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Dick Lobo oral history interview by Suzette Berkman, April 26, 2007

Dick Lobo (Interviewee)

Suzette Berkman (Interviewer)

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SB: Today, April 26, 2007. I'm interviewing Richard Lobo, Dick Lobo, who is President and CEO of WEDU, the local PBS station. Dick, thank you so much for being here today.

DL: Delighted to be able to help, Suzette.

SB: Well great. I know that you are a Tampa native, and I was wondering if you could fill us in, where you were born, and your ties to Tampa.

DL: Sure. I'm a second generation Tampan. My parents, both my mother and my father were also born in Tampa. And my grandparents on my father's side—I've been able to trace them a little bit. My paternal grandparents came to Tampa shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. We think my paternal grandfather arrived around 1904 [or] 1905, and he came directly from Cuba to Ybor City. And as best we can determine, he was a young man of about 20-21 years of age. He came from a part of Cuba where they grow tobacco leaves. It's a province called Pinar Del Rio, which means “pines of the river.” And it's a very famous area for growing great tobacco leaves. The great Cuban cigars, all the leaves that they use and the filler, comes from that province in Cuba.

SB: Is that—

DL: And in fact they still grow cigar leaves there.

SB: Is that the east, west?

DL: It's in the south central part of the island. It's south of Havana. And it's on the other coast. It's facing south. But it's a very well known province.

In any event, my paternal grandfather arrived here shortly after the turn of the century. From what I'm told, he married my grandmother, my paternal grandmother by proxy on a telephone hook up, so that she could come over. And so they did that, and he brought her over shortly thereafter. So—
SB: And—

DL: That's my father's side of the family. That's how they got here.

SB: When would that have been?

DL: That's right after he got here.

SB: Okay.

DL: And I know that because my dad was born in 1907.

SB: Okay.

DL: So if he came over in 1904, 1905, he had to work quickly. Bring his wife over, get married, you know, and then—

SB: [Laughs] Right.

DL: Have a child. And I'm an only child incidentally.

SB: Oh, okay. I was just going to ask that.

DL: And that's something that I—I missed having any siblings. But times were tough. Times were very, very tough at that time in Ybor City.

On my mother's side, my maternal grandparents also came here from Cuba. I don't know as much about them. I've never been able to track them down very much. I do know, and my mother told me this, that her grandfather, my maternal great grandfather, was of Mexican descent. And she thinks that they came from the Yucatan Peninsula, around Veracruz. And my maternal grandfather, who was in Cuba before he came over, looked very Mexican. In fact, I look at pictures of him now and he looks like an Aztec warrior of some kind. He had a very typical, indigenous, native nose—the way the Mayans or the Aztecs might have had in Mexico. So I've got a Cuban background on my father's side, going back to Spain before Cuba. And on my mother's side I have Spanish, Cuban, and Mexican blood. So I'm pretty Hispanic, through and through.

SB: Yes, yes [laughs].

DL: Anyway, I don't know when my mother's family got here, but my dad's family got here 1904, 1905. My father then was born in 1907 in Tampa. My mother was born in 1912. So the Lobo family and—her maiden name was Núñez, which is N-u-n-e-z.

SB: Okay.

DL: They've been around quite a while.
SB: Yes.

DL: They had an interesting childhood. My dad's father, the one that came over from Cuba, actually came here with a brother of his. They were a family of about eight or nine kids, and these two brothers decided to come over together to look for work and to make a better life for themselves. Subsequently, another brother came over, another great uncle. He stayed for a while and then went back. But these two brothers stayed, and that's how the Lobo, my branch of the Lobo family got to this country, and we went on from there.

SB: What was the situation in Cuba at the time?

DL: The situation was—

SB: What made—

DL: Tough.

SB: People want to come?

DL: There were issues with the economy for one thing. But there were also issues with the Spanish government having been overthrown. Cuba was a colony of Spain. And then they had that little war, the War of Independence. They would remember the *USS Maine*, all of that stuff. And there was a lot of confusion and a little bit of angst over the Cubans finally overthrowing the Spaniards and having self-government—

SB: Sure.

DL: And the independence. And the jobs were plentiful here. The factories had been up and running for a while in Ybor City, and my grandparents knew from cigars, and knew tobacco. And so apparently the owners of the factories advertised in Cuba to bring workers in—

SB: Okay.

DL: And my grandparents took advantage of those job offers. So a great many people that came to Ybor City starting in the late 1880s then going from many years migrated here from Cuba or from Spain. And there were a lot of Italians, Sicilians primarily, and Germans that all came together.

SB: Really?

DL: In both Ybor City and West Tampa. Ybor City is the best known of the Hispanic communities here in Tampa, but West Tampa was also a thriving Hispanic community, many cigar factories there. Ybor City was bigger, a little bigger in terms of its size, its area. It had more factories and had a more thriving center of commerce. But my father's
family for the most part spent a good deal of time in West Tampa. The cigar workers went where the jobs were. And so there were factories both in Ybor City and in West Tampa. If there were no jobs in Ybor City they would move to West Tampa, and rent a house there.

SB: Oh, I see.

DL: If those factories closed down, or if there was a strike, they'd move back to Ybor City. So there was a lot of going back and forth.

SB: But they did stay in Tampa.

DL: They did stay in Tampa, however, once they put their roots down here. And so it was a very vibrant community, with all of these different cultures—the Italians, the Germans, the Spaniards, and the Cubans all being thrown together. And a lot of the people that came over from Cuba, Suzette, were of mixed blood. There were a lot of mulattos. So although Tampa was very segregated at the time that I was born until the time my parents lived here, we in the Ybor City and West Tampa communities were used to living with people of color and next to people of color.

SB: OK.

DL: And—

SB: I was going to ask you to define "mulatto."

DL: Yes, it was a really interesting environment there.

SB: What is that exactly? Mulatto?

DL: Mulatto means "mixed blood." You have some color, some ethnic color, blood, so—

SB: Okay, any color.

DL: Mostly any color, but brown or black, yes.

SB: Okay.

DL: And there were a lot of mulattos in Cuba because of the mix of Spaniards and Afro-Cubans who had been brought to Cuba years ago as slaves, so—

SB: Sure.

DL: There was a lot of intermingling of the races in Cuba. So there were a lot of mulattos that came from Cuba to the United States to work in the cigar factories along side
everyone else. And it made for some interesting situations because as I said, the city—the City of Tampa was very—

[Tape paused]

SB: And a little later, Suzette, I'll talk to you about what it was like growing up here in a segregated city—but also the people that came here from Cuba and Spain and Sicily and Germany. [They] all were thrown together in Ybor City and West Tampa, and there was a lot of suspicion on the part of the white Anglo community that lived here because they saw the people from Ybor City as kind of strange and foreigners and aliens—and speaking different languages. And so we were treated with a lot of suspicion, so there was a lot of—not a lot of intermingling of the people—

SB: You—

DL: The workers and the other people outside of Ybor City and West Tampa.

SB: Do you have specific memories of that?

DL: Oh yes, well—we didn't socialize very much.

SB: Okay.

DL: I remember one time as a youngster, during one summer, it was very hot, there was no air conditioners at the time, and we decided—we'd heard there was a public pool of some kind. It was a springs or a lake or something that we wanted to go and cool off. And we got in our old jalopy, and went there and got there and found a sign that said, "No dogs or Cubans allowed."

SB: Oh my goodness.

DL: So there was that type of blatant, you know, racism and discrimination against not only people of color, but people that weren't like, you know, the people that ran the city or the power structure here.

SB: Who was the power structure per your memory?

DL: Well, these were people—the bankers, and people in commerce, and people in agriculture, phosphate mining, shipping. Tampa was a major port city, was a major center of phosphate mining, a big agricultural community with citrus being close by. And it was a major shipping center, and banking and commercial center.

SB: Is—

DL: So the people that ran the city—
SB: Sure.

DL: And actually, the people that wooed the cigar factories here and the workers, were the people who also were very suspicious of them and they wanted, they kind of made it clear that we kind of should stay in our place, you know? And so we all kind of went to school together. We shopped in our own little communities, and every so often, we ventured out into the community at large. And it was not always the most receptive or pleasant place, you know?

SB: But these were the white people?

DL: Well yes, the white power structure.

SB: I mean, they were all white at that time. What, they were natives?

DL: Many of them were native, yes.

SB: Mostly.

DL: Yes. They would call us names and ethnic slurs, and we in return would refer to them as crackers—Florida crackers, which is, you know, actually not a bad term—

SB: [Laughs] Hysterical.

DL: But it, for us, it meant those people that didn't you know, like us.

SB: Somewhat of a negative term—

DL: Yes, there was a lot of that going on.

SB: At that point. Before we leave the factory though, I did hope that you would share any memories you might have. Did you visit your parents in the factories?

DL: Sure, yes I did. Well, let's go back to my childhood because—

SB: Oh, alright, sure.

DL: My earliest memories of the factories were when I was pretty young.

SB: Okay.

DL: My dad's father, my paternal grandfather, was a smart man and very assertive. And he, after arriving in Tampa, rose through the ranks pretty quickly, and became a supervisor. The word in Spanish is, capataz. Capataz. And the translation is kind of a supervisor or overseer. You know, someone that would deal with the workers for the owners of the factory. The owners didn't want to sometimes get their hands dirty and
deal with the workers, so they would hire people such as my grandfather who knew the language, and knew the workers, and were able to hire and fire and tell the owners, you know, what was going on in the rank and file.

SB: Sure.

DL: So my grandfather was respected and a powerful guy because he was a—

SB: Sure.

DL: Supervisor. And in any event he wanted—and he worked—in the factories, as did my grandmother, for a long time. My mother went through seventh grade, and then, for economic reasons dropped out of school after she got her seventh grade education. My grandfather wanted more from my dad. He didn't want to have my dad work in the factories, although my dad spent summers and time working the factories. My dad went through Catholic schools here in Tampa. He went through a school that is now Jesuit High School, but it was called Sacred Heart at the time he went through it. When he was graduated from high school—and he went all the way through high school, it was called Sacred Heart, and he graduated—his graduating class had eight boys in it, eight young boys. And that was the graduating class at Sacred Heart. One of his student friends in that graduating class was Al Lopez who became a baseball legend—

SB: Sure.

DL: The Hall of Famer.

SB: Yes, of course.

DL: He was in my dad's graduating class. And I think he was the last of the eight to die.

SB: Oh my goodness.

DL: He died just recently in Tampa.

SB: Sure.

DL: In any event, my mother worked in the factories from a pretty early age, as did my aunts and uncles. You know my mother's brothers and sisters, my father's sisters, many of them worked in the factories off and on. I was born in 1936, three years after my folks were married. I was born in a hospital in Ybor City called the Centro Asturiano. The Asturian Center.

SB: Sure.

DL: And I think I was born in that hospital because my parents belonged to that health club. There were like—
SB: Oh, I have heard of that.

DL: Societies.

SB: Sure.

DL: And you would belong with—there was socialized medicine in effect in Ybor City and West Tampa.

SB: Yes.

DL: You would join one of these clubs and you would have a place to socialize, a place to meet people, and to be entertained, and you would also have a hospital to go to when you had health needs. And they would also have clinics with doctors able to check you out. So I was born in the Centro Asturiano Hospital, 1936, October 18. And when I was born, my mother and father were living upstairs in a two story little house in Ybor City, about three or four blocks from the hospital. And at the time, my dad was—had a little coffee route. Cubans drink a lot of coffees—

SB: Yes.

DL: Especially dark, Cuban coffee. And so everyone—coffee was a staple in every household and they needed a lot of coffee. They'd drink it morning, noon, and night. And my dad and another fellow, a partner, had a very small, little coffee route, where they would buy bags of coffee. They had a coffee roaster, and they would roast the coffee, grind it, and then take it on a route just like a milkman or bread deliverers—

SB: Sure.

DL: They would deliver coffee. So that's what my dad was doing for a while when I first was born. And my mother, after she had me, stopped working for a while to raise me. But my earliest memories of growing up in Ybor City after I was about one or two years old was going downstairs to where my dad had his coffee mill, his coffee grinder, and his coffee roaster—and smell these wonderful smells of coffee being roasted—

SB: There's nothing like it.

DL: And ground up. It was amazing. And it was an interesting neighborhood, wonderful mixture of homes, very modest homes, mostly workers and some of the professional people that had shops in Ybor City. They all lived near each other. I lived about three or four blocks off Seventh Avenue, which is the main drag in Ybor City.

SB: Yes, sure.

DL: I also remember as a youngster, I learned later on, that directly across the street from
this little two story house where I was taken right after I was born—directly across the street there was a pretty big house for that neighborhood, with a little wrought iron fence around it. And it belonged to a fellow named Charlie Wall. Now Charlie Wall is a legend in Ybor City because he was a mobster. And many, many people that have written about Ybor City and the history of Ybor City mention Charlie Wall. He kind of controlled the Bolita industry, which was the gambling industry.

SB: Sure.

DL: He also had other interests, but he was very, very powerful, and very much an influence in life in Ybor City. I was a kid, so I didn't know, but I was kind of told to stay away from that house and not get too close—

SB: [Laughs]

DL: Not play over there in that yard, or on that sidewalk. And I do remember the blinds were always pulled—

SB: Oh, really?

DL: The drapes were always pulled in that house. You never saw much sign of activity there.

SB: So, he was not Spanish?

DL: Not Spanish, no, I'm not sure what his background was.

SB: So was he part of the goings on—the social climate?

DL: No, we—

SB: Not at all?

DL: No. He was part of kind of an underworld situation there. But it was wide open. Ybor City, back in the early days, because as I said, the City of Tampa—city fathers didn't want to have much to do with it. So they kind of, it was like the wild, wild west.

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: They kind of let the people of Ybor City police or patrol themselves. And—

SB: But yet—

DL: Unfortunately, some of the people like Charlie Wall would buy protection from the City of Tampa police, and from judges, and from the city government. So we were left alone. And Ybor City was loaded with brothels, and speakeasies during Prohibition. And
this gambling that the workers used to love to gamble on this kind of a lottery thing, with Bingo balls, if you will.

SB: Sure, very famous.

DL: And it was fun by this thing. And the workers would also—they'd play almost every day on a daily basis, just, you know, a nickel perhaps.

SB: Did you go to a facility, or—?

DL: No, they would come to your house.

SB: They would come.

DL: There were runners that would come, and they would, each day, they would come and you'd tell them what numbers you wanted to play. And the drawings were either that evening or that night, or on Saturday—they'd draw some number.

SB: Did you play? Were children permitted?

DL: I didn't play but my mother did. I remember my mother, you know, having her petty cash drawer and—

SB: [Laughs]

DL: Giving the fellow some numbers. And she used to love to gamble, did until she died. She was—

SB: Did she ever win?

DL: She did. She was very, very lucky. She had a wonderful lucky streak.

SB: What would you win? How much?

DL: Oh God, if you bet you know, a nickel or so, you might win five dollars—

SB: Okay.

DL: You know, it's a lot of money.

SB: Well at that time, sure.

DL: And it depends—they'd divvy it up depending on how many people got the number. You know, you'd have to rely on their books, so you never knew, but you know, for them it was a good deal to win a few dollars. [Laughs]
DL: So, and later in life, she played a lot of Bingo, she played many cards. She'd go to Bingo parlors. She also loved to play poker, and she had some girlfriends, and they'd get in their cars in the evenings and go to floating poker games.

SB: Oh my gosh!

DL: And they played for real money, you know, in private homes. So she just loved to gamble. Unfortunately I never got her to Las Vegas. I think she would have liked it [laughs], but she was too sick by the time I could have taken her. But I think she would have liked it.

So anyway, getting back to growing up—

SB: [Laughs]

DL: I spent the first few years of my life at that little two-story house.

SB: Yes.

DL: And then, after we, I guess my family accumulated a few dollars, then we moved to a little neighborhood right on the edge of Ybor City called Tampa Heights. And a lot of cigar workers, as they made a little bit of money, and saved up, moved to Tampa Heights, which is adjacent to Ybor City. And we moved to a rental apartment on Taliaferro Street, right near Palm Avenue. Palm Avenue runs through—

SB: Sure.

DL: Ybor City. So when I started school in Tampa, I lived at Taliaferro Street near Palm Avenue, and it was a few doors away from where my grandparents lived, my father's mother and father. They lived at the corner of Palm Avenue and Taliaferro. And I started school in Ybor City at a Catholic School called OLPH, Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Very famous, and many, many, many, many of the workers kids went to that school. Although I must say, many of the families were not very religious, but they thought they should give their children kind of a religious upbringing. So they sent them to Catholic school. And so I started in kindergarten at OLPH. I was double promoted. They felt that I was smart enough that I needed to get ahead. So they made—the nuns had me skip first grade. So I went from kindergarten to second grade. And then went to third grade at OLPH, and then I'll tell you the rest of the story in a minute. But my memories of childhood when I first started school were really kind of sad because I was an only child. My mother was working in the factory, so she couldn't get off to pick me up after school. And so most of the time, I would have to get out of classes—here I'm in kindergarten or second or third grade—and all the kids would go home, or many of them would go home, and they'd have brothers or sisters or aunts and uncles. I didn't have anybody, so what I would do was go across the street from the school to where the nuns had their residence. And I
wasn't allowed to go inside, but I'd play in the yard while the nuns were inside. So I was all by myself, sitting in this yard from two-thirty or three in the afternoon until five o'clock when my mother could get out of the factory and come pick me up. It was pretty lonely.

SB: Sure.

DL: I must tell you there was not much to do—didn't have any toys. I'd just sit around and—

SB: And it was hot!

DL: Have a stick and you know, beat on a tree or something like that.

SB: But it was, I'm sure very hot.

DL: It was very warm.

SB: Gosh.

DL: Very hot, and just—that was very—

SB: Wow.

DL: Lonely, sad time, those few years.

SB: Sure.

DL: Every so often, someone would take me to the factory, a friend or someone. So that I wouldn't have to stay in the yard with the nuns. And that's when I had my first experience of going to the factories.

SB: Okay.

DL: When I was maybe seven or eight years old—maybe nine years old. And I would go to a factory where my mom was working, and they would let the kids go in. It was not a big deal. And these factories were very long. Not very wide, but very long, the floors where the workers were. And the odor of tobacco, the dust—the tobacco dust was everywhere. They used to have major exhaust fans when they had electricity that would try to take some of the dust out of there. But there was so much tobacco and so much tobacco leaf being handled. It was always very musty and the air was filled with tobacco dust. I mean you could just smell it from the minute you walked into the factory.

SB: It was one room?

DL: No usually there were two floors.
SB: Oh?

DL: The first floor was where they received the leaf, the tobacco leaf. They'd bring it in by trucks. And on the first floor, they would have the people that received the leaves, and they would have specialists that would grade the leaves and put them into different barrels—

SB: Oh, okay.

DL: For different grades of cigars that had to be made. And then they would take those leaves upstairs. And the second floor is where the actual cigars were made by hand.

SB: Okay.

DL: And there would be kind of like, rows of work stations. And you'd have maybe twelve people across working—

SB: Would there be—?

DL: Making cigars in rows, and there would be thirty or forty rows of those people.

SB: Wow.

DL: And it was a very long, narrow, musty, wooden kind of environment. The beams were wood, the floors were wood. There were windows that they would keep open to try to get cross ventilation going through during the summer time. But the overriding memory that I have is of the smell of tobacco when you walked into the factory. But people knew one another, and they were close. It was not a huge community, so people were very nice. And when I'd walk in, friends of my mother or my aunts who might be working the same factory would greet me. And I would go and just stand by my mother and listen to them talking, listen to the workers going back and forth and watching her make cigars. And it was very pleasant. They would grouse about the work or something, but it was nice that they had people that they knew.

[Phone rings, tape paused]

DL: One of the things I remember vividly, is after my mother's shift was over, we would all leave the factory. And the women were allowed to take a few cigars home every day. They could make some extra cigars for the men-folk at the home. Whether it was their father, or their husband, or the men that were living in the house. They'd have a quota. They could make a few cigars. And I remember walking out of the cigar door, and the men would just walk out, but the women would have to open their purses and show some of the managers, you know, how many cigars they were taking. And I also remember on Fridays—it was payday—stopping at a cashier's office, and my mom picking up a pay envelope, and that was a big deal. They'd have little manila pay envelopes—
SB: Sure.

DL: And they would pay the workers in cash. And it was not a lot of money, but it was a day that would signify that we might be able to go perhaps and get a hamburger at a drive-in restaurant or something—

SB: Was that special?

DL: Which is a big treat for us. Yes. There was a restaurant called the Goody-Goody. And it was a drive-in, and gosh, I forget. It was on Florida or Tampa Street. And it might still be there. But we used to love to go to this drive-in and have a waitress come and bring a tray to our car and hang it on the window. And we would have basically the same thing every week, my mother and father and I. A hamburger, with a slice of pie, and a Coca-Cola. And that was on payday, that was—

SB: I think it was torn down either last year or two years ago, Dick.

[Phone rings, tape paused]

DL: Anyway, that was a treat for us, to be able to go there and eat one day per week on payday. And anyway, I remember the factories vividly, because it was great to see my parents and not have to be hanging around the school where the nuns were.

SB: Was there a lector? I've read about the lectors.

DL: There was a lector. By the time I was a kid though, they were gone.

SB: Oh.

DL: The lectors were very popular because the workers would take part of their salary; not a lot of money, but they would pool their money. And they would hire a reader, which was a lector, who would come in each day and read to the workers while they were working. And the lectors would sit on an elevated chair that would be above the heads of the workers. And they would dress—they would dress very nicely. They were usually educated men, and the workers would tell them what they wanted the lectors to read. Usually they would start by reading the morning newspapers, translating what was in the English press for the workers. But then later on, the workers wanted the lectors to read from the Classics. They wanted to hear what Cervantes was writing about *Don Quixote*. They also then eventually started asking the lectors to read very controversial books that dealt with socialism and—

SB: Really?

DL: The first rumblings about communism. And so these books got the workers riled up and wanted—they wanted to hear more and more of that, and they wanted to start acting
on some of the things that they were hearing that were in these manifestos and these tomes that the lectors were reading to them. And finally, the workers said—I mean the owners said, Enough. They didn't want the workers to be rising up—

SB: Certainly.

DL: And forming unions—

SB: Sure.

DL: And creating all these disturbances. So they finally said, Enough, and they stopped the lectors from coming in. So that was a—

SB: That's interesting.

DL: The rise and fall of the lectors.

SB: Who—the social—the insurance—the way that they took care of the workers—was it the owners?

DL: No. No, no.

SB: Who—?

DL: There were no benefits.

SB: Okay.

DL: It was either the church—

SB: Okay.

DL: Or the societies that were formed like the Centro Asturiano, or the Cuban Club.

SB: They provided—

DL: The Centro Español.

SB: The care.

DL: They provided, yes. You paid them, and it was like a fraternal thing.

SB: I see, I see.

DL: And they provided the hospitals. There actually were several hospitals. The one I was born in was the biggest one. There was another hospital actually on Bayshore
Boulevard called Centro Español, which my youngest son was born in. And then there were several clinics where doctors would hold consultations with people. And then there were the club houses themselves where you could go and play dominoes, or just get away from the house and go have a glass of wine or a beer after dinner, and socialize with other people. And there were also lectures and symposiums. They had meeting rooms. People would go and learn about things, have discussions. They were active socially. And then also there were regular dances. They would have great dances on the weekends when the workers were free. I remember my parents used to love—they’d call them tea dances. They were matinees, and they were usually on Sunday afternoon. So people could dance, get home early enough, then go to work the next day. But the matinees were very popular, and all the clubs around Ybor City and West Tampa—

SB: Oh, I see.

DL: Would have matinee dances where they would have orchestras, full orchestras playing dance music.

SB: My gosh.

DL: And then the workers would go and—that’s where they would meet, you know, if they were young—

SB: Sure.

DL: And if they were not married, they’d go meet women or men at these dances.

SB: It sounds extremely organized.

DL: Very organized. Very well organized. These clubs provided almost all the needs of the workers outside of the work place. They also had entertainment. They would bring entertainers in from Spain, folkloric groups, singers and dancers and musicians that would come directly from Spain or from Cuba to entertain the workers. Yes.

SB: Where did they learn this type of organization? In Cuba, or—I mean, how did they know how to do this?

DL: Yes, it existed in Cuba—

SB: In Cuba.

DL: And it existed to some extent in Spain.

SB: Okay.

DL: Yes, it was—
SB: Interesting.

DL: These societies are fraternal things, you know? The Americans had fraternal organizations such as the Elks, and they provided some of services and some of the things, but nothing to the extent that the Latino community did.

SB: Sure.

DL: Yes. And those were very important parts of our lives. When I had my tonsils taken out, I went back to the hospital where I was born, and it was all paid for. I remember whenever my mother needed a doctor, measles or something, the doctors in our community would make house calls frequently.

SB: That’s wonderful.

DL: At no extra charge, and you know, this was—there would be insurance agent collectors who would come by every week, and you’d pay them, and they’d stamp your little health care book or something.

SB: Fascinating.

DL: You saw at the University of South Florida, they had my grandmother’s health card—

SB: I did see that.

DL: Remember, in their collection there?

SB: Yes.

DL: So yes that was—

SB: It’s on the Internet.

DL: It’s on the Internet.

SB: Yes.

DL: It’s part of their collection, so—

SB: That’s so interesting.

DL: Yes. Otherwise I couldn’t have—and you know, it was important, because there were many strikes later on, a lot of strikes, the workers rising up, you know, against—
SB: Do you remember that? Did you—?

DL: I don’t, no. No. I know that there were strikes—

SB: Yes.

DL: And I didn’t know much about them, but I remember my folks saying, you know, well, we’re being laid off or there’s no work right now. And it would get tough.

SB: What did they do then?

DL: Well, they’d rely on their relatives to maybe help them out a little bit, or they’d get other odd jobs. There was one time, Suzette, that was important in my life, because things were tough here in Tampa, and this was after I got out of third grade. I remember from the job perspective, things were tough, jobs were very scarce. And my mother’s parents, my grandparents on my mother’s side, had moved to New York City because things had been tough in Tampa earlier. And they started a life in New York. And my mother’s two sisters, two aunts of mine, had also moved to New York to be near their parents, and they had jobs there. And they were doing okay. So when I was in—when I got out of third grade, things were tough in Tampa, and my mother and father decided to pull up stakes, and we actually moved to New York City. We had visited my grandparents and my aunts up in New York, so we were familiar with New York, and they kept saying, Why don’t you come up and join us? You’ll have a better life. And we didn’t want to leave Tampa. You know, my father’s parents were here, and he had relatives here, and we had friends here.

But we went to New York when I was in—starting fourth grade. And we were up there for about a year or so during the war.

SB: I see.

DL: And we went up to find a better life economically, my parents did. And I remember we even had a little bit of discrimination there. This was during a time when a massive, the massive migration of Puerto Ricans was starting to come to New York. You know, West Side Story and all that.

SB: Yes, of course.

DL: And so there was a lot of discrimination in New York against Puerto Ricans. So when we arrived in New York, we wanted to have an apartment in a neighborhood that was pretty nice. There were some rough neighborhoods—gangs and stuff. And my parents found out about an apartment in a neighborhood in the East Eighties, called “Yorkville.” And we went and applied for an apartment that was available there, and the superintendent looked at the application and saw our name, Lobo. And he said, “Lobo, what kind of a name is that?” And my parents said, you know, It’s a Spanish name. He said, “No, we don’t want any Spanish people here.” And we said, What are you talking
about? And he said, “Yeah, no. The Spanish people are no good for the building. They bring in all these kids, and these relatives, and they’re—so you’ve got to go up where the Spanish people live. We don’t want you here.”

So we ended up having to live in what is called Spanish Harlem in New York. And we found a flat, a coldwater flat, on 106th Street and Lexington Avenue, which is right in the heart of Spanish Harlem. They call it, El Barrio. And we were living there because that’s where the Spanish-speaking people were supposed to live. And the people in New York equated anybody that spoke Spanish with Puerto Ricans. They didn’t know that there was a distinction.

SB: Oh my goodness.

DL: You know with Cubans or with people that were born here in this country—

SB: Sure.

DL: We were just Spanish-speaking people. In any event, I spent, with my mother and father, three years living in Spanish Harlem in New York. And this was during fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. I went to public school there, and I had received a pretty good education from the nuns [laughter] in Tampa at OLPH. And so I really excelled in my studies in New York because I was going to school with a lot of underprivileged kids that came from Puerto Rican households where they couldn’t speak the language, and the parents couldn’t be of much help to their kids. So I excelled in my grades throughout my elementary school career and in New York. The teachers loved me. But it was a very tough neighborhood. And I would get beat up regularly by gangs [laughs], you know—

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: The classic thing, my lunch money being stolen, my mittens being stolen, all of these things. It was just really—

SB: And you didn’t have siblings to protect you.

DL: Didn’t have siblings, no. And my dad worked, my mom was taking care of me. And so you know, I wasn’t a street-smart tough kid, you know, I really was bullied a lot and it was just [a] terrible situation. And frankly, I dreaded getting out of sixth grade, Suzette, because the next thing was having to go to middle school. And the middle school that I would have had to attend in that neighborhood was just a nightmare. I’d heard stories about it. I’d seen kids that went there. It was a very tough, tough school. And I was concerned about my safety and whether or not I could survive there. And it’s an interesting story, and I haven’t told it to a lot of people, but I was very desperate not to go to that school. And so I kind of wrote a note that I wanted my parents to find because I couldn’t face them. Because it meant for them, uprooting themselves and moving. But I kind of wrote a note implying that I was thinking about suicide if I didn’t get out of that environment.
SB: Sure.

DL: And it’s interesting because my parents found the note, never discussed it with me, but as soon as that school year was over, they decided to move back to Tampa.

SB: Oh, isn’t that something. What—that you did that?

DL: And it was kind of an unspoken thing that—

SB: I see. You didn’t really want them—

DL: My parents didn’t want to put me through that. They didn’t want to make me feel guilty, but it was [a] huge step for them to take, because my dad, at this time, was working for a major banking organization in New York. And he was in charge of some collections in international business because he could speak Spanish.

SB: Sure.

DL: And they were doing pretty well. But they had to uproot themselves because of their concern about my feelings and my safety. And we moved back to Tampa. And I started middle school or junior high school back here in Tampa. And at the time, we moved back to the neighborhood where we used to live before we left. And during that time my father’s mother and father, my paternal grandparents, decided to move to Miami. A couple of my aunts had moved to Miami with their kids, my cousins. And my paternal grandparents wanted to be near them, because my mother and father had left, you know, and so—

SB: Yes.

DL: They wanted to—so—

SB: Sure.

DL: When we got back to Tampa from New York, about a year or so later, my grandparents wanted to move to Miami. They sold my mother and father the family house, which was at the corner of Palm Avenue and Taliaferro. They moved to Miami and we moved into the family house—which was a lovely house with a porch, and almost looked like one of these houses in Hyde Park. And I went through a wonderful phase at that time, because I flourished after I left the streets of New York. I was able to get a bicycle here, able to be on the streets at night—

SB: Sure.

DL: And, you know, run around. I went to playgrounds. I was able to hang out with kids without this fear of the gang violence and all that.
SB: Sure.

DL: And so I went through a growing spurt, and I went through this wonderful phase where I did a lot of exercise, and was out all hours of the evening, you know, much longer—because in New York I would have to stay on the sidewalk, and my mother would have to be looking out the window, and I couldn’t go past her line of sight. That’s all I could do, so it was a terrible [laughs]—

SB: It’s hard to relate, it really is just a—

DL: Anyway, so coming back to Tampa turned out to be a terrific thing. And my folks—my dad never went back to the factories. He ended up working for a couple of banks here in Tampa, and for the gas company, the utility company. And my mother did work in the factories from time to time, until mechanization came. And that was in the fifties then. And the machines came and put a lot of people out of business. And the factories started closing, and there were just a few left. So factory work was not an option anymore.

SB: I see.

DL: But growing up on the outskirts of Ybor City and going to George Washington Junior High, which is where all the workers kids went—there were schools for the workers kids in West Tampa and schools for the workers kids in Ybor City. I lived in Ybor City area, so I went through OLPH, and then Washington JHS for three years. And then ended up going to Thomas Jefferson High School which was on the fringe of Tampa Heights. And that’s where the kids from Ybor City went. And Jefferson was also where the kids from West Tampa went. There was no high school in West Tampa, so they had to come into this neighborhood. And that’s where we then all got together—

SB: I see.

DL: —the kids from West Tampa and Ybor City finally in high school, but the West Tampa kids went through their own elementary schools, their own middle schools or junior high schools. We all came together. The other major high schools in Tampa at the time were Hillsborough—big school—in Seminole Heights, and Plant High, which was for the ritzy kids. You know, the kids from Bayshore Boulevard and Palma Ceia, which was really getting to be a major neighborhood at that time. They all went to Plant High, and frankly, the kids from Jefferson, you know, the blue-collar kids, were all very envious. And we would love to, sometimes, ride around and look at the houses, and say, God, isn’t that nice, look how well off they are or something. But we still had wonderful parents and a wonderful life.

SB: Sure.

DL: But there was still a lot of class distinction back then. So I went through middle school, Washington Junior High School, and then Jefferson High School. But growing up
in Tampa as a kid—as I told you earlier, it was a very segregated community. But we had so many friends, other workers’ kids, and relatives and things. And our recreation was very modest. We would either take a trolley car—my mother and her sister might go on a trolley car, take me on a Saturday with maybe one of my cousins, and they’d get off at Franklin Street. And the trolley car ran up the middle of Franklin Street at that time, and they would send me to the Florida Theatre, which was across the street from the Tampa Theatre. It was a movie house. And on Saturdays they would just show a bunch of movies for children, interspersed with cartoons and serials, and animal short subjects, and comedy things. And so for, I don’t know, maybe twenty-five cents, she would put me in the theatre with my cousin. And we would spend five or six hours in the movie house while she shopped with her sister or something there. And so those were my memories of downtown Tampa. And then maybe she would take us to one of the five-and-dime stores, and we’d have a tuna fish sandwich and maybe a Coca-Cola at the fountain or something there, that was—

SB: I’m sure that was special.

DL: Yes. The other places that we would go—the people from Ybor City and West Tampa, is the Courtney Campbell Causeway was relatively new. And they had, kind of, tiki huts, at the beginning there. And people could go in the evening. A family or a group of people would go after work. And they’d take over one of these little huts. And the men would go crabbing. They would get fresh crabs right on the edge of the Causeway there. They’d have little lanterns, and pick up crabs, and then we would cook them right there—

SB: Right there?

DL: And make crabs, yes—

SB: How did you cook?

DL: They had these little, early—early grills—

SB: Okay.

DL: If you will. And we would get sticks and stuff, and make fires, and cook the crabs, and that was wonderful, because everyone, and family units and friends—

[Tape paused]

DL: People would love going out there and get some breezes off the water in the evening, and eating the crabs, and telling stories about what happened during the day in the factories and things.

[End Tape 1, Side A]

[Tape 1, Side B]
DL: Suzette, other things that people in Ybor City and West Tampa did to entertain themselves—there were also trolley cars, believe it or not, that went out Bayshore Boulevard all the way out to Ballast Point. And Ballast Point was a place that the workers loved because it was wide open, and they had playgrounds, and they had a little pier, and they had kind of, pavilions. So, large numbers of the people from the community went out there on weekends and had giant picnics, and social gatherings, and dances—and that was a delightful place to go.

SB: There were no restrictions as far as Hispanics?

DL: No, by that time there were none.

SB: Good.

DL: No. And then the other thing is, people in the evenings would go out after dinner, and just walk around the neighborhood. It’s common in Europe you know, and it’s common in the Caribbean to do that. And the workers used to love to do that. The homes were very hot. You know, we’d have maybe, electric fans but there was no air conditioning. So after dinner, we’d go and stroll around the neighborhoods, talk to people who were sitting on the porches in their rocking chairs, or actually just stroll over to Seventh Avenue. Stores would open late. People could do window-shopping or actually do some shopping. Although shopping days were usually Saturdays, which is when people got paid. They got paid on Friday, and they’d shop on Saturdays. But during the week, they’d go and look in the windows and socialize with people on the street. And on any given day, you could find, for example, a deviled crab salesman. Some guy that would have gone out and caught crabs that morning or the previous night, and cooked them and made these wonderful deviled crabs that were traditional. He’d have a bicycle with a glass display case on front of his bicycle, and he’d sell deviled crabs for five or ten cents, wrapped in wax paper with some hot sauce. And those were wonderful. There would also be candy salesmen—some guy would make homemade candies that you could—hard candies that you could suck on. And we would put them on little sticks and have a stick full of them. And you can buy candies while you’re strolling around in the evening, and have a wonderful time. There was also a very famous ice cream store, Spanish ice cream, called Los Helados—h-e-l-a-d-o-s. And that was right off Seventh Avenue and I think, Fourteenth Street. It was always jammed. And they would make ice creams with tropical fruit flavors. And they would actually get—people would bring them papayas or mangos from the trees that they would have in their homes around Ybor City, and these people would make homemade tropical flavored ice cream.

SB: How wonderful.

DL: And they were wonderful, and it would be great. You know, my mother would, and my dad would take me in there. They’d buy me a cone; they’d buy a cone for themselves, and then we’d go out and walk around Ybor City in the evening—it was just delightful! And it was very festive, and very colorful. It was still not a very wealthy place by any
stretch of the imagination. In fact, in many houses around Ybor City, some people had chickens and roosters in their yards—

SB: [laughs]

DL: I remember even, people having goats in their yards for a while.

When I was in grammar school, in and around Ybor City, there were still peddlers on carts and wagons. There would be guys that would come around selling fresh fruit and vegetables off the back of a horse-drawn wagon. People selling fish off the back of a wagon. There was some guy that would come with an ancient truck that would come and sharpen your knives and scissors, you know, around the house. So all of that was still going on. It was still kind of a working class area with a lot of people just doing whatever they could to make ends meet. But it was quite a thing for a young person. As I mentioned earlier, it was a wide open city, a lot of crime. Usually, you know, didn’t involve us. There were people that kind of were asking for it if they were drinking or involved in the numbers or something like that. But it was a very colorful place. And had quite a reputation in the country.

SB: Did you have hopes and dreams about what you would be?

DL: Yes. Those hopes and dreams came about actually when I was in New York during those times when I was all alone with no siblings, and it was not safe to go out and play on the street. So my companion, when I was growing up, and even through junior high school, was my radio. Television had not come around yet, and the few people that did have a television set, we couldn’t get to see them, they were not friends of ours.

But anyway, the radio was my constant companion, and it was my escape. And I would listen to all types of programs—fiction programs, serials, and dramas and children’s programs, and big band and music programs. And as I said, in New York, I was there for a few years during the war, and my parents and I would listen to war reports from Europe on how the war was going. And I thought the radio, and I thought communications was just wonderful, because if I could escape by listening to people talking to me from all over the world, I said, “That’s something I might like to do.” And I learned a lot from it. It helped me be a better communicator, it helped me be a better speaker, it taught me the language. I mean, I emulated a lot of what I heard. And so I knew that I wanted to [do] something involving radio, because television wasn’t big at the time. So when we moved back to Tampa, after school, I would get on a bicycle, and ride into downtown Tampa and hang out at the radio stations. WDAE was a big radio station at the time. And WFLA Radio was also big at the time.

SB: They were right downtown?

DL: They were in downtown Tampa. And I would hang out there and make a pest of myself, but frankly the announcers—and we call them disc jockeys now, but they were just announcers on radio at the time—were used to seeing me, and they would let me
come in and watch them work. They would let me put records away for them. They would show me how the control panels, the consoles would work. I would see how they cued up records. I watched them cue up tapes, audio tapes. There were wire service machines, Associated Press and United Press International. So the news came over these wire machines that had paper on them, and there would be rolls and rolls of paper. And they didn’t use all of them, so the people at these stations let me take some of the news reports home from the wire machines. And I would do that, I would take them home on my bicycle, and after dinner often times, I would take these wire reports, and I would create a newscast using these—

SB: My goodness.

DL: And I would stand in front of the mirror in my bedroom, and with a hairbrush serving as a microphone—

SB: My goodness.

DL: I would kind of become a newscaster and a reporter reading wire copy and trying to emulate their voices in stentorian tones that these announcers would have. And I just loved doing it. And it was information that I had as a kid, like thirteen, fourteen year old—I was reading wire stories from all over the world. None of the kids down the block kind of knew what I was—

[Laughter]

DL: But I thought this was something very special, that I had all this information, so I told myself that this is what I wanted to do early on. I think probably around age thirteen or fourteen, I knew I wanted to be in the broadcasting business. And then shortly thereafter, television started to make an appearance. And we got a television in our house. And, Suzette, the WFLA Television went on the air here while I was in high school. And they were only broadcasting a few hours per day, but one of the first things they did is [they] created a show for teenagers. And it was called, “Youth Wants To Know.” And the people from the TV station thought they would get some of the brightest kids from around the City of Tampa from high school, bring them into the studios and have them be kind of a panel. And the moderator would read questions that were submitted by teenagers, questions that they had about problems with their parents at home, or with homework or with dating. And they’d have these kids from different high schools answer questions that were sent. So I was chosen from Jefferson High School to be on the panel—one of the—

SB: Were you—

DL: First TV programs in the City of Tampa—
SB: Were you the only one?

DL: No, there were some people from the Academy of the Holy Names, there were—

SB: On the—

DL: There was someone from Plant and someone from Hillsborough [High School].

SB: But you [were] the only one from Jefferson.

DL: I was the only one from Jefferson.

SB: And—

DL: And so I was on one of the original, local public affair shows from Tampa, WFLA.

SB: And this was what grade?

DL: And it was fun. This was when I was in eleventh grade.

SB: Gosh.

DL: And it’s interesting. I found out later—because the station had just gone on the air, and I used to wonder—because nobody had televisions then—I said, “I wonder how they get these letters? You know, who’s watching? Who’s writing these things?” I found out later that the guy who hosted the program, who was also their sales manager, because they didn’t have money to hire—he created the letters himself! I mean—

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: He had a son, and he asked his son, you know, “What kind of things—?” So he created these phony letters, so even—

[Laughter]

DL: First thing when starting on television, there was cheating and corruption, and I was a part of it, unknowingly—

SB: [Laughs]

DL: I was answering these phony letters. But it was fun and I—

SB: But that was the format. You were asked questions or—?

DL: No, he would ask—
SB: He would, yes.

DL: Questions, and I would—

SB: Yes.

DL: He would ask the questions, and we—I was a member of the panel, we would answer the questions.

SB: Sure.

DL: So I had the bug. But throughout high school, since I knew that I wanted to be in communication, I joined every club that I could, or every organization that involved public speaking. I was in the drama club. I was the editor of the high school newspaper. During school assemblies I would volunteer to be the master of ceremonies. I was in the student council. I was in politics. I went to—

SB: My gosh.

DL: Well, they called it “Boy’s Town,” where you go up to the state capital, and the students run the government, you know, for a few days. I was involved in the Junior Lions Club. I don’t know—

SB: Gosh!

DL: In my senior yearbook, I think I had more activities listed than anybody else in my senior class. And I wanted to do that because I wanted to not fear talking to people or addressing people, or speaking in public, or speaking over the air or something.

SB: Sure.

DL: And so, that trained me pretty well.

SB: That’s wonderful.

DL: And I went on to a career—I pursued that in college, but that was great. And that was—so I had a dream early on and—

SB: Sounds like you were very busy—

DL: I was very focused on that dream.

SB: In high school.

DL: And to my parents credit—
SB: Pretty impressive.

DL: You know, they allowed me to go with it. You know, they were very happy. I was the first one in my family to finish college, so—

SB: Were you the first to finish high school?

DL: No. You know, I had a couple of cousins that finished high school, but then they got married, had families.

SB: Sure.

DL: I had another one who was a very bright cousin, who was a newspaper guy. And he went to the University of Florida. He was a wonderful football star in Miami. He went to the University of Florida, but didn’t have the money. Even a state school couldn’t finish.

SB: Sure.

DL: So he left after, I think, one semester. And—

SB: How did your parents feel about all this?

DL: They were very proud.

SB: I’m sure.

DL: Because I was their only child, and they knew that I had a gift of some kind, and my grades were pretty good. I was in the honor society, and so I made them proud. They supported what I wanted to do. They didn’t understand it very much. They didn’t know where I would make money in that business, but they supported me. The one thing is, when I was graduated from high school, they wanted me to go to the University of Tampa because it was close by, and I could be at home. And a lot of my friends from Jefferson did that. They went to—they were going to study to be teachers or administrative things, you know, nothing big. So I went to the University of Tampa, didn’t have much choice at the time. And I quickly found out after a year there—a couple of semesters—that they didn’t have enough courses to teach me, to train me for what I wanted. And I told my parents that I wanted to transfer, and they said, you know, What do you want to do? And I said, “I want to learn more about radio and television and broadcasting, and the University of Tampa just has a few courses and that’s it, and I’ve already taken them.” They said, Well, we can’t afford anything else. And I said, “But, you know, I really have to do this!”

So I did some research, and I went to the library, and I checked it out. And there were two schools that had pretty decent radio and television departments at the time. This was now 1955. And the two schools that I’d narrowed down to were the University of Miami in Coral Gables, which is close, and there was another one called Emerson, Emerson
College in Boston that had really, very good radio and television. And I proposed to my parents, you know, that I’d like to transfer to one of those.

Well, they said, Boston is out of the question, you know, We don’t know anything about Boston. We’ve never been there. Who would you know? You don’t have anyone to live with. We can’t afford to get you—and it didn’t have dormitories. It was another commuter school.

We did have relatives in Miami, so they said, Okay, you can go to Miami if you can get in there, and you can stay with your aunt and your grandparents down there, if they’ll have you. And I said, “Fine.” So I did register, they did accept me, I had the grades to get in. And to my parents’ credit, they took out some loans, which was tough for them. And I also worked down there. So [I] moved to Miami for my second year of college and transferred to the University of Miami. And I did various things. I worked in the summer in a perfume factory. In Hialeah, they make perfumes—

SB: Gosh.

DL: And I drove a forklift truck. So, they had this assembly line, and they’d put the perfumes in the boxes, and they’d put the boxes on palettes, and I would have to stack them up—

[Laughter]

DL: My aunt helped me get that job. But anyway, that didn’t last very long. At one point I had a whole bunch of palettes on this forklift, and I hit something and they all fell over!

SB: Oh no.

DL: Luckily it didn’t kill me because there was a cage around the driver’s seat, but I just—

SB: Oh gosh.

DL: I don’t know how many bottles of perfume I broke. So anyway, then my, I had another cousin in Miami who was a sports writer for the Miami Herald. And he got me a job as a copy boy. And that was wonderful, and so I really enjoyed that.

SB: Sure.

DL: And that kinda started my professional media career going. And so I went to the University of Miami, studied radio and television, had a fine education there. Hated living with my relatives—they had a very tiny house and they were very fussy about my comings and goings, you know. And I was in college! And I couldn’t control my schedule. So I told them that I was at school a lot, but what I was doing many nights was sleeping in my car.
SB: Oh my.

DL: I would be in parking lots at the University of Miami, sleeping in my car. So after a year of that, I told my parents that, you know, it wasn’t working out living with my grandparents. And so again, they said, Okay. And we found an inexpensive dormitory room. So my final two years of college, I could live in a dormitory.

But [I was] doing very well, and doing all sorts of radio and TV things on campus, becoming involved in many shows, doing internships at the television stations there. And Suzette, as luck would have it, one of my professors, a guy named Ralph Renick, who’s an icon in television news, both in Florida and around the rest of the country, he was my professor. And he taught me television news writing and news producing. What he used to like to do is find out who the brightest students were and offer them part-time jobs working for him at the commercial television station in Miami. And—

SB: Which one was that?

DL: WTVJ. WTVJ was the CBS affiliate in Miami. I had done an internship there. He was the news director and anchorman— the first anchorman in Florida, and it was first licensed—

SB: Oh, interesting.

DL: Television station in Florida. So he was very well known. And he decided that, you know, I had a future. So he offered me a job as a television news reporter while I was still a junior in college in 1957—

SB: That’s very rare isn’t it?

DL: —working on weekends. Very rare. And that was a big break. That was my first paid professional TV gig. I’d gotten paid at the Miami Herald for doing some writing for the newspaper, and that, but this was my first professional TV job.

Then I also needed more money, because I was paying my way, and my parents. And I also sold shoes during the holidays, women’s shoes. I had done that through part of high school and the University of Tampa. So I was selling women’s shoes in Miami, and working at this TV job. And I met a young woman while I was selling shoes, she was a cashier, and she sold hosiery, and I sold shoes. And anyway, this was my first wife, and I got to know her and married her the following year, the year that I was being graduated. Because that’s, you know, in the fifties, you know, kids got married—

SB: Sure.

DL: They gave you a ring, they ring, you know—they pinned you or whatever—
SB: [Laughs]

DL: And then, so I was on this fast track and then—

SB: How old were you?

DL: I was twenty-one? Twenty-one.

SB: Oh, so young.

DL: Yes.

SB: Yes.

DL: And so the next year in ’58 I graduated—

SB: What was her name?

DL: Her name was Jackie—Jacquelyn. Jacquelyn. And she was a native of Kentucky, and had moved to Miami to be near her aunt. She wanted to get away from the rural part of Kentucky, and she was living with her aunt in North Miami Beach. And anyway, in 1958 we were married, and I was still in school. And then I graduated that year, and I had to do an ROTC commitment. So I had to leave the job that I’d gotten, and go to do my ROTC thing. Went off to the military, went to Indianapolis, Indiana to Fort Benjamin Harrison, where I was a Second Lieutenant. And I studied publicity and public relations, which were allied, you know, to—

SB: Sure.

DL: The radio-TV field. And I spent six months there, and then I came back to Miami, and by this time, I had a son now. Lance had just been born. This was at the end of 1958. And I came back to Miami, and I went to work for the competing TV station. I had worked for the CBS affiliate—

SB: Yes.

DL: When I came back, the NBC affiliate in Miami hired me. And this was now 1959. And in 1959 is when the Revolution of Cuba took place. And I was a TV reporter in Miami, and at the time, I was the only TV reporter in the City of Miami that could speak Spanish. You know, I was totally bilingual because—

SB: The only one?

DL: The only TV reporter who could speak Spanish. So of course, my news director took advantage of that, and now I was twenty-two years old—twenty-three years old? And I was covering stories in Latin America by myself. I would go off with my own camera. I
was a reporter and photographer. I would go off and cover stories in Latin America, by myself. And this was amazing. And—

SB: It’s—

DL: During that period I became an expert in Latin American coverage, because there was so much interest in Miami and Latin America. I got to meet Senator Smathers, who was the senator from Florida who was an expert on Latin America. And I accompanied him on a tour of Latin America once. He was able to get me through his connections an interview with Trujillo, who was the dictator of the Dominican Republic, and with Papa Doc Duvalier in Haiti. These were exclusive interviews, nobody had ever interviewed them for American television. Also on my own, I got an interview with Fidel Castro.

SB: How did you do that?

DL: Well, I found out through my Spanish language contacts, where he was going to be. I mean, and it was some Air Force installation and I went there, and I knew where he was—

SB: Gosh.

DL: And they kind of tipped me off that he was coming out. So I kind of stopped him and did an interview with him.

SB: And he was open? And he answered?

DL: He was. I spoke to him in Spanish, which appealed to him—

SB: Which helped of course.

DL: Which helps. But all of these interviews, the Castro interview, the one with Trujillo, and the one with Duvalier, got used in this country on the Today Show, and on Huntley-Brinkley.

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: And so these were major things.

SB: And you were—

DL: And I was still very young.

SB: You were now, what, twenty-two?

DL: Well this was 1960 now—
SB: Oh, okay.

DL: So I was born in thirty-six—[I was] twenty-four.

SB: Sure.

DL: Twenty-four. And it was pretty heady stuff, you know?

SB: That’s amazing.

DL: And I was also covering all sorts of stories in Miami—city government, county government, plane crashes, hurricanes and stuff. All of the education, and all of the planning that I’d done for a career was paying off. I was at the right place. I was at the right school. Everything happened—it was good karma for me—

SB: So at this point—

DL: In terms of my career.

SB: You really enjoyed being a reporter.

DL: Yes, very much, very much.

SB: Did you at all envision any other aspect?

DL: Nothing at the moment, no.

SB: Nothing, okay.

DL: I was living a wonderful life, because it was so exciting. Every day was different—the assignments were different everyday. I also went around Latin America with a guy named Farris Bryant, who was a Democratic governor of Florida, and was going to do a tour of Latin America. And I was assigned to cover him. And we went to, I don’t know, five or six countries. And I was with him throughout the thing, and he was very impressed with the way I was covering this. And by this time, I had a second child. My daughter was born in Miami. And I was enjoying the work, but it didn’t pay as much as I’d love for it to pay. So after this tour with Farris Bryant of Latin America, he came back and he was represented—his speechwriters and his public relations people were here in Tampa. And there was an ad-agency being run by a guy named Louis Benito. Louis Benito was a very fine man who had a very successful advertising agency here. And he handled a lot of political people, including Sam Gibbons and others. But he handled Governor Farris Bryant. When Farris Bryant got back from this trip to Latin America, he said, “Louis, there’s a wonderful young man that covered my tour. He works in television in Miami, and he would be really someone that you might want to talk to.” Louis took that as a hint and contacted me, and said, “You know, Governor Bryant was taken with you, and I would like to talk to you about coming here and joining my agency, and
working with me on representing not only Governor Bryant, but some other state agencies that I handle. I think I could use you with your writing and public relations skills.” And I thought to myself, I said, You know, this would be giving up broadcasting, but the money that he was offering me, and the title and everything was very tempting. So I pulled up stake through Miami, and I moved my wife and two kids here, and went to work for Louis Benito. And stayed with him for about a year, and handled things like the Florida Nurses Association, the Florida Cattleman’s Association, Florida Turnpike Authority, Governor Bryant, the Florida Development Commission. These were all accounts that Benito had. And I was his Director of Public Relations. So I was busy doing work for these agencies on behalf of Louis Benito. And I didn’t enjoy it very much. There were nice people, and wonderful people, and it was a great learning experience. So after about a year or so, I decided to leave advertising, and I went to Channel 13 here in Tampa, and I told them I wanted to get back into television.

SB: Yes.

DL: And all they could offer me at the time was a job writing in their promotion department, creating and producing promotions and writing for them, and being a creative person. And the money was also very good. And so I went to work for them, and while I was working for them, I had my third child.

SB: Oh my goodness.

DL: So I had three children within the span of about four years. And that position was fun. I was in Tampa, struggling to feed, you know, a wife and three kids on my own, and doing well, and managing. And as luck would have it, the fellow who was the news director at WTVT and I were friends. He was offered a position in New York to go run the CBS local news operation in New York City, which is WCBS TV, Channel 2. And he offered me a position as a television news reporter in New York.

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: He saw the work that I had done in Miami—

SB: Wow.

DL: And what I had done for Louis Benito and what I was doing at WTVT, and he thought I would be perfect in his new news department. And this was now in the summer of 1963. And I said—

SB: What an opportunity.

DL: I said, “You know, this is a great opportunity—

SB: Sure.
DL: So I told my wife that I wanted to go to New York. And she was a southern girl from Kentucky and Miami. She wasn’t too happy about it, but she saw that it was important going from the Tampa market to New York as a reporter. So we picked up and we put the family in the car—it actually had a little trailer in the back—and moved to New York City with three children and a wife.

SB: In a far different circumstance than that Spanish Harlem.

DL: And far different circumstances, yes. We went to a really, pretty nice middle-class neighborhood in Queens, New York—Rego Park, Queens—where we had a comfortable two-bedroom apartment, and a garage, and we had a little car, but you couldn’t use it very much in New York.

SB: Sure.

DL: Parking was atrocious. So I’d go to work on the subway. There was a subway right nearby, and it left me off. And I went to work for CBS in New York—this was in 1963—and met some wonderful people at CBS. I stayed there seven years.

SB: As an anchor?

DL: As a reporter, not an anchor.

SB: Okay.

DL: But a street reporter. Robert Trout, who is an institution at CBS, an old radio guy, was the anchorman for Channel 2 when I got there, and got to meet him. Then later, Jim Jensen, who joined CBS in New York while I was there stayed on that job twenty-five [to] thirty years—was there. Anyway, I got to meet Frank Gifford who was a football great—

SB: Sure.

DL: —and was a sportscaster. [He] worked with me, and I got to cover some incredible stories in New York City during the sixties while I was a reporter. I was a general assignment reporter, which means I did everything, and I had a specialty in politics. So while I was there, and while I was—

SB: Was that of your choice, Dick?

DL: No, that was—

SB: That’s what they assigned.

DL: What I was assigned to do, that’s what they felt were my strengths.
SB: Okay.

DL: They felt I was capable of doing all sorts of things. So while I was there, some of the highlights of my job at Channel 2 in New York—I covered the Beatles in 1964 when they came to America.

SB: Oh my gosh. Wow.

DL: I interviewed Malcolm X many times up in Harlem when he was in his— in his heyday. I had an interview with Dr. Martin Luther King when he came through New York after winning the Nobel Peace Prize. I covered Barbra Streisand when she was getting ready to do _Funny Girl_ on Broadway. I covered urban riots in the sixties all over New York, Brooklyn, New Jersey—covered peace demonstrations at the United Nations, Columbia University. Covered the whole hippie movement and everything in Greenwich Village. It was an amazing time to be in news, and an amazing city to be involved in. So it was quite an education for me. I covered Governor Rockefeller who was governor of New York at the time, and Mayor Lindsay who was mayor of New York. For a while I covered Mayor Wagner. I covered Bobby Kennedy when he moved to New York and became senator, New York senator. It was great. And this was on top of my having covered all these Latin American dictators, you know, a few years earlier. And so while I was still very young, a lot of what I did had won major journalism awards, and a lot of national recognition. So the sky was the limit for me.

SB: My gosh.

DL: And then I got my comeuppance a few years after I got to New York. The fellow that hired me, who was from Tampa, got fired, and the guy that replaced him called me in some months after he got there, and he said, “You know, Dick, you stink on the air.”

[Laughter]

DL: He said, “But you have a very good head for news.” He said, “So what I want to do is make you an editor.

SB: How did you feel about that?

DL: Well, I felt crestfallen. You know—

SB: Of course.

DL: I had done such great things. But in retrospect, Suzette, he was absolutely right. It was one of the best moves—I’ll never forget it because I was so crushed to be taken off—

SB: Gosh.
DL: From in front of the camera—

SB: Sure.

DL: But I was not good. And I’ve looked at film of myself from that era, and it was dreadful. But ever since he put me into management, which was now in nineteen—at the end of 1966—ever since then I’ve been a manager. And I’ve been a very good manager I think. I’ve done some wonderful things in the management ranks.

SB: Absolutely.

DL: So he had a good instinct about what I could do best, and he felt that I could manage people, make good decisions, run organizations, and—

SB: Yes.

DL: And put things together.

SB: And what type of management position was it?

DL: Well, I started by becoming an assignment editor—an assignment manager—which is the equivalent of a city editor in a newspaper. So here I was in CBS as an assignment manager, with maybe twenty reporters reporting to me, that many film crews, couriers that were bringing film back from the field—

SB: Which you decided—

DL: And I was in the middle of the newsroom listening to police scanners answering I don’t know how many telephone lines—

SB: You decided what stories—

DL: I’m assigning stories, yes.

SB: Would be covered.

DL: Yes.

SB: Yes.

DL: Myself and the producers—I mean at the beginning of the day, we said, Let’s do these stories. But during the day as news would break, news would change, I’d have to tear everything up and set things up. So—

SB: That’s pretty important.
DL: Really incredible logistical decisions, trying to like, move chess pieces all around New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Long Island—and trying to beat the competition, and get the stories first, get the stories best.

SB: Wow.

DL: So that was wonderful. That was very heady stuff. And I was really very, very good at that. And so from then on I was in management the rest of my career.

SB: Yes. And how many years were you there?

DL: Well, CBS—I left in 1970. The fellow that took me off the air and made me a manager—

SB: Yes.

DL: Got fired.

SB: Oh.

DL: And then his successor came in and wanted to bring in his own people. And by this time I was the Executive Producer of the newscast. Which means I was—

SB: Sure.

DL: The number two guy in the news department. And we were number one in news in New York. But they fired a whole bunch of us. They just had a purge, and it’s not uncommon. New people come in, they want to bring their own people. So I left CBS, and I ended up at WOR, which is a big independent station in New York, Channel 9. And I went there because they had a news director’s position open, and I thought I might be ready to be a news director. As I got there and I presented my credentials to the general manager, he said, “You know, you have really great credentials, but I just hired a news director.” And he said, “I would loved to have met you a day earlier.” He said, “But I have a job open as a program director.” And I said, “I don’t know a thing about programming. I’ve only done kind of, news.” He said, “Here’s the deal. I know a lot about programming. I came through sales, and I know programming. You know news. Why don’t you come here and be my program director. I’ll use you as a station manager, you can teach me news and help me put this news department on the air.” They had no news department, and they were just starting it up. He said, “You can help me get this department started.”

SB: It’s quite an opportunity.

DL: “In the meantime, I’ll teach you programming and station management.” I said, “It’s a deal.”
SB: Wow.

DL: And it got me off the beach, you know, I was, I had—

SB: Isn’t that something.

DL: Been fired at CBS, so—

SB: Talk about timing.

DL: And it was good because this station had been in trouble with the FCC. They had not been doing a lot of news and public affairs, and they needed to reform the station. And I came in as kind of a reform movement with this general manager.

SB: Gosh.

DL: Anyway, believe it or not, that only lasted a year. We were reforming the station so much that the owners didn’t want that much reforming!

[Laughter]

DL: So a year after I joined it, they fired us—the general manager and myself, and several other people.

SB: Gosh.

DL: And that was also a fortuitous thing because I ended up at NBC, and this was 1971—the end of seventy-one. And that’s when I joined NBC. And I stayed with NBC until I was—

SB: In New York?

DL: In New York. And I was back doing the assignment manager’s job. I was at Channel 4, WNBC TV, which is their flagship station, as the assignment manager. I spend three years doing that, then, they promoted me to be a bureau manager, bureau chief, and a news director in Cleveland. NBC owned a big station in Cleveland. I went there, and I started a new breed of local newscasts, had a great time. Did that for three years, and then I became a news director in Denver.

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: In Denver, Colorado. And—

SB: And how many years there?
DL: That was a year—a little over a year. I ended up not liking Denver. I liked the skiing, but when the skiing was over, I didn’t like being out in the mountains and stuff. So I came to Chicago after that at NBC and became a program director doing documentaries and specials. That was my task. And I spent three years doing that—

SB: How did—

DL: Did some wonderful shows—

SB: How did you feel about programming versus news?

DL: At this time, the programming that I was doing was kind of public affairs and documentary work, so it was quasi-news—

SB: Okay.

DL: Programming. That’s a good question. I didn’t mind it at all because I was doing things that the news department would normally be doing, but the general manager at this station decided to let the program department do it, since my background was news. And it’s interesting, Suzette, because the guy who was my general manager, who hired me in Chicago, was the guy that originally told me I stunk on the air.

SB: Oh my goodness!

DL: He was now a general manager! But we became very good friends.

SB: Isn’t that something.

DL: And he hired me in Chicago. And so I became a program director there and did a really good job. After three years there, I got a promotion and was sent back to New York, as the station manager, which is the number-two job at WNBC TV, which is the biggest and richest television station in the country. So here I was, and this was in 1980, the end of 1980, back in New York as the station manager.

SB: This is now with—still with wife number one?

DL: No, no, I’m sorry—

SB: Okay.

DL: This is now on wife number two. Wife number two I met—trying to figure out when that was—while I was still with NBC. I was still with NBC. They took me off the air, and my wife number one had had enough of New York, and didn’t like living there, and I was working so hard and doing all of these things, covering—

SB: Yes.
DL: Riots and stuff day and night, that it was not really good. So she wanted to get out of New York. And I couldn’t, frankly, leave and go back. So it was not a good situation. So she left and went to Memphis, which is near where her parents live.

SB: I see.

DL: Not too far from Kentucky. Shortly thereafter, I met wife number two—

SB: Caren?

DL: No, Patricia, this is wife number two. Patricia, and she was in an unhappy marriage. I had just gone through a divorce, and she got divorced, and she ended up going to law school. She’d been a housewife, very frustrating because she was smart and had kind of a husband who was not very tolerant and didn’t want her to grow from that. So anyway, I helped put her through law school while I was at CBS, and then WOR and NBC. And then we got married, and she went with me when I went to Cleveland, and then to Denver, and then to Chicago. Now she had gone through law school and taken bar exams in New York, Ohio, and Colorado. And I kept getting transferred.

SB: Oh, gosh.

DL: She says, “How can I be a lawyer if you’re going to move every couple of years?” I said, “Well, you know, when you signed on, this was kind of the thing. I’m in television.”

SB: Yes, sure.

DL: And she said, “I really love you, but I also love the law, and I just invested—you know, I’m late in my life, I’ve invested all of these years in studying the law, in taking these bar exams.” So, she said—when I was in Denver, she said, “You go ahead to Chicago, be a program director. I’ve got a really good job here.” She was working for the State of Colorado in their legislative affairs department. And she said, “You know, let me get some experience, and then I’ll join you in Chicago.”

So I moved to Chicago, and she didn’t join me. She was doing—and we were trying to commute back and forth—

SB: Sure.

DL: And it was getting harder and harder. And then I moved to New York, took my station manager’s job. And that’s where I met Caren. And so the marriage to my wife in Denver was just dissolving because she wanted a law career—

SB: Sure.

DL: I wanted a career.
SB: How many years was that second [marriage]?

DL: The second marriage—well, we got married in 1970, and we divorced in 1980. Which is the year I first met Caren.

SB: Who is your current wife?

DL: Who is Mrs. Lobo number three!

SB: Yes.

DL: My current wife.

SB: Yes.

DL: And I met her when I moved to New York and became the WNBC-TV station manager. The second wife ultimately became a judge. She works for the social security administration.

SB: Isn’t that terrific.

DL: And I—

SB: She really likes it.

DL: I talk to her from time to time, yes. She regrets not staying in the marriage—she regrets not keeping it together and not leaving Denver, but you know, she understands what I had to do—

SB: Sure.

DL: There’s no acrimony there.

SB: That’s wonderful.

DL: Was not happy for the marriage to have been dissolved, but she’s—

SB: You’re both career people.

DL: Both career people—and she’s a judge, and she’s doing very well. So anyway, now I met Caren, and she was in theatre. She was running an off-Broadway theatre, and I met her quite by accident. And we fell in love pretty quickly, and we were inseparable. And after a few years of being together in New York, I got transferred to Cleveland, as I mentioned. And this was as a general manager. It was my first vice presidency. And poor Caren had just moved to New York from Pittsburgh.
SB: Oh my.

DL: She had gone to college in Pittsburgh, and was running a theatre in Pittsburgh and couldn’t wait to get out of the Rust Belt and move to New York. So she had just been living in New York a couple of years when I met her, and she fell in love, and now I’m saying I’ve got to go to Cleveland. And I said, you know, “You don’t have to go, because I know that you’re happy, and you’re having a good career here.” And she said, “I’m not going to lose you,” you know, “I saw what happened in your second marriage, so I want to stay with you no matter what.”

SB: Isn’t that wonderful.

DL: So she did move to Cleveland with me, and we had a wonderful time. And I was running that station, and very successfully—not happy to leave New York, I resisted going there—but NBC kind of said, You got to go. And while we were in Cleveland, we got married, Caren and I. And that was in 1984. I lasted two years in Cleveland this time around, and had been so successful. And then there was a job open in Chicago as a general manager. In Chicago, where I had been program director. And got transferred to Chicago. This was a great thing for both of us. We were happy to leave Cleveland, and go to Chicago, and we had a wonderful life there. It was just wonderful. I was doing great things at the TV station, very involved in community activities there, especially with the Hispanic community. I was one of their heroes—

SB: Like what?

DL: There’s a big Mexican and Puerto Rican population there.

SB: Okay.

DL: And when they discovered that I was Hispanic, they embraced me and they just thought I would be a champion for them. And so I brought a lot of Hispanic reporters and anchor-people into the community, and it was very helpful to them. And they’ve never forgotten—they gave me several awards for that.

SB: Terrific.

DL: And anyway, then, three years into the Chicago experience, NBC, which was now owned by General Electric, decided to buy a television station in Miami. And it was the television station where I started my entire career. They bought WTVJ, and it was still a CBS affiliate, but NBC bought it, and were going to turn it into an NBC station. And when I heard that announcement, I told Caren, I said, “I’ll bet you anything, they’re going to send me to Miami.” She said, “Why would they do that? You’re in Chicago, you’re successful, it’s the number three market.” The Miami station was the number twenty-something market at the time. I said, “A, because I’m Cuban-American, I’m Hispanic. I know that market, and they’re going to look at all their executives and see
what the fit is.” And she said, “You’re crazy.” And sure enough six months after they bought the station, they let the general manager go, and asked me to go run it. And I was really kind of adamant, because I didn’t want to give up Chicago—and I’d moved Caren around. I didn’t want to give up our wonderful life in Chicago. So I turned them down twice. And then the third time, I got a call one evening at home from the President of NBC, a gentleman named Bob Wright. And he said, “Dick, it would be a personal favor to me if you went down to Miami and took over that station.” And at that point, I didn’t have much of a choice. So, [we] packed up and we moved to Miami. And this was in the summer of 1988.

SB: Did you have a reputation then? Of turning these stations around?

DL: Yes, I was—

SB: You were a troubleshooter.

DL: A troubleshooter and a turn around specialist. And that’s how they had used me. And we had had a lot of success at each of the stations where they had sent me, and that was a blessing, but because I got a lot of promotions—but it also meant being transferred and uprooted a lot.

SB: Moving again.

DL: So here we are in Miami now, in 1988, at a major station transition. It was one of the biggest network affiliation switches in the history of the country at that time. A great old CBS station becoming an NBC station, and they wanted me to engineer the switch and make it all happen. So I spent the first five or six months getting that switch ready. I was an NBC executive running a CBS station for the first—

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: Five or six months.

SB: [Laughs]

DL: Anyway, stayed there for—let me see—

SB: Is there a huge difference?

DL: Of the two companies?

SB: Yes.

DL: Well, I didn’t know much about CBS at the time because I hadn’t been with CBS for many, many years.
SB: Is it the people? Is it the way they program?

DL: No, it’s just the programming and the corporate culture and that kind of stuff. But let me see—that was 1988. And then we had a—kind of a trauma in our life in 1992, when Hurricane Andrew hit Miami. Caren and I were living there. We had a home in Coconut Grove, right near the water, near Biscayne Bay. And we evacuated our home on—it was a Sunday afternoon, and went to the TV station with our cats—we had three cats, four cats at the time. And the storm hit and we knew it was going to be bad, but not how bad it was really going to be. And anyway, our home had really been hurt, we had six feet of sea water come through our house—a big storm surge right near where we lived, and a lot of damage all around us. So we had to find a—

[End Tape 1, Side B]

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[Tape 2, Side A]

DL: So here we are in Miami after Hurricane Andrew, and there was some good news, because the coverage that our television station provided for the people of South Florida during that storm was extraordinary. We had a meteorologist who had prepared our station for such a disaster. He was a specialist in hurricanes, and he knew the big one was going to hit sometime. So we had all the right equipment. We had everything prepared at the station. And as luck would have it, our tower did not go down. We stayed on the air during the entire storm. So people that had portable radios or portable televisions could watch us or hear us—

SB: Thank goodness.

DL: During the whole storm, and the whole evening.

SB: Were you the only ones?

DL: And so we were one of the only people that stayed on. That’s correct. And we had made plans to simulcast, so if you lost your television set, you could turn on a portable radio and still hear our coverage. So we were on nonstop. We started, of course, that day, and in fact we started the night before, Saturday. And we were on the air, I think [for] four days straight without commercials, without stopping.

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: So we kind of—the station turned out to be the hero of the storm, and our meteorologist was the hero of the storm.

SB: Oh gosh.

DL: He was made the grand marshal of the Orange Bowl Parade that following January.
SB: Oh!

DL: And NBC actually did a movie of the week about our coverage of the hurricane, about how this television station saved so many lives.

SB: What was it called? Do you remember the name?

DL: God—it was just called Hurricane Andrew something. And it was a terrible movie! [Laughs]

SB: That’s got to be a first—

DL: But it was on national television.

SB: Sure.

DL: And WTVJ won every major coveted journalism award. The Peabody, the duPont, the Edward R. Murrow, Sigma Delta Chi.

SB: Incredible.

DL: We won all the major awards for our coverage.

SB: Certainly deserve—

DL: But it took its toll. I mean, it just traumatized—and it took years for the city to bounce back. We were out of our home for eight months before Caren could get it fixed up and livable again. But she did a marvelous job, and got us back in there. But by that time, we were kind of fried from that experience. And frankly, Miami might seem exotic and a lot of people think it’s this glamorous place, but the quality of life in Miami, we didn’t care that much for. You know, we didn’t go to the beach that much. The media market was something that—it was not that exciting, because we’d worked in New York and Chicago, and had some much better media experiences than the one we had in Miami. So there came a time in nineteen—at the end of 1993 when they were offering some early retirement packages at NBC. And I was kind of getting tired, and wanted—getting antsy. And I think the company was feeling the same way. So we parted company at the end of 1993. And I got a terrific severance and retirement package from them. And I was ready to do something else, and as much as I loved the broadcasting business, by that time, which was now the early nineties, I didn’t like what was going on. I didn’t like the programming that was—the network was providing. I thought that the ownership of the television networks by these major multinational companies, NBC and Disney and Viacom, was hurting the quality of the broadcasting business. I got into it when the business was owned by the Sarnoff’s of RCA, and the Paley’s of CBS, and people like that. And they had a—they felt they had an obligation to the public and to provide programming in the public interest. But these new companies were primarily interested in
the bottom line, and in ratings, and pleasing shareholders on Wall Street. So the business was not what I had bargained for when I got into it in 1957 at WTVJ. So I was kind of happy, and I said, “You know, this has been a good run.” It was a lot of years, and I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew that I’d had more than enough.

So the announcement of my retirement was published in the Miami Herald, the day it was—the day after it was announced to the staff. And the day after the story appeared in the Miami Herald, I received a call from Washington, from someone in the White House who was in charge of Latino affairs for the Clinton administration. This was now the end of ninety-three, the beginning of ninety-four. And they said that they had read about my leaving NBC, and that there was a position in Washington that they thought I would be suited for, and would I be interested? And as I said, I’d had no idea what I was going to do at the time. And I asked them about the position, and the job was the Director of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. It was part of “Voice of America” at the United States Information Agency, and it was headquartered in Washington, but there was also a major office and a bureau in Miami, and this was overseeing the operations of radio and Television Martí, named after Jose Martí, the Cuban liberator. And it was a very controversial operation because it was established to provide ostensibly unfettered, uncensored news and information to the people of Cuba that were living in a very tightly censored island. However, the people that had been running radio and TV Martí had agendas, and were not being objective and were not putting on the type of programming that this country wanted the people of Cuba to hear—which was programming free of any bias, pro-Cuban or anti-Cuban or whatever. So they thought someone—the government thought that someone with my credentials could bring North American journalism morals and ethics and principles to the Radio and TV Martí newsroom. So I asked some of my colleagues and friends what they thought about it. They said, You shouldn’t do it, it’s a kind of a snake pit, and it’s very controversial. And they said, I don’t think anybody can reform that place. I asked Caren what she thought, she said, “Look, it could be fun living in Washington for a while, so if you want to do it, we have nothing better to do, so,”— and I told the people at the White House, “Well, go ahead and put my hat in the ring.” Don’t know, you know, what will happen. And then it took them months to vet me. They—the security clearances, the Secret Service and the FBI—they talked to everybody I’d ever known. They went to every place I’d ever lived in my entire life, from childhood. They interviewed all my neighbors, all my friends, and they did all sorts of clearance and security searches on me.

SB: Very interesting.

DL: As it turned out, I already had a security clearance because I was an officer in the US Army. Remember I had gone—

SB: That’s right.

DL: —into the army, and I had a security clearance.

SB: A long time ago.
DL: But they still had to investigate me. And after a lot of investigation, they finally offered me a job. And so we accepted, and on February 14, 1994, I was sworn in by the head of the United States Information Agency to the job of Director of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. And it was very heady stuff, because I was in charge of this wonderful operation that had a twenty-five million dollar budget, and that was supposed to give the people of Cuba, who really were not getting good information, some solid news and public affairs.

SB: That’s a huge budget.

DL: It’s a huge—

SB: How many employees?

DL: I had about 150.

SB: My gosh.

DL: Yes. Most of them—

SB: That’s quite large.

DL: In Washington—

SB: Compiling—

DL: But you know, about thirty or forty in Miami.

SB: Compiling news, editing—

DL: Yes, we had a twenty-four hour radio operation that was both on shortwave and on AM. And then we produced three or four hours of television that we tried to get in there everyday. So I had a radio and television operation going. So these were writers, producers, researchers, technicians, managers, the whole gamut. And it was an incredible operation. We had a great—for example, a great research facility in Washington. One of the best libraries and research facilities, with all sorts of Cuban history and information. We had some very learned people, PhDs and scholars, on Cuba. The only problem is that many in the Cuban-American community in Miami thought it was their station, that they owned it. Because they were the ones that lobbied hard for President Reagan to establish it. So they felt that they should control it. They didn’t understand that even though it was meant to help get free information to Cuba, the information had to be uncensored, it couldn’t be their information versus ours. And so they wanted to kind of control editorially what was on the air. The government said, No, we need to control it. And so there was a lot of friction, a lot of controversy. They were constantly investigating the programming that was going on.
SB: I see.

DL: And also—

SB: This is—

DL: You know, the Republicans, generally—are hardliners on the Cuba issue. They support the embargo. A lot of the Democrats don’t support the embargo, so they were against this agency that I was running, and I was a Democrat, appointed by a Democrat. But they were against what I was doing, so I didn’t feel that I had any allies whatsoever, no friends.

SB: [Laughs]

DL: Because the Republicans and the Miami community, and then the Congress were asking me to be very hard-line, and the Democrats wanted to do away with this whole agency. So I—

SB: Under both administrations, were these broadcasts able to get through to the people?

DL: Many of them, radio especially. Radio was very successful. Even though the Cuban government jammed the signals and they still jam the signals. The Cuban people did receive radio Martí signals on shortwave pretty easy. Most of them have shortwave radios because they’re in the Caribbean, and they can get radios around the world. And they were not able to jam the shortwave signals effectively.

SB: It’s very interesting.

DL: And what we would do, Suzette, is switch from one transmitter to another, and we would tell the people of Cuba when we were switching, so we would go to different gigantic transmitters [that] were around the northern hemisphere to try to upset the Cuban jammers.

SB: Very interesting.

DL: Yes, it was a cat and mouse game. They pretty effectively jammed our AM signals, which were from the Florida Keys, and our TV signal into Cuba was done using a big weather balloon. We had a TV transmitter on a weather balloon, and at night down in the Florida Keys, we would let this balloon up into the air on a tether, and we got it up far enough so it could overlook the curvature of the earth, and—

SB: My gosh.

DL: Have a direct line of sight into Cuba. And then we would broadcast material, which was on tape. We would tape it early in the day, and then at night—we didn’t want to start
an international incident. So we would air our telecast at night. And the Cuban government—TV signals are pretty easy to jam, so they jammed them pretty effectively. So not that many people were able to see the TV signals. And that was another bone of contention.

SB: What kind of programming would it be?

DL: Well, just everything. We had comedy programs. We had music programs. But the programs that they really wanted to hear were roundtable discussions.

SB: Oh, okay.

DL: Discussions about issues—

SB: They being?

DL: The Cubans.

SB: The Cubans.

DL: Yes, this was strictly for the Cuban audience. None of the programs that “Voice of America” put out are for consumption in this country. They’re for other countries, primarily behind the Iron Curtain when it existed. You know, “Radio-Free Europe,” “Radio-Liberty”—

SB: How did you know that’s what they wanted?

DL: Because we would—

SB: Did you have dialogue?

DL: Do focus groups, yes.

SB: Okay.

DL: When people came over—either people that were fleeing Cuba on rafts when they got here—we would go talk to them, [and ask] Did you hear us? Did you listen? What did you like, what didn’t you like? Also, Cubans would come to visit their relatives in Miami and in this country, and we would have many, many focus groups. We’d do a great amount of research, When can you hear us? When were your neighbors listening?

SB: Okay.

DL: What was it like—where did you live? Where could the signal be heard the best? We had very, very meticulous research.
SB: It’s very interesting.

DL: And what we would do is, we would respond to what they wanted to hear.

SB: So, it wasn’t propaganda?

DL: No. I mean—

SB: And the government—

DL: The people that don’t like it call it propaganda. A lot of it turned out to be propaganda before I got there, but my job was to make sure that it was—

SB: That it wouldn’t be propaganda.

DL: That it wouldn’t be propaganda.

SB: Okay.

DL: Because that’s not what we wanted to do.

SB: That’s interesting.

[Tape paused]

DL: It was a very controversial job. There were many investigations going on all the time. I think at one point there were thirty-some different investigations going on surrounding Radio and Television Martí and its operation.

SB: Investigations by the government?

DL: By the Congress, different agencies investigating our coverage, that type of thing. There were just mostly nuisance things but we had to spend a lot of time answering questions from congressional committees or from particular congressmen who were questioning certain things. It was pretty heady stuff because I would be invited to the White House from time to time to strategize about Cuba, and when they needed to get information from us regarding Cuba, we would provide it so they could make policy decisions. We frequently went to the State Department for briefings on Latin American affairs. We were in constant communication with the Cuba Desk. There was a special desk of specialists in Cuba that had intelligence and information about Cuba that we would share and they would give us information. I had a secure phone in my office, so if need be I could talk to the Cuban, the special interest section. We didn’t have any diplomatic relations, but we had an office in Cuba, and I could talk to the people there and they could tell me some of the news that was going on to help us. They would also tell us sometimes that, you know, that people, were listening.
There was one example of something we did that I was very proud of, Suzette. Congressman Rangel, who was a very prominent African-American congressman from Harlem in New York, who is not a supporter of the embargo to Cuba, not a supporter of our Cuba policy, called for congressional hearings on the question of the Cuba embargo. He was—his committee was going to hold some hearings. And he was asking people from all over, from different points of view to come and testify before his committee on the question of the embargo. I told my staff, I said, “This is a terrific story, and I want to cover these hearings live.” And they said, But they’re in English. I said, “Well, we’re going to have to provide simultaneous translation.” But I said, “This is exactly what I think the Cuban people want to hear. The American Congress holding hearings about their life and their future, and their activities.” They said, But you know, this congressman is against the Cuba policy. I said, “Well, that’s what makes this so much better, that the Cuban people will see that we’re covering someone in our own country that is opposed to the policy of the country!” I said, “That is the freedom of speech that we enjoy here.” And they said, I don’t know, this is very, very controversial. And I said, “No it’s not.”

Anyway, of course people on the staff at Radio Martí leaked to the Cuban community that I was planning to cover these hearings. So the leaders of the Cuban-American community, the political leaders were furious that I would be giving airtime that would go into Cuba and they would be hearing this congressman speaking against the embargo. And so I would get calls from the people in Miami saying, Are you sure you know what you’re doing? Are you sure you want to do this? And I said, “I’m going to do it. I’m going to do it.” So the day comes, and we have our crew there, and the hearings go on for about twelve hours. They started at like eight in the morning and they ended late that evening. And there were dozens of people testifying before the committee. And we did a fabulous job of covering. We had live coverage throughout the day. We had batteries of translators that would relieve one another, and they would translate every bit of testimony that was being presented. And it was just a monumental, logistical effort and—

SB: That’s incredible.

DL: I was very proud of the staff, and I told them that. And after the day was over, they kind of felt that they had done something special. And not too long afterwards we received a call from the Cuban interest section in Havana telling us that it was an incredibly exceptional bit of programming, that it was probably the single most important thing that Radio Martí had ever done. That throughout the island, when people—the word got out that this was being broadcast, that almost everything came to a stop on the island, because they wanted to hear this.

SB: Gosh.

DL: This unfettered, congressional testimony. They even got word from their sources in Havana that the Cuban government, the highest levels of government stopped business to listen to this testimony.
SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: And they told us this on the telephone. And shortly thereafter, the head of the United States Information Agency got a letter from the Secretary of State—who was Warren Christopher at the time—saying that the work of Radio Martí and such and such a date, by beaming into Cuba, these hearings from congress, was an exceptional piece of work, and it’s exactly what our government should be doing. So it was a very complimentary letter, saying it was just, one of the best things that Radio Martí had ever done.

SB: Extraordinary.

DL: So at least I did something that was appreciated—

SB: Gosh, that’s extremely impressive.

DL: And I think, made a difference. So that was really nice. The other thing that I did that I was kind of proud of with my staff, is help the administration out. While I was running Radio and TV Martí, the government—the American government changed its policy with respect to Cuban people fleeing the country. It used to be that they got out on rafts or boats and we picked them up. Then we would bring them over here. The government stopped that, and in 1995, said, “If we pick you up, we’re going to send you back and we’re going to not let you come in.” And there had been a rafter exodus of giant proportions. And at one point, the government had picked up—I think over forty thousand people that were on boats and rafts—

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: They had left Cuba. And they put them in Guantanamo at the naval air base there. And they set up kind of a tent city, and they didn’t know what to do. They were caught by surprise—the number of people. So here, the government picked up these poor refugees up. They put them in this naval base that was not prepared for them. They had—a city, it was a city of people—forty thousand men, women, and children. And there was no idea what to do with them. They were trying to spread them around. They’d send them to different countries. Other governments weren’t ready to take them. So the people in this encampment, the Cubans, were very antsy, and it was getting very hairy. And so our government was hearing from the people at Guantanamo that this thing could erupt, you know, unless the government did something. So my staff—my staff and I were asked by the White House to fly to Guantanamo and try to find out what’s going on and see if we could diffuse the situation. So we got on one of the White House’s fleet of airplanes—actually it was a small jet that flew a bunch of us down, my deputy and I from Radio Martí, and some people from the White House. And we got down to Guantanamo, and we went into the camp, and we talked to these people, told them who we were. We were heroes to them because they believed in Radio Martí—

SB: Sure.
DL: So they opened up to us. And what they told us was that they were glad to be safe, but they were disappointed that they weren’t taken to the United States. But what bothered them more than anything was their families back in Cuba, not knowing what had happened to them. So they had mothers and wives and relatives who didn’t know if these people had drowned or what their status was. But the first thing they wanted to do was make sure that their loved ones back in Cuba—which were on the island, they were just a quick—

SB: Sure. Right there.

DL: And knew what was going on. So we told them that what we would do is get all their names, and then have—day and night, we would broadcast their names—from Radio Martí into the islands, so the relatives could know, you know, where they were, that they were in Guantanamo. And the other thing they wanted to know is, what was going on between the US government and other countries about where these people would end up. So we said, Okay. So we talked to the military people that were running Guantanamo, and we said, These people need to be told what’s going on. They’re smart people. They just don’t want any nonsense. So we convinced the government that we should let the camp people set up their own communication system, and we got them the equivalent of a mimeograph machine—

SB: Oh my gosh.

DL: And they started their own newspaper. And we, our government, gave them information about the negotiations going on with Panama and other countries that we were hoping to send them to. And we also bought thousands of little cheap transistor radios, and we spread them out all over the camp so that they could hear. They would provide their own little radio stations. So we just set up a little small transmitter for them, and that way we were able to keep them informed and let them know what was going on. And so any threat of a riot went away. So we kind of stopped this, what could have been a horrendous scene.

SB: At that point, could they not go back into the island?

DL: They didn’t want to.

SB: They didn’t want to.

DL: No, they fled—

SB: They were afraid.

DL: They risked their lives.

SB: They were afraid—
DL: They were afraid to go back.

SB: Of the repercussions.

DL: Yes they—the repercussions.

SB: Sure.

DL: Exactly. But—

SB: What a horrible thing, to not know where—

DL: So I went down to Guantanamo a couple of times to work on that project and that stuff—

SB: What became of them?

DL: They were shipped to all different countries and they spent several years there, and they ultimately all worked their way into the United States.

SB: That’s amazing—

DL: Yes.

SB: To have—

DL: It is.

SB: Accomplished that. Incredible.

DL: Yes. So that was an exciting chapter in my life, where I was doing a type of broadcasting that I’d never anticipated.

SB: You were involved in politics too at this point, inadvertently.

DL: Well I was a Democrat, yes. I always supported Democrats, but while I was a general manager of a commercial TV station, I never openly spoke of my politics because we were owned by corporations—

SB: So your—

DL: And—

SB: Right.
DL: I had commercial news departments. And so I didn’t want people to say, Well, their anchorman, or their news people are putting on biased news.

SB: And you were covering politicians and political issues.

DL: Yes.

SB: But when did this intense interest in the political atmosphere really develop?

DL: I think it started while I was on the streets in New York, in the sixties, seeing the social upheaval. Seeing the Civil Rights Movement unfold. I was part of the Civil Rights Movement. You know, I did some marching myself, and I did a few things during the Civil Rights Movement. And because of the discrimination that I told you, that our community—

SB: Oh yes.

DL: You know, as a family, observed—we as a family—I said, you know, “Only politics can move some of these things.” And so I saw that the political Civil Rights Movements in the sixties got something changed. So that politicized me, and I really loved the Kennedy brothers. I was very fond of Jack and I got to—as I told you earlier—interview and got to know Bobby Kennedy, who ran for [the] senate in New York. And if Bobby Kennedy had not been assassinated and had gone to Washington, I probably would have given up my career to go work for him. I was that motivated.

So I’ve always been a Democrat and believed in democratic politics. But those were the points in my life where I really became more politicized, in the sixties and seventies. Later on, in the eighties and nineties, I was involved in supporting people, but not to the extent that I am now or that I was back then.

SB: So your career was Radio Martí—you didn’t really see as a political office.

DL: No that was journalism—to me, that was a broadcasting and journalism mandate, where they asked me to be a journalist and a broadcaster, and bring some of my experience and expertise into a news department that had kind of become prostituted if you will, and corrupted.

SB: Sure.

DL: Yes.

SB: You must be very proud of that period.

DL: Well, I know that I did as much as I could—

SB: Amazing.
DL: I finally got out of there after a couple of years, and I said, you know, “That’s as much”—

SB: What happened?

DL: Well, I just didn’t feel that I could do anything. As I said, we were being investigated by everyone. We had no real support. We were the target of so much criticism, and I didn’t feel that I was making a contribution of any consequence.

SB: Is the situation still the same?

DL: It’s gotten worse.

SB: Worse.

DL: Yes.

SB: It’s unfortunate.

DL: I was the one attempt that they made at having a good professional broadcaster go in there. You know, ultimately I was replaced by someone else, and it’s not as good—

SB: That’s unfortunate.

DL: As it should be.

SB: Certainly has potential.

DL: And I was losing sleep at night because I couldn’t do what the government really wanted me to do.

SB: I see.

DL: And we loved living in Washington. Caren and I had wonderful times there. We had great friends, old friends from NBC days and stuff. But after a couple of years I said, “You know, this is tough.” And we went back to Miami.

SB: What did you do in Miami?

DL: Well, we said—

SB: And why? I mean you were kind of anxious to get—

DL: Well, because we still had our home there, we had an office there, so we—
SB: Oh, okay.

DL: We’d never cut our ties to Miami off. We always had our house there. And I had to go [to] Miami a lot because we had a Radio TV Martí bureau there.

So after I left the government, then I really had no career move left. And we made a decision at that time to move to Sarasota. We’d considered several options, moving to other cities, and we said, Let’s—I love the West Coast of Florida, I was born and raised there, I liked the climate. And we’d seen Sarasota evolve into a wonderful little city, because we used to go there during NBC conferences—

SB: Okay, I see.

DL: Executive management conferences. We said, you know—

SB: So you had knowledge of it.

DL: Yes, we had knowledge of it, and we said, It’s a nice size, and maybe we could do something, make an impact on that community. And so we moved to Sarasota in 1996, sold our home in Miami, which was quite beautiful and we loved it. And after the hurricane, we restored it to its original splendor—it was an old historic Spanish house. But as I said, we didn’t like living in Miami. We loved the house, and we had some good friends, but [we were] happy to get on with our life, and so we moved to Sarasota.

The intention was, I wanted to buy a little radio station if I could find one, and program it myself and put on news and public affairs, and maybe jazz—things that I liked. Or, failing that, I’d like to buy a weekly newspaper, a little alternative paper, and become it’s publisher and have a column every week, and try to cover news that I thought was important. And so we moved to Sarasota. Caren went to work remodeling our house and getting—feathering our nest, while I looked at the opportunities that were involving radio stations and newspapers. And I tried to buy a couple of little newspapers. I tried to buy a couple of radio stations. But the deals never worked out. The prices were exorbitant, and the financial models didn’t work out. And we ended up opening a bookstore that was in a wonderful part of Sarasota that was in financial distress, and we ended up buying that store and making it into a wonderful café-bookstore-European type of retail sensibility. And it became a literary gathering place for wonderful people. And through Caren’s wonderful marketing skills and instincts, she developed a reading festival in the City of Sarasota, a big event every winter—a one-day reading event.

SB: What is the name of it? What was—

DL: It’s called the Sarasota Festival, the Sarasota Reading Festival. And we also developed—primarily Caren, through some partnerships—the Palm Literary Society, which is a luncheon group that meets four or five times a year during the season, and it’s sponsored by the Northern Trust Bank, and the Sarasota Herald Tribune and our old bookstore. And they bring in very prominent authors, and there’s a, kind of a gourmet
lunch. And there’s a speech by the author, and a question-and-answer session and a book signing.

SB: But the name of the store?

DL: Our store was called Sarasota News and Books.

SB: Okay.

DL: Yes, and there was a big newsstand. It was a European café, and an independent new bookstore. We also had greeting cards, and gifts and things. It was just a great little store.

SB: And it’s right in the middle of downtown?

DL: Right in the heart of downtown on Main Street and Palm Avenue.

SB: Very popular.

DL: Very, very popular. We knew nothing about retailing, but we knew how to produce shows. We kind of created this bookstore as if it were a production—a stage production with great lighting and great colors, and music and stuff. So we created a set. And we learned as quickly as we could about books. We both liked to read. And it was not brain surgery, but again, we did it at the right time and the people responded.

SB: Who were some of the authors you imported?

DL: Well, we had Amy Tan, which was a very famous author, she came through. We had Jimmy Carter, [he] came to our bookstore and did a novel. We had Frank Rich, the columnist for the New York Times came through. John Jakes has been through several times. There have been hundreds of them, Suzette, just literally hundreds of them.

SB: Over what period of time?

DL: Well, we opened the bookstore in October of 1997, and we finally sold it at the end of 2005.

SB: What made you sell it?

DL: Well—

[Tape paused]

DL: What made us sell the bookstore? Well, in 2002, I was approached by an executive recruiter, a headhunter, while I was living in Sarasota and helping with the bookstore with Caren, and I was approached by an executive recruiter—
DL: So I was approached by this executive recruiter who had found me through a mutual friend [and] didn’t know that I was living in Sarasota. It’s someone that I knew back in the 1960s when I worked at CBS. This fellow worked with me. And now he was an executive recruiter. I hadn’t heard from him in forty years. And now he found me in Sarasota, and he told me that he was trying to find a president and CEO for WEDU in Tampa, that he was on a search, and he was doing a national search. He was at the end of the search, but somebody told him that I was in Sarasota, and would I be interested in the job? And I said, “You know, I left broadcasting,” I said, “A few years earlier. I’m very happy, and I’ve just given up on the business.” And he said, “Yes, but this is in Tampa, it’s your hometown, wouldn’t you like to give something back to your community? And secondly, it’s PBS, which is not commercial television, and PBS really needs your help. They’re in some kind of trouble right now. So why don’t you consider that.”

SB: And again you have this reputation as a troubleshooter.

DL: That’s correct. And he knew about it. And he thought that I would be perfect for the job. So anyway, I talked to Caren about it because we had the bookstore, and we had some commercial real estate interests in Sarasota. She said, “Look, if you want to try for it, go for it. We can manage, and if we need to, we’ll get a little apartment or house in Tampa and we’ll go back and forth.” So she said, “You know, I don’t know if the board is going to hire you, so if you want it, do it.” So I told the guy, “Sure, toss my hat in the ring.” And he proposed me with a couple of other candidates to the board of directors and to the search committee at WEDU, and they were a little uncertain I think about me, because of my age primarily, and whether I had the stamina maybe, or the current knowledge of the business, you know, to maybe run a television station. And I was interviewed by the search committee and by the board—I think they had eight candidates. There were originally seventy or eighty people that had applied and that were being looked at for the job. They narrowed it down to eight. I was asked to come to Tampa and be interviewed. I was interviewed by the board and then they narrowed it to four, and I was part of the last four. And then another interview, and then ultimately they offered me the job. And so in June of 2002, I was offered the position at WEDU, and I accepted, and it’s been wonderful. And it gave me the opportunity to come back to Tampa, now as a president of a television station. And when I left Tampa, you’ll recall, the first time was after my first year of college, [I] went off to study broadcasting. Then I was in Tampa for a short period of time as a public relations executive, and a promotion department writer. And I hadn’t been living in Tampa since 1963. And so—

SB: It’s an incredible story.

DL: An incredible story. And I come back to Tampa, and so for a few years I was commuting back and forth, because we still had the bookstore and things were really going well there. And there came a time when Caren, God bless her, said, “You know, this is getting to be a bit much. Maybe we should think about selling it.” And we said, Sure. But we didn’t have a plan. We didn’t want to sell the building we were in and not
the bookstore, and we didn’t want to close the bookstore. We felt we owed it to that community to try to keep it running.

So, Suzette, as luck would have it, we were approached by a real estate official in—a real estate broker in Sarasota, and said, “Would you be interested in selling your building and the bookstore?” And we said, Well, you know, what’s the deal? And he said, “We have a buyer that wants to buy both. And so long story short, we put out a price out there, and they accepted. And so we found someone that bought the building and the bookstore, and the bookstore is still operating successfully, even though we’ve now been out of it well over a year, year and a half. There’s a young brother and sister—young professionals that bought it, and they’re operating it, and they’re doing a really good job with it. And I, in the meantime will be going—

SB: Do you still consult at all for the operations?

DL: Not really, no. We’ve talked to them from time to time, and we tell them about some of the authors that Caren still brings to Sarasota for some other venues and let them sell books. But no, we kind of cut the cord so to make sure they were on their own. But in the meantime, in another month or so, it will be my fifth anniversary at WEDU.

SB: Extraordinary.

DL: And the time has really flown by. I must give this board credit, because they offered me this position when I was sixty-five years old. And now I just turned seventy and a half, and they seem to be pleased. I’m very, very happy. It’s been—

SB: That’s kind of an understatement, Dick.

DL: It’s been a really great thing. I’ve—you know I didn’t know what the last chapter in my broadcasting life would be. And I couldn’t have written a better chapter than this. I feel that I’m going out of broadcasting by having made a significant contribution to a community that I’ve always held very dear. And in a television station that I think represents more of the future for broadcasting than some of the commercial entities, which are just all consolidating. And they’re losing any identity or character. They’re all kind of looking alike with all of this terrible entertainment programming, and kind of shallow news and shallow public affairs work, if any. And I feel that WEDU is now going in the direction where we’re doing better and better local programming. More relevant programming, and covering things that none of the commercial stations are even interested in. So that’s very gratifying—and very heartening. And if my health holds out, you know, I will be doing this for another few years hopefully. And will be able to see the station through its digital transition, and I’ll hopefully be able to position it—

SB: Could you explain about that?

DL: Sure. Several years ago, because of technological changes in the world, digital has become overriding. Everything has gone digital, and broadcasting is no exception. Since
the beginning of broadcasting, we’ve been broadcasting over analog channels, and it’s worked out satisfactorily. But through digital broadcasting now, we can use a different spectrum and use it more effectively. In fact, we will be given space on a digital spectrum where we can have three or four channels of television, if you will, instead of just one. And that’s going to present a great new opportunity for us for different programs and different types of—

SB: Sure.

DL: Services to the community. The government started this thing more than ten years ago, started this move towards digital. For WEDU, starting in April of 2003, we started our multi-casting, where we’re doing both analog and digital programming for the moment. And in February of 2009, the deadline takes place. And at that time, the entire country—all the stations, both PBS and commercial stations, will be giving up their analog signal. It will be strictly broadcasting on digital. And so we’re getting ready and preparing for that.

SB: You were mandated to make the switch.

DL: Mandated by the FCC—

SB: Yes.

DL: To do this, all stations were.

SB: Were you ahead of the curve? Did you do it ahead of time?

DL: WEDU was, yes. There was a very successful capital campaign that WEDU—where we combined money that we received from state and federal agencies, some wonderful grants from some foundations, including the Kresge Foundation. And then some very generous contributions from donors and from members. And so we were able to amass about twelve and a half million dollars that we needed for this transition. And we’re still putting things into place, but we bought some land, we built a gigantic tower, we bought some new transmitters, we bought all sorts of high definition and digital equipment for the television studios. And those are being put in place. And so we’re prepared for this February of 2009 deadline.

SB: That’s extraordinary.

DL: And a brand new world. And at the same time that that’s happening, there’s other platforms. Wireless devices are coming up, and people are looking at television on handheld devices, or through their PC or through their laptop. And there’s a brave new world out there, and we have to find a niche for ourselves. We have to find out where we’re going to be relevant in all of these new platforms. We’re working very hard to make our website better and more interactive. We think that’s going to be a lot of the
future. I see a convergence, if you will, of Internet and television—where people will look at their Internet through their television screen. And that’s going to be very exciting.

SB: How will PBS play a role?

DL: Well that’s what we’re looking for. PBS is always going to be, I think, noncommercial. So we’re not going to be interrupting our programs with commercials the way the commercial stations are. I think we’ll always be setting a standard for cultural programming, for alternative programming to the entertainment that the commercial stations will provide. I think we’ll be doing more on-demand things, like the commercial stations. We’ll be aggregating a lot of our content and making it available to fans, you know, on some—by some medium. So I think we’ll be playing in that arena as well. We also do something extraordinary, which is—we at WEDU, and most PBS stations do—at least six hours of children’s programming everyday. That’s always been one of the pillars of our building blocks. And we have put on things like “Mister Rogers,” and “Sesame Street,” which is now almost forty years old, and “Barney,” and “Clifford,” and “Arthur,” and “Dragon Tales,” and “Between the Lions,” and—

SB: [Laughs]

DL: All of those things. And we have really educated a generation or more of children and grandchildren.

SB: Absolutely.

DL: And so we still do that, and we think there’s a wonderful place for us in media for putting on great quality programming for children. So I have that to worry about and to position the station. And I’m also interested in providing some succession planning so that whenever it’s my time to leave, I want to have someone identified—someone in place that can take over so the station will not miss a beat.

SB: I happen to know that when you took the station over, it was not on sound fiscal footing.

DL: That’s true—

SB: It is—

DL: I was told that a year or so before I took over the job, the station was close to being bankrupt, that they were close to having to close their doors because their cash flow was such that they couldn’t continue to operate. So there were some Draconian cuts in staff, and Draconian cuts in budget. And because of, I think good planning and good strategizing over the last five years that I’ve been there, we’ve built our staff back to where it used to be, and we’ve increased the budget to where it used to be. We’re not where I want to be right now, but at least we’re back. We have some strength, and for the last four years, we’ve ended up each of our fiscal years with a surplus. We’re a nonprofit,
and we’re not going to be making a profit, but we’ve not had to at the end of the year borrow money or ask or beg for money to make up our operational budget. And another thing that we’re very proud of is that the station has now started a good endowment practice, and we have an endowment campaign that we have just kicked off. And it looks like we have, right now, in our endowment—and this is fiscal year 2007—probably five million and something in our endowment.

SB: That’s extraordinary.

DL: And this is good—

SB: You have to be very proud of that.

DL: We’re really excited about this because prior to this we were living month to month—

SB: That’s extraordinary. Sure.

DL: And we now, I think are sustainable. We have some wonderful things that I think we’ve done that people are responding to, local programming, which is what I really believe in, and I think we specialize in, has been great. We’ve had partnerships with arts institutions, museums, nongovernmental agencies, libraries, performing arts venues. And we’ve done some exciting things over the last five years. Won awards with them, and have just done great, great local programs.

SB: You have to be very proud.

DL: We are, and it’s an extraordinary staff who believes in what they’re doing now. And I think we have turned it around. I think we have one of the better-positioned PBS stations in the entire PBS community. A lot of them are still floundering and don’t have direction right now.

SB: WEDU serves how many counties?

DL: We serve an enormous coverage area, at least sixteen counties, and we reach people over the air by broadcast, or through satellite or cable. The majority of people reach us and see us with cable and satellite, not over the air. That probably—

[End Tape 2, Side A]

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[Tape 2, Side B]

DL: A fourth of the state of Florida’s population.

SB: Do the commercial stations reach—how far—
DL: The ones in the Tampa area, pretty close to that amount.

SB: Pretty close.

DL: Yes. We are operating at full power. And most of the TV stations in the Tampa Bay market do have full power. Our signal goes to the eastern most parts of Polk County on the east. We go up around, past Hernando to the north. And to the south, we go down to Charlotte County. We reach the Sarasota/Charlotte border. So it’s pretty extensive, and it’s a pretty dynamic community. And it’s going very rapidly. In fact the Tampa Bay television market right now is ranked twelfth in the nation, right below Detroit, and right above Phoenix. When I got to WEDU, almost five years ago, we were ranked fifteenth. So we’ve grown three market sizes just in five years. That’s phenomenal growth.

SB: That’s amazing.

DL: Miami is ranked sixteenth in the nation, so they’re four market sizes smaller than we are. Orlando is ranked twentieth. And our market is growing tremendously, and it should be surpassing Detroit within a year or two. But Phoenix is right behind us, so we’re playing—

SB: It’s amazing.

DL: Leapfrog with the Phoenix market.

SB: How does WEDU compare to other PBS stations in terms—

DL: Well, we are—

SB: [Of] quality in reader and listenership?

DL: Yes, we don’t even subscribe to the ratings, but I know that we have an exceptional audience, because our audience here in West Central Florida is a unique PBS audience. Generally, PBS stations attract an older demographic, a more literate group of viewers and listeners, because a lot of our programming has to do with cultural affairs and cultural events. So we have a more literate, better educated, more affluent, older population. And that exists here in large numbers.

SB: I’m sure it does.

DL: So we know that we’re appealing to them. You know we, whenever we have pledge drives, we get really good results and people are very supportive. Now that they see that WEDU is viable and sustainable, so that we’re just enjoying a good deal of buzz and popularity right now. We are the biggest PBS station in the state of Florida, and as you know, Florida is the fourth most populous state in the nation, so we’re one of the big television stations. We do a lot of things that attract attention from the other PBS stations
in the country. A lot of the things that we do are being emulated by other stations. So in that respect, we are an admired station.

SB: You do programming that would include special events. I don’t know if other PBS stations do that.

DL: Some do and some don’t. But we decided a few years ago that we wanted more revenue streams coming in from different parts of the operation. We were relying too heavily on the membership department, trying to get people to give us money through pledge drives. We were presenting so many pledge nights, that it was making people a little unhappy, because we would interrupt their normal programming so many days out of the year. So it’s been a goal of mine to reduce each year the number of days that we do pledging. And we’ve been able to do that, but in order to do that, we had to replace that money with other sources of revenue. So we’ve created special events. We created a wonderful thing called the “Be More Awards” where we celebrate and honor some of the nonprofit agencies in our coverage area, and we have a wonderful luncheon each year, and we give awards to the best nonprofits in the area. And that’s been a wonderful, satisfying thing.

SB: And very popular, I know.

DL: And then we created a gala, a wonderful event—black tie event. Each season, we’ve just have done it two years in a row. Monroe and Suzette Berkman were the—

SB: Oh my, imagine that! [Laughs]

DL: Were the hosts, and the chairs of the first one, which was beautiful and elaborate and gorgeous. And we just had our second one in St. Petersburg this past February, and the next one, which will be next winter, will be during our fiftieth anniversary. WEDU will celebrate its fiftieth year, and we’re going to be celebrating that all year long during the year 2008.

SB: It’s called Sojourn.

DL: Sojourn—

SB: Do you have a theme? Or do you want to keep that a secret at this point?

DL: Well, we’re, right now we’re talking about—the first year we did South America, Latin America. We did wines and foods from Chile and Argentina. And then the second year, we did the New World, which was New Zealand and Australia, wines of the New World. And this year, we’re toying around with the Mediterranean. Maybe just doing French, which has a great cuisine and great wines, or doing the Mediterranean totally, with Spain, Italy, and France maybe, and even Portugal. So we’re—

SB: Will be exciting.
DL: So we’re fooling around with that right now. It’s going to be very exciting. And we have other events with special donors, like broadcaster circle event people that contribute at least a thousand [dollars] annually. We do special concerts, as we did the other night with André Rieu, where we had a bunch of people come to the station for a party and—

SB: They’re huge money raisers.

DL: They’re wonderful, yes.

SB: I know.

DL: André Rieu, we have a partnership with that group, and they’ve come for a couple of years in a row, and it has meant maybe a quarter of a million dollars to the station—

SB: That’s extraordinary.

DL: If not more to have that—

SB: Just very imaginative and creative.

DL: Yes, yes. And that’s what we’ve had to do in order not to be like every other PBS station, just rely slowly on membership drives.

SB: Well you’ve won some awards, have you not?

DL: Well, we’ve won awards for our events, for our galas. We’ve won awards for our “Be More Awards,” for being innovative. We’ve won some Emmy awards for some of our local programs that we created, such as the Gulf Coast Journal with Jack Perkins down in Sarasota. We also do wonderful community stuff. During Black History Month this year, we did a celebration of a black neighborhood in Tampa called Central Avenue. It was the heart of the African-American community in Tampa when I was growing up. And we did a little historical piece with the Tampa Poet Laureate, James E. Tokley Sr., who’s an African-American who grew up there. Beautiful, beautiful little documentary. A couple of years ago, we did a special on the first Iraqi Medal of Honor winner, who was a sergeant who died in Iraq who happened to be from Tampa. And we did a tribute to him and his family, and it was a beautiful piece. We did that.

We do political debates now. We just did the Governor of Florida, Governor Crist on his first hundred days in office. We had an exclusive interview with him. We’ve done some Town Hall meetings and some forums in the last year or so on teenage alcoholism. We’re just doing an exciting number of things. We also do outreach. People just think we do things over the air, but we have a wonderful early literacy program called “Ready To Learn.” And we have one full time staff member and some part-timers that are out in our coverage area all the time, dealing primarily with Pre-K children and their caregivers or their parents, trying to interest these children in reading and being attracted to good PBS
educational programs. And we provide them with books and learning material so that when they get to kindergarten they’re going to be prepared to learn, and they will be able to do some reading. We’re very proud of that.

SB: What is the name of that?

DL: Ready To Learn, Ready to Learn.

SB: A lot of people don’t know about that.

DL: They don’t.

SB: And—

DL: And not every PBS station does it. But—

SB: But you use the TV as a learning tool.

DL: Exactly, exactly.

SB: It’s extraordinary.

DL: And the programs that we present, you know, “Sesame Street” is a great learning tool. Any teacher will tell you that it’s invaluable—

SB: Absolutely.

DL: Because when they get kids into kindergarten that have been weaned on “Sesame Street,” these kids know how to count. They know the alphabet. They’re very well prepared. And I’m also happy that we’re doing something, as I said, for the community. A lot of my friends from high school and college are still here in Tampa, have come out of the woodwork to greet me. They’ve been very supportive. And so that’s nice, it’s—I’ve come full circle.

SB: You have come full circle.

DL: And there’s something kind of spiritual, and there’s good karma in that. And that’s also been very satisfying.

SB: And I have to say, listening to your life story, I know you used the word “luck” and “fortuitous,” but it seems very much like fate, it really does.

DL: Some of the things I couldn’t have chosen though—

SB: We’re just—
DL: They were presented to me.

SB: We’re just extremely happy that you’re back in Tampa, I have to say.

DL: Well it’s been a pleasure. And luckily, I have two of my children living in the area, you know. And I have five grandchildren—four of them have been raised in Florida, one of them is in Colorado, so—

SB: Are any in broadcasting?

DL: None in broadcasting. None of the kids or grandkids were that interested in the business, which is okay, because it takes its toll on family life. But they’re all doing well, and a couple of them have quite a bit of talent. There’s one who’s a mezzo-soprano who’s living in Boston and making a living singing. Another one is studying at NYU. She’s in theatre arts. I have a grandson who’s graduating next month at the University of Miami, my alma mater, who’s a business and finance major. So they’re all going to be okay.

SB: A variety.

DL: A variety.

SB: You must be very proud.

DL: Yes, I’m proud and I wish my parents were still alive, to see what they’re—

SB: Yes, yes of course.

DL: Great-grandkids are doing.

SB: And what you have done in your life.

DL: They’re very proud of me. Before they passed away, they knew that I had achieved some good things in my business.

SB: That’s wonderful.

DL: They were very proud.

SB: So glad to hear that. Well it’s been an incredible story, and an incredible experience to share this with you, Dick. I can’t thank you enough.

DL: I’m happy to have been able to give something back to this community. And also this is a great way to help the University of South Florida Special Collections area because they’re doing some great things with my childhood neighborhood, you know—
SB: Sure, yes.

DL: They’re keeping it alive through these stories and through the—

SB: Very much so.

DL: Collections that they have.

SB: Very much so.

DL: So I’m happy to be a part of that.

SB: Well, we thank you again, and you take care and keep doing good works!

DL: Thank you, Suzette, thank you.

SB: Thank you.

[End of interview]