what did you do (laughs)? No—okay.

PW: Well, we, ah, first place I went in Tampa, when I returned in ’78 was to Ybor City and there was a cadre of artists living and working down there and they had taken over these old, beautiful old buildings that were kind of seedy; they had apartments and studios and there was a real scene and I really fell into it and fell in love with it. And started dating a girl that lived down there and met all of the artists and I never lived there because the apartments were not nice enough and I lived in South Tampa, but I spent a lot of time down there and, ah, we started—

SB: Is this Pat?

PW: No, nope, this is just another gal that I met down there—young and single and you know; she lived above the Ritz Theater, which at that point was x-rated. There was nobody except a few Korean sailors wandering through there.
SB: Oh, my gosh.

PW: You had to throw pennies at her window to let her know you were downstairs and Seventh Avenue was just empty except for, but there was this little, just this wonderful art scene and so we just started doing things, threw the first arts parties in Ybor City and what became what we call the “Artists and Writers Ball.”

SB: Oh, that’s when it began?

PW: Yea, we started it in 19—

SB: Now, who is ‘we’, Paul?

PW: Bud Lee, the photographer Bud Lee, to me, I give him credit for so much that has happened in Tampa arts wise. He came down here and sort of ended up here and was doing some stuff for the arts council and of course, moved to Ybor City and he started just making things happen. He was just a real doer, a fascinating character and he loved to make things happen, and he loved arts of all kinds. He was not an elitist; he loved the worst painter who was sitting on the street corner painting; he loved children’s paintings; he loved everything still. Bud’s still alive; he was a just real force at that time.

He would give these shows where he would book the Tampa Theatre and put on anybody doing anything. The worse the act, the better. He loved these things and it would be real happenings. And so we took that and created this Artists and Writers Ball which we took these old clubs that were sitting empty in Ybor City; giant clubs that they had done for the immigrants, and the immigrant clubs had ballrooms at the top and theaters in them and—and game rooms down below and patios and you could transform them. We would transform them completely into this art venue whatever the theme was. You just walked through this magical thing and so those parties were wildly successful and [would] draw 2000, 3000 people.

SB: Then?

PW: Yeah, then.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

PW: Which were way too many people for the place and we put bands and art and everyone came in costume and we had themes and, ah, it really showed people that Ybor City was this place you could go and have a good time and that there was something interesting going on there. It had been written off by the mainstream community. All the immigrants had left and they were lucky they didn’t tear it down. They tried to tear it down and so it turned Ybor City into a scene and from there we launched some more events and we did an art publication and we did a thing called Tabloid that came out for two years. Until we lost all of our money and you know we were never business people.

SB: (laughs) What about “Guavaween?” When did that start?
PW: “Guavaween” started, we used a little bit of the money we made doing the “Artists and Writers Ball” and there was a theater company in Ybor City called the “Playmakers,” and “Guavaween” was conceived as a fundraiser for them.

SB: I didn’t know that.

PW: Yeah and we shared it with the chamber. We made it the Ybor City Chamber and “Playmakers” fundraiser. It drew about 5000 people. We did just a terrible parade that came up Seventh Avenue, and it was the most wonderful event for about five years and then one day, I came out and there were 100,000 people in the streets and it was just—everybody and their dog and I just asked, “What happened?” I felt like Dr. Frankenstein, you know, had created a thing that was not quite what you expected.

SB: Well, you have to feel good about that, surely. It’s quite a draw.

PW: It’s quite a draw, but now when I tell people that I [was] involved in the start of “Guavaween,” a lot of them look at me like, “Oh, you’re kidding me!”

SB: Now, did you help choose “Mama Guava?”

PW: Oh yeah, yeah. (inaudible) You’re not supposed to mention her name, of course.

SB: I know it’s a big secret.

PW: Big secret, but, ah, we picked “Mama Guava” and we created this whole back-story.

SB: This is how many years old?

PW: This is about twenty years old.


PW: Yeah, it’s kind of gotten to be and the “Playmakers” ultimately didn’t make it, and the guy who really was behind it moved on to teach outside of town. So it just kind of lost some of the arts center. It became just a, more crass—

SB: Commercial.

PW: A big old party that somebody makes money off of and the chamber gets a little bit of it. But in its day, it was really—

SB: It defines Tampa though. It really does.

PW: In some ways, yeah.
SB: Did you meet Pat Fenda in those years?

PW: Yeah, I met her, ah, I was playing the piano in the lobby for the “Playmakers” for one of their shows and she was choreographer of the show. It was Jesus Christ Superstar.

SB: Oh, my goodness.

PW: And I had seen her perform—she was a performer and I had seen her perform and so we met in Ybor City.

SB: Pat Fenda, being your first wife, and what year was that Paul?

PW: We got married in ’85. So we met about ’83-’84.

SB: And then how long were you married?

PW: About ten years.

SB: About ten years, wow! Okay, so then those, those were early years. You then moved from the Tribune to the Times (St. Petersburg Times).

PW: I did.

SB: About when was that?

PW: ’91.

SB: ’91.

PW: The Times was making a pretty strong move to attract readers in Tampa, so they hired a few, quite a few folks out of the Tribune. And I was one of (inaudible) there was another (inaudible) And I joined the editorial board and, ah, and then became a, sort of a reporter, who could write about anything. I wrote a lot about Tampa. But also wrote a column for who?? too, and then became their state correspondent.

SB: That’s something.

PW: Great newspaper, great job.

SB: It is and it was that paper that bestowed on you this very prestigious award or—

PW: Working with everybody that helped me win that award, I’d won a few writing awards over the years and have always gotten good, I got in this business because I could write and my dad was a really wonderful writer. I got his talent for that. And, ah, so I, the Times submitted me for reporter of the year award that, ah—
SB: That’s incredible.

PW: The Florida Society of Newspapers gives out every year and I think what’s great is you submit a body of work so it’s not just one storyline. It was how you did the whole year. And so that, I won that.

SB: That is very impressive.

PW: And it was great and it was like very gratifying and also helped me win a national journalism fellowship to the University of Michigan, which was truly an honor.

SB: Wow! That is quite an honor!

PW: Take a year off, with pay, and be in a university setting with 16 other journalists from around the world.

SB: That’s amazing and it was noted that there were quite [a] few prestigious people who were given those scholarships.

PW: They had a really good cross-section, some of them are, we had Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and someone from a national TV show, as well as news shows and we also had some small town journalists. Because they were really, they really balanced it out nicely. We had journalists from Korea, China and Poland.

SB: And what did you study, then, that year?

PW: You’re not allowed to be a journalist particularly. They want you to have another sabbatical so you can take anything at the university, so I did, and I studied short story writing on a private seminar with a guy, with a great professor there named, Charles Baxter, who is consistently in the The Best American Short Story Books. Just a wonderful writer of Midwest stories and, ah, studied graduate level playwriting and screenwriting and you know, took lots of things and actually got a play that I had written get produced at the University while I was there.

SB: What was the name?

PW: It’s called Stray Dogs. And it was—

SB: And what was that about?

PW: Stray Dogs was ah, I specialized in journalism. If anything I specialized in, it was writing about people who didn’t have a voice anywhere else and I loved writing and ended up giving people words either street people or outside of society in some way. Ah, and, and those characters would resonate with me beyond the story I wrote for the paper, because the paper is very limited as to how far you can go, and once you have
written that story, the editors don’t want to see it again. “I have already read about this person.”

But these characters were still batting around in my head and often came and borrowed money from me and things in real life, and it was a whole issue as a journalist of, ah, you would spend time with these people, and I’d always spend two or three days sometimes on a story, and get into their lives and then you move on and then you write about it. And you’d be this very important person in their lives and for you they were just a job. They were what you did for a couple of days. And there was this whole issue of sort of, loving them and leaving them that really existed. You just didn’t talk about it a whole lot. But it’s very true.

So this play is all about one of these character that breaks into my office as a reporter and to rescue all of these people I have hidden in my computer, all the stories—

SB: (laughs)

PW: And he—as he rescues them—

SB: Oh, I love it.

PW: They speak. So all these characters tell their story, and it worked really well. And it was produced here by The Performing Arts Center and also produced at the University of Michigan.

SB: Oh, my goodness, that’s great. Has anything happened since?

PW: That was, I hadn’t really pushed that more than that since then. It’s still around. I’d like to bring it back in again. It was really great. I got to direct it, to direct the show there. It ran for several weekends here in Tampa. So, it had a good life. I mean, I don’t know what you would do with it. I don’t consider myself a professional playwright. But, I loved the theater world and it was great to have been able to do that.

SB: So then you came back to Tampa from Michigan?

PW: I came back and I had met—a couple of things happened while I was there. It was a magnificent, you know, little college town and you’re with 16 other people and you’re not working, and so, ah, I was single and there was a woman from the Wall Street Journal that worked in the Berlin bureau, and so we fell in love. And, ah, she was inviting me to come to Berlin and—

SB: She was German?

PW: Yep.

SB: Yep.
PW: And from a real interesting German family, a very well known German family. And also one of my journalism stories had gotten optioned as a screenplay and the people that optioned it wanted me to write the screenplay because I had some experience doing that and, and so I needed to take some time off to write. So it ended up being, “Let’s go to Germany and see if this relationship will work out. Let’s live in Europe for a while,” which is something I always wanted to do. And, “I’ll write the screenplay and go to Hollywood and become famous.” It’s so easy, after a fellowship, you think everything in the world is possible. So, it didn’t quite all work out, but I lived in Germany for a year. Turned out, we were probably not the best couple to be together, but it was fine. Then I went and followed the screenplay to LA (Los Angeles). And the producers actually put me up in their house in the Brentwood area and I sort of, immersed myself in that world for a little while. I was looking for, to get back in journalism out there, and when I first got there they helped me get a job as a location guide at the Ambassador Hotel, which is where Robert Kennedy was killed. That famous hotel was also the site of the Cocoanut Grove nightclub, and they did the first Oscars, early Oscars at this place. It was an abandoned hotel that was a film set. There were always people filming. And they had an office of film inside the hotel and I worked for them and worked with movie productions and TV productions and cable productions and rock videos. You got to see every type of thing that they were shooting in LA.

SB: Now, this is while you were working on the screenplay?

PW: Yeah, I had finished the screenplay, and I was working on some more. You could actually it was one of those things where as long as things were going quite well, you could sit in the office and work on your screenplay. You were kind of there in case someone needed something. So I got to see the whole inter-workings and watch actors, great actors working and great directors working and some bad actors and bad directors, but you know, you got to see how it all got done.

SB: The whole thing, um-hm.

PW: Yeah.

SB: Now, share if you will how you met, Eugenie Bondurant, your current wife.

PW: Well, I had, ah, gone to work in, first for a statewide legal newspaper and then of course, got a job with the Associated Press, and I went to work for the Associated Press based in LA which is their second or third biggest bureau. It was a really interesting bureau because you were covering entertainment, and you were covering politics and LA is a very tough news town. There’s tons of news there. You fall over it when you walk out doors. It’s everywhere. I had a reporter friend say, she covered the courthouse in LA, and there were six stories on any given day which would have made front-page news in Tampa.

SB: Oh, my goodness.
PW: She had to pick which one or two she had to write about and so it was that kind of place. So, I had gone to work at Associated Press, covered lots of diverse, serious, and wacky stories and was covering one of the wacky ones, the Wynona Ryder shoplifting trial in Beverly Hills which was more media coverage than a lot of big stories should have. And, ah, I was invited to a party just not far from the courthouse that night by a publicist who thought I was cool and was inviting me to lots of stuff. I was really trying to meet as many people in LA as I could. This was a great way to do it and I thought there might be a cute girl there too.

And sure enough, Eugenie had made a movie. She’s an actress and she had made an independent film and had been invited to the party and thought it was a great place to go to promote the movie because they were looking for a distribution deal. And she came over by herself to meet her friends and they weren’t there when she got there, and I was there and saw her and, ah, went up and quickly got myself introduced and was charming as all get out.

SB: She was totally convinced? You worked at this?

PW: Well, yeah, she was actually, she announced to me when we met that she was, “Eugenie Bondurant and I’m moving to New Orleans.” She was from New Orleans. She had been trying to get back to New Orleans for twelve years. She had a good career out there and did very well, but she never felt at home there because she owns a beautiful house out there and done lots of stuff and people loved her, but she was determined she was moving to New Orleans. So, she thought I would be somebody good to introduce her girlfriends to me.

SB: Uh-huh, oh my. (laughs)

PW: I actually asked her out on a real date for later and, ah, in LA real dates often mean, Meet me at the restaurant. Guys don’t pick up—it’s a weird world out there and I actually said, “I’ve made reservations for dinner, I’ll be picking you up at this hour.” When she came out, I actually opened the door for her and you know, it was like, she’s a southern belle really. She’s a University of Alabama sorority girl. She’s a New Orleans, you know, society girl, even though she doesn’t admit to it. And so, she liked all that, and we ended up having a lot in common.

SB: That’s great.

PW: Hit it off and ultimately, I—

_Tape 1 ends; tape 2 begins_
SB: Paul, maybe you could tell me how you came to Tampa—back to Tampa.

PW: Well it’s interesting. A couple of factors were at work. I was, I was enjoying LA, and had kind of found myself there after a while. It had taken a little while to feel like you were there.

But I was just feeling, feeling like the Associated Press was, was—journalism has become a 24/7—the 24/7 news cycle. And it was, everything was all about how quickly something is in, rather than how [the] quality [of] something is. And it just, I was just—it felt like, for a number of years that journalism was, had reached that edge of it. And in some ways, in LA, I was doing journalism because that’s what I knew how to do, and could get paid very well doing. But, but it was kind of like, I wanted to find the new thing for me.

And Eugenie was really—we had gotten very serious. And were in the process of becoming engaged, and she was really—she had moved half her belongings to New Orleans and actually taken a car there.

SB: Oh my goodness.

PW: And so, she was not—it didn’t have to be New Orleans for her, but she wanted, she really wanted to move back somewhere where they served grits with breakfast. She wanted to be in the South somewhere. And so we started sort of looking around.

And around that time a friend called me and said, “Did you know Pam Iorio was running for Mayor of Tampa?” And Pam and I had a long history, just a professional history really. Her dad had been a professor of mine at USF, the best professor I probably had there. John Iorio. And, and Pam and I had known each other through her, her county commission job, through her supervisor of elections job, and she knew me through my job. And we just had a real good respect for each other. And I knew her family but I’d never been to her house. I didn’t really feel like I knew her personally, except that we you know, really enjoyed each other’s company and respected each other. And I thought so much of her intelligence, and her straightforwardness, and who she was as a person. And my friend who was a former journalist living elsewhere said, “You know, I could really work for her.” And when I hung up the phone, [I] said, “Well, I could work for her!” And I never saw myself working in government.

SB: Isn’t that something.

PW: So I didn’t really get in touch with her until after the election. Didn’t give her a dime, never worked on her campaign. I was in Los Angeles for heaven’s sake. And my
friend Linda Saul-Sena, who’s a city council member and a friend of Pam’s as well, had always been trying to find a way to get me back here. And so Linda, Linda said, “Well let me talk to Pam about you.” And so she did, and Pam was actually very interested. And—

SB: I’m not surprised.

PW: So I wrote her a letter and said I did not want to be her PR guy. She said, “That’s good because I have somebody else in mind for that job anyway.” She didn’t really have a PR person. She had a media rep. And she’d conceived this idea of a sort of a, creative industries, arts position. Because my background, as we’ve talked about before was, was in growing the arts in Tampa. I’d been on the board of the Performing Arts Center, I’d done all this work in Ybor City, I’d been involved in theatre companies and music and— (inaudible) outside of my job. But I also knew everyone in Tampa pretty much from my job and from those activities.

And, and I think was, what I could do best—and what I think I still do best is that I can put on a suit and go to the business meetings, and also go to the arts events and kind of have respect in both places. And that turns out to be kind of rare. At times.

SB: It is rare.

PW: Especially with “street-level” arts and some of the—

SB: Very much.

PW: So she had this job in mind and we corresponded and I was offered the job in May. She had been the mayor for about a month, and I was offered the job in May of 2003, and took it. And came back to Tampa and started I think in July of 2003.

SB: How did she perceive your job description?

PW: We wrote it—

SB: What were your instructions? You formed it together?

PW: Yes. She had some ideas. I said some stuff. Richard Florida had been to town, and Richard Florida is this author who had written a book called The Rise of the Creative Class. And he met with the mayor. He drew four or five hundred people to hear him speak at the Performing Arts Center. And his theory still is, you know, a couple of years down the road—still carries a lot of weight that the cities that are going to thrive in the future are going to thrive because they attract bright young minds. Because they have a high quality of life, because the arts are thriving, because it’s a good place for entrepreneurship. And she felt like the city hadn’t paid enough attention to that. We, we didn’t really have much of a department of arts and cultural affairs. We had a woman doing that job—and certainly not a knock on her, but there was no staff, there was no—

SB: Yes.
PW: It was really just represent the city with the arts groups.

SB: Sure.

PW: And so the mayor wanted to be more ambitious than that. And so in some ways it was—she wanted to create a job that sort of tapped into that Richard Florida excitement to try to work on the arts, both the for-profit and the non-profit arts. And also be a person who could move between the business community and the arts community.

SB: Okay.

PW: And get—help us—surprisingly there were very few connections, except maybe at the highest level. You know, certainly the CBB, Convention Business Bureau maybe recognized the Performing Arts Center, or they maybe recognized The Florida Orchestra, but they still didn’t really recognize the economic benefits of these organizations, and certainly not of smaller arts organizations.

SB: So you kind of, build relationships?

PW: That’s what has been the biggest part of my job, I think, is making, being the person who connects those things and helping. And we’ve, not the—it’s been a quiet little revolution, and I don’t take all the credit for it, because lots of other people are working on it. But we’ve made incredible inroads with the Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, with the Chamber—

SB: Wonderful.

PW: With, you know, just sort of connecting—

SB: Terrific.

PW: Making us part of the, making the arts part of the economic development mix and part of the, at the table, when decisions were made. So—

SB: You do not fundraise, per se. Do you ever get involved in sponsorships of projects?

PW: Only a little bit—

SB: Like Lights On?

PW: Yeah. What we have found—I mean, I’m certainly not—my background is not as a fundraiser, and the city doesn’t necessarily want to be out competing for dollars against arts organizations. But to do some of the ambitious things that we’d like to do, you’ve got to find some money. Because it’s not in our budget. I mean when I got here, I looked at my budget and it was pretty much me. You know, and you’ve got to, you’ve got to—I’ve
latched on to money or to projects that we can, that we can you know, sort of take over in a way—

SB: Okay.

PW: And there is, you know there is some fundraising involved. But we’ve always, we’ve tried to look—certainly in my projects, tried to look outside the normal realm and—

SB: What boards are you on?

PW: I’ve been on—

SB: I mean, what are you active in?

PW: Well—

SB: In the community, specifically?

PW: Representing—Well, the city gives money to a number of things and we have to, we, there’s, we are on those boards, a lot of boards that we support. And so I’m on the Performing Arts Center board; I’m on the Florida Orchestra board now. I just came off the Plant Museum board. A few of us rotate through these boards. Business Committee for the Arts; Chamber’s Arts Committee. There’s a few others that probably are not coming to mind right now, but you—the Gasparilla Art Festival for a while. I just came off[ of] that.

So you, you—there is a role of sort of city representative. I find that probably the least you know, vital part of my job, but it helps you meet people. It helps you connect, and you can at least see a—Most of the organizations that I’ve been on fortunately have been very well run and not had, been [in] crisis. There have been some boards where people have been on it, and have not been that lucky!

SB: We’re talking a museum? Uh-huh. You are not involved in the museum?

PW: No, interestingly enough. The way the mayor envisioned the reorganization of the city that created my position, which is Creative Industries—we have a public art division, the Arts and Cultural Affairs. And the mayor had wanted to bring in a national level arts person to, to sort of manage the city’s arts, whole arts picture. And I understand that philosophy—and the city’s trying to build a big museum. And she felt like she needed somebody to really represent her in that process because it’s been a tough process as we all know—

SB: Sure.

PW: It has stumbled in recent years and, I mean last year, and hopefully will be getting back on it’s feet. So she wanted this person to be the museum. And it was, I thought at
first, Well, I wish I could participate, because I thought that was, you know, the biggest thing going on. As it turned out, it was the best thing that ever happened, because, you know, the first museum project of the (inaudible) project, ended in some acrimony on both sides.

And Robin [Nigh] and I who runs our public arts division and myself were not involved in any of that. So we are able to just continue working—

SB: Unscathed?

PW: Unscathed and working with all the community and have been able to be sort of— carry on.

And then I was one of the people who recomme

SB: That’s nice.

PW: In the interim position. And ultimately as we talked about it, they did hire this person [Wendy Ceccherelli], and it didn’t really work out because personalities just didn’t click—not with me or with Robin, but the mayor and this person didn’t quite work out. And I think it, they—once they realized there was not enough for her to manage, because we were, still are [a] growing a department. So we, in going forward we’re going to be able to use that salary line to create two jobs. One full time and one who’s a person who is taking it on as a full-time consultant. Keep them in the private sector so they can do some things a little easier than being a city employee.

SB: And events?

PW: An events professional. Because we’re very ambitious and we kind of, do these major things, but we really need expertise in those areas.

SB: Is the next event the Latin Festival? Are there any in-between, or—?

PW: Well, Lights On, we created—Public Art created the “Lights On Tampa.” And I was, I pulled, helped pull together with a number of arts groups a thing that became known as “Arte 2005,” a big Latin-American arts festival. It’s coming back every two years, and so is Lights On in alternating years.

SB: Great.

PW: And—

SB: That’s very ambitious.

PW: And those are pretty ambitious projects. And we’re also doing other things. We’re, we’re just, in Miami at the Art Basel event. And I don’t know if you’re familiar with that Basel—
SB: I am, yeah.

PW: It’s a big gallery show. Galleries from around the world come to Miami and pay 50,000 dollars to be just represented at this art show. So imagine how much they’re selling. And Miami is becoming this huge arts venue—

SB: International.

PW: International arts venue. We’re not saying Tampa is supposed to try to emulate that, but what was—What’s amazing that has happened is around this big thing, Arts Basel, has come seven or eight small events that are going on at the exact same time—spin offs. And they’ve actually encouraged it. And, and we really loved those things. And so coming back, we looked at, Well, what’s our biggest, sort of arts festival or event? And that’s the Gasparilla Arts, sidewalk arts festival. It’s thirty-five, forty years old. It’s very successful. Some of the highest prize money—it’s a very high quality show. And 100,000 or more people come down to see it.

So we’re creating for March—this March—the city’s commissioned a curator to create sort of a side show that will be sort of a “Best of Tampa” art show. And we’re going to have three or four other things going on that are sideshows. We’ve, one of the things that we were able to do was make some city space available to an arts collective, and they’re in downtown at free—a dollar a year—they get about a thousand square feet of empty office space in a beautiful red brick train station. And so, so they’re going to have a big show. We’ll have this other big show that we—and one more piece of “Lights On Tampa” hopefully appearing that weekend, and two or three other—

SB: That’s exciting.

PW: Things. And we’re going to bill it as a, you know, big arts weekend with these spin-off things. You can see this show, you can see this show, you can see that. And it will say, There’s a lot of stuff going on—

SB: Very exciting, sure.

PW: In Tampa. And it will be very interesting and high quality art.

SB: That’s exciting.

I didn’t mean to ignore your music—your love of music. And I think, I can’t remember if we mentioned the Pop-Tarts, which you began many years ago, I remember listening to them. And I think you had them for maybe 10 years?

PW: Yeah.

SB: Or so? And then you had a break.

PW: Took a little break.
SB: Had a break.

PW: And it was, it was fun—it was a very popular group and had girl singers, and it was kind of a show that you could dance to in a way. And so combine my love of theatre and my love [of] music; and I’m a piano player and I ought—I sort of describe myself as, Well, I’m not the world’s greatest piano player but I’m a good entertainer.

SB: A wonderful entertainer!

PW: So, it’s fun, and we have a good time. And we got a lot of work because we look like we were having fun.

SB: But now you’ve resumed your love? By forming another group. And this is how old?

PW: Maybe a year and a half, something like that.

SB: And the name?

PW: The name is Blue Roses. And—

SB: I have to ask, why?

PW: Where we got that name.

SB: Where?

PW: Well I’m a big Tennessee Williams fan. And I’ve just—he’s my favorite artist, writer, however you—I just think he’s just amazing—

SB: He’s wonderful.

PW: And, and in [The] Glass Menagerie, the gentleman caller calls the sister Blue Roses, because she had had pleurosis in High School—he didn’t know who to say pleurosis, and so he called her Blue Roses. And I always thought, What a great name for a band! Guys in music are always going, God, that would be a great name for a band, not that one—You know, always something. Somebody will say something, I go, What a great name for a band! So I actually had that one in my back pocket for a long time. And this group was just a trio, occasionally with a girl singer that we had, and we always—

SB: And where do you perform?

PW: We, right now we’re doing three shows at a theater in St. Pete called the Palladium. And it’s, the—I’ve been, I’ve always loved standards and I’ve always loved—we’ve always had songs from the thirties even in our Pop-Tarts dance band, because those are great songs. And people really responded, and I had the, you know back-up—the girl
singers and we could do, “Am I Blue?” and we could do Fats Waller tunes, and we could do some of those sort of standards that were just, had a good rhythm to them. And I’ve always, and now I’m really exploring them a lot deeper. And these are a combination of theatre and music where I tell stories about the songs and the songwriters.

SB: Oh that’s, how wonderful.

PW: And we do—

SB: Educational.

PW: The songs.

SB: This is not job related, this is like, pure fun.

PW: [A] total separate thing.

SB: For you, I guess. Except you know there are occasions where you’ll have to have groups perform and all. Would you, would you do that?

PW: No, I try not to, I try to make this—

SB: Separate?

PW: It’s own thing. I mean see, if you even notice. We’re playing in St. Petersburg. You know, where I don’t even have that, any clout. I didn’t, you know—this, they ask us to play over there.

SB: But it still keeps you so integrally involved—

PW: You have to, if you want to—I love music and I have to do it every day. And if you don’t have a group, I find that I lose this. It’s not that I don’t do it, but it, it makes you work at a higher level. And I, I work so hard at it, it’s—it just feels unnatural not to be doing it in some ways.

SB: You’ve been a journalist, you’ve been a musician, a reporter.

PW: Screenwriter—

SB: Screenwriter.

PW: A bad, you know, playwright, you know, I don’t know.
SB: Pianist. I mean, what floats your boat? What do you like the best?

PW: That’s a good question because I think at the point I’m doing it, I love each of those things. I never felt like one was, you know, my day job was never supporting my night job in a sense. I mean, journalism, I felt like in terms of my talent, and I used this line, and I think it’s pretty true. As a journalist, I had a shot at a Pulitzer Prize. But I don’t think I’d ever be at the Grammy’s. You know what I mean?

SB: I sure do.

PW: I kind of, I love music and I love doing it, but I never envisioned myself as someone breaking through into the national market. For me it’s just a thing that you do as part of your life. It’s just—

SB: So what is your goal? In Creative Industries?

PW: What’s nice is I’m now, in this job—it combines a lot of my talents. I’m, my love of the city, my background in the city, my interest in seeing it continue [to] improve. I think we’re, we’re you know—Florida itself, I think, is a state that’s evolving very rapidly—

SB: It sure is.

PW: And from one thing to another. And, in evolution, some things develop faster than others. And you, some things can be very strong and other things need some help. And I think you know, we, Florida developed as a tourist economy. We developed as a sports based economy where people are here for the weather. And the arts in some ways have lagged a little behind. We’ve been fortunate that we’ve built a great Performing Arts Center here. The Florida Orchestra has been here for so long, and even though it’s had some struggles, it’s here. And it’s, you know, it’s really found its place.

And, and I think the arts in general—this is the point where we need to, to really concentrate on that. We still don’t have a major equity theatre house in the Tampa Bay area that is full on, you know, regional theatre. We’ve just got—

SB: [To] take it up a notch?

PW: We’ve got a few things that need to be, we need to pay some attention to. And I think that’s one thing the mayor’s trying to do with this job, and certainly what I’m trying to do while I’m here. And I don’t see myself as a professional government person. I’m here to make some things happen, to have some fun doing it—to make it, you know, take advantage of this opportunity. The mayor really says, “You know this is it.” You know, we’re, you get, you’re lucky if you get these windows where people hand you something and say, “Go do it.”

SB: Isn’t that so true.
PW: And you know, we might—

SB: That is a true fact.

PW: Either do something or, or you know, why are we here? Because in ten years you’ll look back and say, Well, we had our shot. And so we’re just trying to make some things happen and my goal you know, I think, my goals are always to try to take whatever I’m doing and try to do it as best I can. And probably haven’t followed the career path that, if I just laid it out but my mind doesn’t necessarily work that way, my mind is more, what interests you? Where is it pulling you? And try to really work hard to do that. So I work really hard at my music, and I work really hard at this job and, and I think those things lead you to the next thing.

SB: Absolutely.

PW: I think you find yourself, you know, you walk through a door and suddenly—

SB: Absolutely.

PW: You’re at this next place. So where that is, I’m not completely sure.

SB: But I have to tell you and thank you, you really are here at an opportune time. This is kind of an editorial statement in a way, but to thank you for making a difference in Tampa the way you have in the past. I mean, looking at your whole life as you’ve been here, and helped with the growth, and it’s—we’re very lucky that you came back.

PW: Well I, I appreciate that. And you know, I think there’s something, there’s just a lot of people who, who care and it’s, it’s a certain mindset. I mean not everybody, some people, their mindset is about doing business or doing other things, and I think that’s, that’s great. The world needs all that and there’s certain people that I find myself working with and drawn to who are about community building in some way—

SB: Well you—

PW: And that journalism was certainly somewhat about that and—

SB: Sure.

PW: I think everything, is somewhat about, about it.

SB: You’ve kind of led up for your whole life to perhaps this point in time.

PW: Yeah, I think in a way, yeah. And I would never [have] predicted that I would have been here. Because it’s an odd skill set that I have. Being able to talk to people, relate to people. Even from high school on I realized I didn’t belong in any one group, but I could move pretty easily from, through all of them—
SB: A skill.

PW: And that was a skill that worked well in journalism, and it works well in this government work—

SB: That’s great.

PW: And I used to think that was [a] problem, but it turns out, it really was an asset.

SB: That’s great Paul. Well I can’t thank you enough, this has just been great.

PW: It was a treat to be asked!

SB: I really found out a lot about you that perhaps, you know, I didn’t even realize myself, and hopefully will be recorded for all posterity. I know people will enjoy listening to this.

PW: Well I hope somebody does, that would be good!

(both laugh)

PW: Thank you so much, Suzette.

SB: Thank you.

_Tape 2 ends; tape 3 begins._

Interview with: Paul Wilborn
Interviewed by: Suzette Berkman
Location: Tampa, FL
Date: October 14, 2006
Transcribed by: Rebecca Willman
Audit Edited by: Cyrana Wyker

SB: Today is October 4th. I am sitting with Paul Wilborn. We’re doing our second interview. It’s the year 2006. And we’re sitting at 3401 South Beach Drive. We would like to continue talking about Paul’s second marriage; his first marriage being to Pat Fenda who has an entertainment business [and] still lives in Tampa. And they’re good friends as a matter of fact.

PW: Still my agent for my musical stuff.

SB: Oh right! Oh, that’s great. Well, where we left off Paul, is that you had met Eugenie in LA, and it was her wish to go back to New Orleans. And I think you had a little bit to say about that.
PW: (laughs)

SB: Could you enlighten us?

PW: We, when we met, that was almost the first line out of her mouth. And she had been, felt like she had been somewhat shipwrecked in LA for about 12 years. And after about six, she had really wanted to go back to New Orleans. She said, just got New Orleans in her heart and soul. Still has a house there, has other property there. Her even—

SB: Family?

PW: Some family, though, her, none of her sisters live there. Her mom and dad have both passed away. But they’ve kept the family house. Mom could come back tomorrow and would still be able to get dressed. You know, it’s just those crazy southern girls, you know. And the joke that I share with my brother in law in LA is that, that when we’re all dead and gone these three sisters are going to be living in that house, fighting over the silver. You know, and wandering around in some kind of weird Tennessee Williams sort of—

SB: Do you visit?

PW: Oh, we go all the time. We actually keep a car there. And—

SB: So you go often.

PW: So we go every, about, sometimes about once a month. So it’s fun. And we’ve had lots—because of the storm, they actually had a rental property that got flooded. So she’s been having to go back a little more often because [of that]. But it’s all worked out.

SB: Storm being Katrina?

PW: But Katrina was a huge, a huge thing for, for us. And certainly for New Orleans. And for Eugenie. So we’ve been going a lot more even than we might, just to really show support, spend money, get the house fixed up, and—

SB: Is, is that how you got her to agree to not live in New Orleans?

PW: She—

SB: Just by visiting?

PW: Yeah, well I convinced her that, that Southwest basically paid you to fly from Tampa to New Orleans. It was very cheap, and very easy. And that she would be in kind of a, a town where they serve grits with breakfast. And, and so, and she—it’s really worked out well for her. Because she’s had great opportunity here. It’s very easy to get
there, you know, you can be there in an hour and a half. The flights are really cheap. And, and so we’re back and forth a lot. And for her it’s been kind of the best of both. So she’s, you know, she still roots for the Saints—

SB: Uh-oh, okay.

PW: But, you know, but, she really loves Tampa. So she’s been very happy.

SB: How did you get back to Tampa? What brought you back?

PW: We met, and because of her planning to move, we met, and three weeks later, she and her sister actually drove her car across country to leave it in New Orleans in anticipation of moving. So she was, it was not just idle talk.

And, but she had, she had a house that was a beautiful old historic Spanish duplex. And downstairs, the woman had just moved away. And she had been the wife of Famous Amos, the cookie maker. And she was a little nutty. And she had finally moved to be with her family in another state. And she had been in that apartment since Eugenie bought it. So Eugenie had never really done any work. She went in there and it was just a horror show. It was one of those places that was, you know, a complete mess, and so she was—it took her three or four months to fix it up. And in that time, I asked her for three months for us to decide how we felt about each other. And at the end of, actually went on for about four because of the time but [by] the end of March, we were engaged.

SB: That’s pretty fast.

PW: That’s pretty fast.

SB: Yeah.

PW: But you know, you know what you want. And it was, I kind of sensed it early on, but we gave ourselves several months, and she didn’t even finish the place until then anyway, so—

So we were engaged right around Easter time, late March, early April. And around that same time, was the election in Tampa.

SB: Which election?

PW: The mayoral election.

SB: Okay.

PW: In which Pam Iorio was elected mayor. And I had never worked in government in my life. I had always been on the outside looking in and never thought I would be on the inside looking out. And, but some folks in Tampa had been interested in trying to get me back. And I had had conversation with a friend who was a, also a journalist who had left Tampa, who told me Pam was running. I hadn’t even heard about it. Because I wasn’t
keeping that close in touch. And, and at the end of our conversation, she said, “You know, Pam Iorio, that’s somebody I could work for.” And I said, “Oh, yeah, yeah.” And I hung up the phone, and when I hung up the phone I thought, You know, that’s somebody I could work for! I really, we had a great respect for each other. Her dad had been my college professor. I had met her as a young woman, doing some work for the democratic party. She had been doing that, she came in, and I was a reporter. We had met, I watched her get elected and—

SB: Were you personal friends? No?

PW: Only personal friends in the sense that we were on a first name basis, and I knew that she was married, and I knew she had kids. But I’d never been to her house. We didn’t, you know, we were more professional friends I think in that sense. That you meet someone through politics or, as a journalist I would, would, she was a person I would write about. And especially when, in her next job as the Supervisor of Elections, we talked a lot because as reporters, you would go down there and find out who had, who was running, who had given money, there were lots of questions for, for her.

So it was, it was more of a professional relationship. We really enjoyed each other’s company. And I was close to her enough to say that, you know, “Please don’t ever sing in public.” Things like that, you know—

SB: (laughs)

PW: And, but, like I say, it was not like we were chums, or even you know, friends, social friends. So, but what I had—

SB: What made you think you could work for her?

PW: One I really thought that she would—and she certainly proved that to be true—that she would in every way, be, try to do the right thing, be professional, there would never be a hint of scandal. She would do great things by the city that you would be proud to say you were a part of her administration. And, and that’s not a knock on anybody else in politics, but I didn’t feel that way about a lot of folks. And it’s not whether they would good, bad or different, I just felt like she was really would set a standard. That you’d be proud to say that you had worked for her. And I was interested in the arts. That had always been my sideline. I was not interested in being—I would not have come to be her press guy. And she was not interested in me as that anyway. She already had somebody in mind for that.

But Linda Saul-Sena, who was a city councilperson, and Chairman at that point of city council, is a good friend of mine. And she had thought I would be a good fit for the administration. So she was sort of a go between. And mentioned it to the mayor who was intrigued by the idea. And Fran Daven who was her advisor in the transition and is still an advisor, who was also someone that I covered, and knew me professionally very much, liked the idea. And so we started a little conversation, and by, I guess May, she got elected at the end of March, took office first—early April, very early. And around May we put together a job description and—
SB: So you called her? Or she called you?

PW: I—Linda spoke to her, she responded to Linda, “Yes, I’m interested in hearing from him.” So I wrote her a note sort of suggesting things that I was interested in. And she got back. We did some emails and some phone calls. And so, and at that—

*Pause in recording*

PW: And at that same time, I believe it was April. I wasn’t here at the time, but it was April or early May. An author, and an economist named Richard Florida came to Tampa. He had written a book called, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. And he was a big hit here. He drew a full house to the Performing Arts Center, excuse me—

SB: At Ferguson? Yeah.

PW: And at Ferguson Hall, so you know, big crowd turns out. And his message is a lot of things, but basically it’s sort of, creativity and economic development go together. And cities that really work on their creative side—arts, creative people, retaining talent, all that stuff—would be the cities that thrive in the future. Tampa was at a point where that really resonated with people. Because we felt, I think people felt like they hadn’t quite done enough in that area. We could do more.

So Richard Florida actually met with the mayor, and she was then talking to me and I was pitching sort of an arts thing. And so the two kind of came together, and she—it was really from her, came up with this idea of a Creative Industries position. That I’d be sort of a liaison to art and artists. But also with sort of an economic development job as well. And, and so we kind of, that was really exciting to me.

SB: Who, who came up with the idea of “Tampa, City of the Arts?”

PW: That happened before I got there.

SB: Okay.

PW: The, the mayor had been—there had been a session at, at Tampa Theatre where the mayoral candidates spoke. And it—the arts community sort of sponsored I think, The Business Committee for the Arts sponsored it. And Leonard Stone was one of the people in the audience, and he asked the mayor about the arts, and a number of other people were there. And, and the mayor really pledged to make Tampa, if she was elected, a “City of the Arts.” And you know, it’s kind of one of those titles that you kind of wish maybe you had said something other than, “City of the Arts,” because it’s almost like, “The City on the Hill” or something. But, but she really was committed to doing that, and so I think that’s one reason I got hired. And they created a position that didn’t exist before.

So I guess around, sometime in May—and I don't really have the date in my mind clearly, but it was May of 2003, I agreed to take the job. I’m working at, still working at the Associated Press, as a state correspondent with California. And, and Eugenie and I
talked, and she thinks this would be a good thing, and, and she likes the idea and it gets her a guaranteed back-to-the-south. She's at least getting much closer to New Orleans—

SB: Yes!

PW: And if for some reason I turn out to be a big loser, she wouldn't have so far to go to get there.

SB: (laughs)

PW: But at this point, we're engaged, and so we agree to move to Tampa, plan a wedding, and [I] take this job. And we take [it] knowing it wasn't going to happen once I started. We took six weeks off. And went to Hawaii, and—

SB: But you, you got married in Tampa?

PW: We didn't get married, we didn't get married until almost a year later.

SB: Oh, okay.

PW: Just because of all the moving—

SB: Okay.

PW: And all that stuff. We had to plan a wedding.

SB: But in Tampa.

PW: We got married in Tampa.

SB: Yeah.

PW: In 2004, April of 2004. But the—we took a magnificent long trip, all through California and to Hawaii, and then we drove across country and took a really nice cross-country drive to New Orleans. Spent several days there and then—

SB: Terrific.

PW: Came here.

SB: That's terrific.

PW: And you know, it's been great. She's really loved it, and—

SB: What does she do?
PW: She—and I didn't know this about her because she wasn't doing it actively when I was there. When I was in LA, she was still working at being an actress. But she had, for many years, also been a teacher of acting. And had taught some semi-famous folks and—

SB: Like who?

PW: I want to say Jessica Alba, this famous, very famous—Alba's the last name—

SB: Sure.

PW: I may be wrong because I'm not so good on my current young stars. But this woman's like one of the hottest stars, had been a young student of hers. And several others. And she still points to people in movies and, Oh, that was my student, or that was my co-worker—

SB: That's great.

PW: So we arrived here at a great time because the Patel Conservatory was in the process of—I don't think it had come out of the ground yet, but it was really, had been, was set, and was in the process of being built, I guess. And they were starting [a] plan. What were they going to include there? And so she met Wendy Leigh, who's a friend of mine, and who was going to run the school. And in their conversation started talking about these classes that she did and they liked the idea so much that they really—she started teaching before the school was finished. They started, she was teaching in the lobby of the Jaeb Theater.

SB: Oh my goodness.

PW: And she was one of the first teachers they hired. So she—

SB: She enjoys it?

PW: She enjoys it. It's a part time position, which she likes. And she—

SB: What, what classes does she teach?

PW: They're called “on camera acting.” And she teaches adults and younger kids. And it's how to audition for commercials, how to, how do you—she doesn't, she's not a stage actress. She's great on stage but that's not her specialty.

SB: She's, she's been in films?

PW: She's been in films, on TV, in commercials, she's done all of that stuff that involves a camera. That's her background, as a model and then she’s been in movies. And she studied, and she's a great natural teacher, so—
SB: She's striking looking.

PW: Yeah. And she really—

SB: She really is beautiful.

PW: She has this focus when she does things, and as a teacher that's so great because the kids just feel like there's this connection because she really gets excited about it, so. She's a great teacher and a natural, and they love her. So that's what she's doing.

SB: That's terrific.

Well how do you like your job with the city? What, what have you experienced for instance with the Tampa Museum of Art? I think its common knowledge there have been issues with the mayor, with the city, with city council, with the public, with perhaps the Museum Board most of all.

PW: Yeah, it's been a, you know, it's certainly been a—

SB: Have you been involved?

PW: I haven't been as directly involved as I thought I might be when I came here. And I was a little concerned about that at first because I was wondering why they were sort of keeping a little buffer between me and also our Public Art Director, Robin Nigh, and the Museum. But turns out, they're much smarter than we were in that the mayor didn't want us to be pulled into that. And as, as things unfolded, it worked out well in that we were, we were not sort of seen as one player on one side of the other.

When I came to take the job, I was assuming that the Vinoly Project was coming out of the ground, at some point soon. And really did a lot of research on it, talking to Emily and doing it even from afar. Because I just assumed that would be the big thing that was happening.

SB: Sure.

PW: But you have to look at the history of Tampa somewhat. And it's a thing that can be debated a lot of ways. We've done some incredible things that, that didn't necessarily pay for themselves for a pretty long time.

SB: Like what?

PW: Like the Florida Aquarium.

SB: Okay.

PW: Which was a, seen as this economic development tool, “Everybody's doing an aquarium! So we progressive cities will do a big aquarium.” Well, about time we got ours finished, the aquarium business kind of fell off a little bit, and the, the way the numbers
were worked out were not suspicious, just didn't, didn't, the expectations didn't add up to the reality. And the city is—

SB: Stuck.

PW: On the hook for a lot of money, continues still even though the aquarium is doing much better. Same thing happened with Centro Ybor. Build this big project, the city underwrites it, and the bill comes due, and this mayor came in, and I'm not saying this is necessarily bad, because the Performing Arts Center was certainly one of those cases. In which, for, we still pay a pretty good bill to make that building, to have them there.

And for five years or so, they really struggled. They were in the red in their operating in a big way, and—

SB: The Perf—

PW: Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center.

SB: Right.

PW: So, but we were proven smart to have done it. So this mayor comes into office, with a lot of bills coming due. For cultural and these types of facilities. And she's a very pragmatic woman who looks at the bottom line. And she does not want to be one who leaves a legacy to her successor of, “Hey you figure out how to—

SB: Of debt.

PW: Solve this problem.”

SB: Yeah.

PW: And I think she was genuinely concerned when you look at, the city was committing this much to the museum, about a million bucks a year. Aside from what we were going to give them to build it and things like that. And the budget was going to triple, to upgrade the museum.

SB: Yikes.

PW: And when you really look at it in reality, will there be triple the amount of people paying to come? Will you have grown it that much? Maybe the first year, but after people have seen the building, will it fall back? And I think she was really concerned and started demanding some harder numbers. And really started holding some feet to the fire that had not been necessarily held there before Greco. Great guy, friend of mine, was a, he liked to see things happen in concrete. “Let's make it happen and then we’ll figure it out, figure it out later.” And you get a lot of things done that way. And he did a lot of good things. But he also had a lot of bills coming due. So—
SB: Who, who was she demanding of?

PW: Well I think the, the museum board and the museum director, and just sort of less, Is this going to work? Are we—

SB: Sure.

PW: “Can you really, can we really do this?” Because no matter what anyone says about guarantees or people signing will pledges or things. When all is said and done, the city's on the hook.

SB: Absolutely.

PW: And so, so—

SB: Well just historically, it might be good to keep this in perspective. Where do we stand right now?

PW: Well—

SB: With the museum.

PW: I think—

SB: From the city's point of view.

PW: Ultimately I think it was not just the mayor's cautions, but the banks had a lot, had questions. And so ultimately, even though the city I think, the city, in terms of the community did respond in lots of great pledges. And a lot of money was pledged to this project. That the whole thing sort of fell down under the weight of it. And at the same time, building costs were skyrocketing. We were in the middle of this bubble of construction where everybody, every piece of drywall was worth triple what it should be.

So, so ultimately the banks didn't guarantee the loan as, and the loan didn't happen. That project stopped. Everyone's looking around for a new place, the mayor suggested one, didn't like—people didn't like it. We tried another, that was timing was wrong and the money was wrong. And now it's ended up in what seems to be the board has approved, the city has approved, they’re out searching for an architect in what will be a beautiful spot on, on the river in what's going to be a magnificent new “arts park” for lack of a better way to describe it. It will be the place where the orchestra plays its outdoor concerts, where we'll have festivals—

SB: That's—

PW: And the museum will front on that—

SB: It's right against the Poe Garage.
PW: Right against the Poe Garage, and next to the children's museum. So you'll have some, hopefully some synergy in that. And, and I don't see any obstacles ahead of us there then. The city money pledged, the museum board has said, “Yes.” And they're going to build in a fence—

SB: That's exciting.

PW: And we've got enough money I think, to get it done.

SB: That's exciting.

PW: So—

SB: Does the city have plans for activities or any you know, related functions to, to help the museum? How is the Riverwalk coming? And how does it relate?

PW: Well, I think the placement is going to be incredible. Because as it is, where the museum sits today, which will be gone when this new, they become part of the park. It's been kind of on it's own. It's been sort of isolated there. So this new building will be part of your big events park that will be a magnificent Riverwalk that connects the entire downtown where people can jog and walk, and there will be public art along there. There will be, just across the expanse of the park will be a big open air restaurant with outdoor dining and riverfront dining, you'll—

SB: It's exciting.

PW: Be connected closer to the Performing Arts Center. We're creating sort of a cultural hub there. And I think it's probably the best solution that could be reached for everybody.

SB: Do you, what is the public consensus? What, what [does] the mayor's office think about this latest decision?

PW: Well I, it seems to be—

SB: Positive?

PW: It seems to be positive. And I think, I don’t think you get in trouble as an elected official looking out for the public dollar. And I think in this case it comes—there are some, certainly some people on the board who are upset with how things came out. But, but at the bottom line you will end up with, I think a new museum and a great spot and the city won't be on the hook for quite as big a bill potentially. And I think—would [it] have been nice to have had a museum opening later this year? Yeah. That would have been great.

SB: Sure.
PW: And I'm sorry that, that you know, that we lost a director. We brought in a new one. It's been, it's not been an easy time. And as I say, I've been, now, in retrospect, grateful that that was not my charge. That my charge was elsewhere.

SB: Sure. It's an exciting time.

PW: Yeah.

SB: It really is. And you're right in the middle of it.

PW: It's been an exciting time. I think it's an exciting time in Florida. And I really think, coming from California, it showed me a lot. Florida is in a, I think, a big transition. And we're catching up in a lot of ways to other states and, and we're—have been become such a powerhouse of a state in many ways.

SB: In terms of the arts?

PW: I think finally in terms of the arts, yes.

SB: Okay.

PW: But it's, you know, it's been a—

SB: How—I mean, I have to touch upon the Tampa-St. Petersburg perspective, connection. There's a lot said about how far ahead St. Petersburg is in terms of developing the arts. Years ago, who would have thought Tampa was perceived as being that much further? How, how do you think people are perceiving this?

PW: Well, I think, I always look at these things as evolutionary in a way and that things happen in different times, in different places. I mean, Tampa had a period where, clearly, it was sort of the center of the arts.

And if you really look at it objectively, there's still so much more that happens here. What makes St. Petersburg so wonderful—and I’m a huge fan and [am] there a lot—is that what they have is in sort of a compact area. And so within a few miles in any direction, you can hit all of their arts resources. And there's a center there. And it was a resort town, and it's on the water. It's pretty.

And one of our issues in Tampa's always been, we're almost a little, we're not so big, but we're too big. And so things are kind of spread out. And building a critical mass in Tampa has been more difficult. And the downtown has been slow to develop residential. And St. Petersburg always had residential in their downtown. Especially around the periphery of their downtown.

SB: Is that one of the things Richard Florida talked about?

PW: (Nods “Yes”).
SB: The residential aspect?

PW: Yeah. And I think, you know, I think we, we went, we're in a transition from, for the first time, the statistics are showing that a majority of people prefer an urban residence over the suburb residence.

SB: For the first time?

PW: For the first time. And that's looking at the big picture. It's like baby boomers retiring, young professionals—

SB: This is based on studies?

PW: Based on studies from the homebuilders and those folks who are in that business.

SB: Interesting.

PW: That's—you're not seeing these things pop up because they think it's a good idea. They're seeing it pop up because that's what the market is looking for. And so—

SB: How do studies reflect on the arts? Are people asking that the arts be part of this downtown scene? What comes first?

PW: I think the centers of cities have always been where the arts need to be to blossom. And that's sort of where people need to go. I mean that's why—

SB: Congregate—

PW: Cities need—look at New York City, I mean, you know—

SB: Absolutely.

PW: So much that happens there could happen elsewhere, but the arts are real focused. In so many cities, that's where you put your arts and your entertainment stuff. So, is it, what's the chicken or the egg? I mean, we've got the arts in downtown. It's, now we, but we've needed the residential to actually have the foot traffic to make it feel like a place. And—

SB: Would you say there's a comprehensive plan in place with this development? Or is one thing developing over the other and the other (inaudible).

PW: Well you know, we're in a free market economy so it's very hard to put a giant plan in place because the developers are going to do what the market tells them. The city has some influence there, but not a lot. I mean, you know, we can talk about zoning and
things like that, but downtown is developing because the market is demanding residential. And hopefully we continue to do that for a while.

SB: Do you, how do you interact with business? What is your official title?

PW: My title is “Creative Industries Manager.” And I really see my role as interacting a lot with business and being the guy who represents the arts and creative community but is able to go to the same meeting with the guys in suits and be the suit that represents all these folks who aren't wearing suits necessarily.

SB: Okay.

PW: And, and we've done a lot of work with the Chamber of Commerce. They've become big partners in things that we do and we're sending now our arts people on their trade missions. We sent four of them to Mexico—

SB: Terrific.

PW: As part of a trade mission, and they—

SB: That's great.

PW: Made arts contacts. We're sending two to Brazil, maybe more—

SB: Exciting.

PW: And so they're seeing us now as how that helps them. And especially with Latin American trade, the arts and culture are a big part of getting to know each other. Americans want to go down and say, Let's do business. Well, they want you to respect their culture and understand and celebrate it. And so we're helping them with that.

SB: What type of economic impact would you say the arts are making on that basis?

PW: Well, that's one of the messages that we're trying to get out because we've had a reputation, quite justifiably, of being sort of a sports place. And Florida—people come to Florida because they want outdoor activities. They come for this beautiful waterfront. And we've developed professional sports teams, and they've really put us on the map. But what people don't also—the drum we try to beat is to say, Look at the real numbers. There are more people [that] paid money to sit down at The Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center last year, than paid money to sit down in Raymond James Stadium.

SB: Wow.

PW: And Raymond James is a big place!

SB: Sure is.
PW: And we sort of hang our hat on that. Well, people pay big money to go to the Performing Arts Center as well. And that doesn't count the people who went to Ruth Eckerd and who went to the Mahaffey, and the people who went to concerts and shows and—

SB: All the other events.

PW: Theatre. And other places. The business community for the arts, every five years does a survey, and, and it's a huge, you know, I think the number is in you know, the 500 million dollars impact every year of the arts—

SB: Incredible.

PW: And jobs. So—

_Tape 3, side 1 ends; side 2 begins._

PW: Because that's—

SB: This is your expertise.

PW: This is what we've really been working on, and it's, it's kind of been quiet, behind the scenes work to really win people over. To know—I mean, if you looked at a place, what Chicago has done, and what New York has done in terms of, why do people go to visit there? They go there for arts and culture. They go there for, to see this interesting place, because they know they can. There will be music in the park. There will be this great, you know, thing that Chicago built Millennium Park, and it's programmed every night of the summer. It's incredible.

SB: Oh my.

PW: And they have turned cultural tourism into this huge economic engine. And we spent all sorts of effort to get a Super Bowl. [A] great thing! I'm for it! We spent all this effort to get like a big sports game down here. Big sports game, folks come in, they see the game, they spend some money, off they go. But if you're in Chicago or in New York or in Austin, Texas, or some place that's known for culture, people come every day, all year long. They stay. They spend money. It's a little quieter because you don't see them coming in for the big game and the colors. But we are really working hard to establish Tampa as a cultural tourism destination. We've got water; we've got sports; and we've got arts. And we've actually convinced the tourist development folks to give us 50,000 dollars this year. And last year, we raised about another 50,000. And we've worked, launched a campaign to get people to come here for the culture, not just for—

SB: That's good.
PW: A sports game.

SB: A lot of people don't know—

PW: Yeah. Well I mean we're offering weather and culture—

SB: What's here.

PW: So we've got [an] even better combination.

SB: We've got it all.

PW: So, so we've become partners with the tourism side, we've become partners with the economic development side. All of our initiatives, we're doing a big Latin American Arts Festival every two years, and it's becoming—

SB: It's exciting.

PW: Huge. And, but we're having it around a Latin American Trade Convention that's here. We're going to be bringing in Latin American dignitaries and presidents and trading people, so—

SB: When is this?

PW: This is November of 2007.

SB: Okay.

PW: And so you're, you take what would have been an interesting arts event, but you make it a nexus for trade, a nexus for business, a back drop in which people can go, My gosh, look at this city—

SB: That's exciting.

PW: You know, and people in South America and Latin America can look and say, Well Tampa, they've got this thing going on and we're trading with them. We're using their port. We're going back and forth—

SB: That's very exciting.

PW: So that's the type. When I—a lot of stuff we do, we try to have those economic development elements in those.

SB: Tell us about some of the arts activities you care about. You care about and, excuse me, some you've been responsible for over the years that are still around. Some aren't. What, what's happening arts wise?
PW: Gosh that's a big one. When I got involved in the eighties, because I was always a musician; and there was a, a small but sort of vital interesting arts community between USF and sort of, Ybor City. A lot of artists had discovered and moved to Ybor City. And so between the great professors at USF and graphic studio and, this, this sort of, some, a lot of them graduates from USF who ended up in cheap studio space in the old historic district. There was a real moment in time where there was sort of a birth of an arts community that hadn't existed.

SB: This was the eighties?

PW: This would be like '79-'80, and in through the 1980s. And the ground zero was mostly Ybor City. Which was, at that point, empty. I mean, empty. People look back and it hasn't been that long. But you know, I was, we were down there. And you could, you know, look down the street on a Saturday night and not see anybody.

SB: What's there now?

PW: Now it's a big entertainment and restaurant district. And it's you know, 25 or 30,000 people down there.

SB: Incredible.

PW: We're—this weekend, this is in October of 2006, we're reviving for one night only this Artists and Writers Ball that we've created in Ybor City in 1979, that became a phenomenon and lasted 13 years and really showcased the historic district for the first time as an arts and entertainment place.

SB: You've mentioned that before, and you gave a number. What you anticipate drawing this year?

PW: Well this year actually we're pulling, we're actually trying not to draw the number.

SB: Oh, Okay.

PW: It's going to be 400 tickets only.

SB: Oh?

PW: And in past years it was this giant monstrosity. Two and three thousand people in every corner, and you know, it just became this giant thing.

SB: Real big.

PW: This one is, we're trying to sort of recreate the feeling of it, but not, not have to do, make it quite the mountain. And I don't even—it's more of an acknowledgement of what
a great thing it was, rather than trying to start it all over again. It's one of those things [that] when we finished it after twelve years, I never wanted to do it again in my life!

SB: (laughs)

PW: But it was an incredible arts experience. Artists created environments in these old clubs in Ybor City. I booked all the best, interesting music from big band to punk to—you know, whoever was the most interesting folks. And so it was an experience that you came into. And each one was a different theme and, it was based on sort of the old Venetian Balls and—it was a little bit of a satire on Gasparilla, which you know, we had a coronation, and a king and queen, and they were always artists, and it was very campy and fun. But it was a way—

In Florida, I think, and is one of the things is, we don't have an arts culture, a history of an arts culture. You draw people to the arts through events more than through, Oh, I have to go to this gallery and see this new show. It doesn't happen quite so much like that here. You bring people to the arts through events and through parties and things, and you give them the arts, and they get it and they go, Wow, this is so cool. But that's how you get them out.

SB: It's happened at an event. But we do have art galleries.

PW: Oh, absolutely we do.

SB: Now we—well, what are some of the galleries that have been around for a while?

PW: Well we've got a number of, you know, galleries come and go, and we've had you know, every time you talk into, into the arts community there are people who will moan and, Oh, this is the lowest time it's ever been, and how, no one's supporting the galleries. And—

SB: But for one that goes out, one comes in, kind of thing.

PW: I—Michael Murphy at M Gallery in South Tampa just opened. He's now got 10,000 square feet of art gallery space that's very well done. You know, very high end. And I would maintain that in 1980 there was not 10,000 square feet of art gallery space in the entire city.

SB: So, it is improving.

PW: Yeah.

SB: And Graphic Studio still exists.

PW: Graphic Studio. You've, the university—

SB: That's a secret—
PW: That's an international—

SB: It's well known internationally, but people who live in Tampa don't really know. Could you explain a little bit?

PW: Well yeah, Graphic Studio is a—to say it's a printmaking house is not to do it justice. But it's, it's a research arm of USF and the arts. And it focuses around printmaking and special projects like that, and they have brought in every big name and a lot of names that you should know, but maybe you don't know in the arts for projects for, for years—

SB: Like Rauschenberg?

PW: Yeah. Oh, I interviewed a lot of them when they came to town as a journalist. Because nobody else knew who they were, so I would go out even though I wasn't an arts writer and sit with Phillip Pearlstein while he was, you know—

SB: Oh my gosh.

PW: Doing a nude and just amazing stuff.

SB: Very well known artist.

PW: And it's really in a great—

SB: In the art world.

PW: It's positioned itself really well; they’ve done wonderful stuff. They're a big partner in the Latin American festival.

But, so the gallery business will always be a struggle. And I think we probably do need to—hopefully as the economy continues to grow and more people come, you build a bigger collective base. A lot of our collectors will go to New York and Miami to buy. So we're still trying to—

SB: What is your goal? I mean what, what do you want to accomplish Paul, in the near future?

PW: What I want to do—because this, a city official and in a city can't convince people to go buy art. They can't convince people that this art is better than something you go, a poster you go buy. It's not. I can't necessarily do that. But what we can do is hopefully change the public debate and say, You know, the arts are important. And unless, whenever we do something, show you what good art is. I mean, our “Lights on Tampa” project that our public art folks did. They commissioned incredible artists from here and from around the world, and people got really excited about it. And that's a project that's unique around the country. People are emulating it now. So what we try to do is just set
really good examples, create things that are exciting and that set the bar higher. I mean my being a guy who grew up in Florida, Florida has for years sold itself to the lowest bidder. And we've, you know, exploited the beauty and we've done all those things that we shouldn't do. And I think we're at a point where we need to say, Enough with that! And we have in many places. I mean look at the Performing Arts Center, look at the Airport we built here. When you do things first class, they are successful. And so my thing is: let's try to do as much in the arts first class as we can and see where—

SB: And you think this will draw people from all over?

PW: I think so. And I think it will, it will—Florida is, it's a state of immigrants. We're all essentially immigrants at one point or another in this state. And we want to, we want to attract bright, talented immigrants—folks to live here! From all around the country and around the world, who come for the weather, who come for the opportunities to work and who come because there's a great cultural backdrop. And I think we're heading there. I mean I may be—

SB: That's nice.

PW: In a wheelchair when we get it really done, but you know, we've got a lot of them already here.

SB: I think that's great to hear. That's exciting.

PW: Well, that's—

SB: You make it, you make it sound like this is a good place to live.

PW: I, you know, to me, and I—it's interesting, I was talking to a young artist the other day who said a lot of his buddies who moved to other cites are coming back. Because—

SB: Well, that's nice to hear.

PW: You go to a city like LA where I lived, and you go to New York, and you go to some of these cities—there are things happening, but they're kind of done. You know, you, you can find a little niche where you go into, but what I love about Tampa, what I've always been able to do is, you can get right to the front of the line and do something!

SB: You can make a difference.

PW: You can make a huge difference. And I've enjoyed that more than being somewhere like LA, which I enjoyed. But when I was there, I felt like I was enjoying the difference that somebody made fifty years ago or twenty-five years ago. And here you can be part of the, part of it.

SB: You feel kind of like a bigger fish in a smaller pond.
PW: Well, and you're kind of a, you're pioneering, and you're able to—people are welcoming. Oh, you want to do something? Yeah, come on in! Let's, let's—

SB: Isn't that great.

PW: And so—

SB: That's nice to hear.

PW: That's been fun. And I think, now the world is so wired you can be in a place like Tampa and be connected to the larger world too. With the Web and the Internet, it's a different world.

SB: Absolutely.

PW: I think than it was before.

SB: Totally. That's exciting.

PW: You're not so isolated in once place.

SB: Well, I kind of want to get back to the personal side. Part of these interviews is to get to know you personally, Paul. And but whoever is listening to this tape, I'd like them to know you! You're a very colorful guy—

PW: I'm afraid so.

SB: And one of your, kind of interests is performing. Would you tell us a little bit about what you're doing?

PW: Yeah I think, my parents haven't quite figured out where the gene came from, but somehow my brother and I both got the bug and somehow got some talent. I think he got even a little more than me. My brother studied music and went on to a career in New York as a Broadway singer and sang in Broadway road shows, and now he's a professional church singer who travels around the country. And has made some wonderful CDs and has a voice that will just send chills. And, and I've always loved performing. So even though I never wanted to do it for a living, the journalism always treated me better, and I didn't want to have to live off my music. But it's been a great side line for me. So I've always had, either done musical theater, done bands, I've done, you know, rock bands, dance bands, folk bands from you know—

SB: When you say you've done them you participated or you had groups?

PW: I usually led them. Because I never considered myself a good enough musician to like follow some other guy. If I was leading them I could tell people what we were going
to do, and we could do something I knew how to do. And I think I always had the personality to be that.

SB: Your old group was named?

PW: Paul Wilborn and the Pop-Tarts. And we had girl singers who were called Strawberry and Cherry, and we were—I wrote funny songs and we eventually became sort of a fun, just a wild dance band that people would come and have so much fun because we were having a lot of fun. And we did that for about twelve years.

SB: Wow.

PW: Starting early eighties sometime. And, and then I had a group that sort of morphed from that. There was better players even, and it became, was called the Big Bar Bills. And that was you know, a little more—

SB: And how long did you—?

PW: Few years, few years. But at that time I was actually sort of gotten excited—this was you know, mid-nineties maybe early nineties—I got excited about, I discovered, actually, early on, I discovered the thirties and the twenties. Which I consider the height of American music. I’m not even a big fan of the forties. I'm a much bigger fan of the twenties and the thirties. Things got a little schmaltzy by the forties for me. Great hot jazz music, great song writing, great—it was just words and music came together. It was one of those places where, where I think we already are looking back—but you look back and go, That was, for American music, a watershed. You know, a couple of decades between the two World Wars. And so I really have focused hard on those decades.

SB: This is now current, your interest?

PW: Well, also for the last—probably for the last ten years. But currently, I'm really at it a lot more than ever because I'm actually doing big shows. We did a show. We're doing a series called the “American Song Books Series” at the Palladium. We did one September 29—it was all Cole Porter. We had over 300 people pay big money to hear Cole Porter songs.

SB: Great.

PW: And we do it like a kind of variety show. And I tell stories about, that put the songs in context. And it's going over really well. So that's my passion.

SB: And what's the name of your new group?

PW: The group is called Blue Roses. Paul Wilborn and the Blue Roses.
SB: Now does the group perform or is it just you performing at the Palladium?

PW: It's a trio. Plus, I always have invited guests. I always felt like you got to have some girl singers. Got to have beautiful girls on stage, it's an important thing.

SB: Okay.

PW: So we, we invite Eugenie. Usually, she actually does some performing. Because she's a real—she just knocks people out when she gets on stage. So, so it's been, it's kind of a little variety show that focuses on one theme or one composer. And I've done, as a journalist I just use my old journalism things and did tons of research into the songs and the songwriters. And so I tell stories. And a lot of people know the song, but they don't know—

SB: That's exciting.

PW: Anything about it.

SB: The stories.

PW: They don't know the context, or they don't know—and I tell—trying to make it very contemporary, because all of these people were, you know, going out there or having a great time. They were living their lives. They were, you know, making love and doing life—

SB: Sure.

PW: And it's not that much different than now. It just had a better soundtrack than we do now.

SB: (laughs)

PW: So— (laughs)

SB: Where do you find the time, Paul?

PW: I steal it. And after—

SB: So, is all your time taken for that?

PW: Well the city is, the city is a pretty demanding job.

SB: But I meant in terms of a hobby.

PW: Oh yeah, I mean it's—
SB: That's, that's your main focus.

PW: Yeah.

SB: As a hobby.

PW: Yeah. I don't play golf. I don't, you know, I garden. I like working in the yard as sort of a therapy. But I don't have a lot of "boy" hobbies.

SB: And there are no children.

PW: I have never had children. And so yeah, it gives you a little more free time and flexibility.

SB: Sure.

PW: To do things. And so essentially you just sort of give up your nights occasionally. And a lot of my nights are spoken for as well with my job. But we manage to find the time. I'm only doing, you know, three shows per year, the big theatre shows. So it's not like you're out every weekend performing. I couldn't do that.

SB: You're on a lot of boards.

PW: I sit on a lot of boards.

SB: And that's mainly during the day?

PW: Yeah, but, you know, when you sit on—

SB: Which boards?

PW: Like the Florida Orchestra, you need to go see the shows!

SB: Yeah, Okay.

PW: And I love the orchestra. And I sit on the board for the Performing Arts Center so I'm there a lot for things. I used to work with, sort of Gasparilla Art Festival. The, I just went off the Plant Museum board. Tampa Bay Business Committee for the Arts, it's like part of a chain. You know, there's too many meetings. Way too many meetings.

SB: Are those the main boards that you're on?

PW: I think I may be leaving some out, but right now those are the main boards. I've sat on others. I essentially represent any—we have to, whenever the city gives money, we give a lot of money to different arts groups. We have a representative sitting there to sort of make sure that—
SB: Sure.

PW: You know, what's going on. And the board is a way to do that.

SB: Sure.

PW: I also sit on the Arts Council. And probably a couple other things that I—

SB: Do you get involved in charity work at all?

PW: I do, and I donate my musical time for that but I, I really have kind of limited my charity work to arts charities.

SB: Do you have favorite charities?

PW: I kind of look to see who, who might be—who needs the help at this time. I mean—

SB: Okay.

PW: What sort of got me going was, was a friend of mine, Guy King, who was on the board of the Performing Arts Center. Great guy. And he, around the time before they found Judi Lisi and when the center was kind of floundering, he said, “Listen, we need to get some people involved in this thing.” And he got me involved, and I started donating a lot of time and would donate musical services. And I went on as President of the Producers board for them. And so my interest was, this is something that's a good thing that needs some help right now. And you know, I've had friends who have done that with the orchestra, and I've had friends who have done it with other things. And so I kind of look to see—

SB: Where the need [is].

PW: Who I can make difference with.

   And one of the things we're—my interest now is in some of the smaller arts organizations that—

SB: Like?

PW: Like our theatre companies. Stageworks, Jobsite. There's two or three of them. What we've done—and this is—we're doing a community cultural plan. You ask about a plan, we're actually are finishing up one right now. And one of the things we've discovered—it's what we already knew, but the—having an outside consultant tell you, it's, it helps focus you. Is that if you really look at our arts as an ecosystem, we've got the big predators. And they're doing pretty well even though, you know, it's sometimes a struggle. You've got the Florida Orchestra. You've got the Performing Arts Center. You've got Lowry Park Zoo. You've got MOSI. You've got some you know, very big
players. Tampa Museum even with its issues is still a very big player that's not in any jeopardy. You drop down below that level and we've got a big gap.

St. Petersburg, one thing I think people are pleased about is that there is something—they have some folks in that level. Florida Crafts and the Arts Center, some things like that that are—not as many employees as a big. So, I think where we're looking to go strategically in the next few years—and this is between myself, the Arts Council—you know we're trying to really put a focus on this, is, How do we help grow our small and mid-level arts organizations to where they can have, an employee? Or five employees? How do they sustain that? Because until you do that, those things come and go and there's, every year is a struggle, and—

SB: How important are they to the growth of the arts?

PW: I think they're incredibly important.

SB: Why?

PW: Because, because the, you look at your big institutions. And how many folks are going to, got to be pretty specialized talent to be at The Florida Orchestra. The Performing Arts Center has a niche, but is localized. You know, it's, there's a very, you know, it's road shows or professional entertainers. You need to have a level where people are able to break in, and these things that, that are, how do you describe it? They're sort of, you know, it's like an eco—I think of it as an ecosystem. You need to have the big, the middle, the small, and it's in balance.

SB: And there are varying ticket prices, I would think.

PW: Varying ticket prices, there are things, a young theatre company may be doing things, like Jobsite where it is doing things that developed this really cool young audience. That they kind of feel like they're going to Saturday Night Live or something, but it's, it's theatre! And they're really ambitious, and they're, and they're doing some great stuff. Well that's a niche that we need to fill! And you know, everybody at that theatre company has to have a day job right now. Which is, you know, so maybe if two of them didn’t' have to have a day job? If their day job was that theatre? How much more could they accomplish? So that's an area where I think we need to grow. And I'm real interested in that. More interested frankly than I am right now in some of the bigger dogs. Who are great and I'm, you know, love them. But I think they're going to be okay.

SB: What, Paul, would you consider your greatest achievement thus far? Putting you on the spot.

PW: Well, I think, for me, if I really look—I was a very good reporter. And I won a lot of important awards, and was named Florida Journalist of the Year in 1996. And I remember when I got that award. I'd gotten some other national things—but this was like this thing where they judged you on ten of your works. And you know, the editors of the papers around the state picked. And you were up against the top journalist. And I
remember going up to my room and kind of like, cried after I got this thing! Because it was like, Okay, I've reached this—

SB: This level.

PW: There was like 20 years of work—

SB: Wow.

PW: That got acknowledged there. And, and I really took it seriously and worked really hard at it and tried to be the best every day that I could be at that job. And, and so, I'm kind of happy now that I'm not in it anymore because I had a wonderful career. I had a fellowship to the University of Michigan. I've worked all over, you know, have covered things around the world. And did a lot of big stories around the country. And so I feel like I'm at a new phase and a new challenge.

But I look at that as like my professional, highest and best professional stuff.

And—

SB: Would you, I mean, do you like writing better?

PW: Well, I love writing.

SB: Better than performing?

PW: Well, now I'm kind of in a phase where performing is fun, but what I'm doing is writing these shows. So they're performance, but they're all my—I write a whole show that goes along with it. Everything I say in the show is—

SB: So you're writing.

PW: So I'm writing.

SB: Yeah.

PW: And so it sort of brings together those two things.

SB: That's great.

PW: And it's fun and it's, you know, it's potentially something I can do for a long time.

SB: Well, Paul, I mean, you're an amazing person! You really are!

PW: (laughs)

SB: I've known you for a long time, and it is a joy to know you.
PW: Oh, thank you.

SB: And we are so blessed to have you in this area. We really are. People who brought you back knew what they were doing. Because you have, you have contributed so much to this area.

PW: Well, its fun to be back. And you know, I think as we talked about early on— you know, my family has been here for a long time. You get this— things that drive you crazy about the city are also things that endear it to you.

SB: Sure.

PW: And you can point and go, Well why is this and why is that? But, but I think there is this powerful thing of, you know roots and connection and we can have a family reunion, and turn out ninety Italians. And there's something in my DNA that says, Oh, you're supposed to be there! I don't know, so—

SB: That's great. Well, just please stay. And I, again, I can't thank you enough for this time. It's just been a—

PW: Such a pleasure.

SB: A real pleasure.

PW: I'm glad someone cares!

SB: People enjoy getting to know you. I absolutely have.

PW: Well, thanks so much. This has been so much fun, and it's been great sitting here at this beautiful home! I'm looking out at the Tampa Bay!

SB: Oh this is my office!

PW: It's great!

SB: Take care and thank you, Paul.

PW: Thank you.

*End of Interview*