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Andrea Graham oral history interview by Suzette Berkman, October 30, 2007

Andrea Graham (Interviewee)

Suzette Berkman (Interviewer)

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Suzette Berkman: Hi, Andrea. We’re here. It’s October 30, 2007. And we’re proceeding with an oral interview of a lady I’ve known for a very long time, who has made a significant impact in the arts. Hi, Andrea.

Andrea Graham: Hello, Suzette.

SB: Thank you for being here. This is a treat for me.

AG: Likewise.

SB: I am looking forward to hearing stories that I’ve never heard before and that probably our listeners have never heard before either. You brought with you today a scrapbook of your years at the Performing Arts Center. And you were with the Performing Arts Center at the very beginning. Could you tell us a little bit about those early years?

AG: Sure. First, I’ll tell you how I got involved. I had just moved down from New York City and, to put it mildly, I was not a happy camper.

SB: Uh-huh. Why is that?

AG: Well, I had come from Manhattan to Tampa, and this was twenty-seven years ago. So you can fill in the dots there. (chuckles)

SB: (chuckles)

AG: And I’ll tell you—

SB: You won’t say the words?
AG: No. I—

SB: (talking at same time) There was nothing happening?

AG: No. Then you won’t be able to use any of it on the air—

SB: (chuckles)

AG: —should you ever want to. But just as an example, to me this symbolizes the trouble I had moving down from a great metropolitan area to a community where I had no idea if there would be any arts. And in my mind I wasn’t sure if there would be indoor plumbing. I mean that was my vision. But on the first few days that I got here— I had never owned a car before and my then husband had dropped me downtown for an interview; he went off to work. I went up to my interview. I came down on to Florida Avenue and stood out with my hand in the air trying to flag down a taxi.

SB: (laughs)

AG: Now, I know, living in Tampa, you don’t flag down taxis. You call them. You know the difference between Manhattan and Tampa. So that’s my funny moving to Tampa story.

SB: And where was this interview?

AG: The interview was actually with someone at Exchange Bank, which is no longer. I think that the reincarnation of Exchange Bank is currently Bank of America, but it has gone through many takeovers, mergers and transformations. But in any case, when I first got down here, one of the first people that I met was H. L. Culbreath.

SB: How did you meet him?

AG: It was through an attorney at Carlton Fields, which was where my first husband worked. In fact, they had moved us down from Manhattan and enticed [us] to Tampa. And Ed Atkins, who is no longer with the firm — and I am trying to think — I am sure he is still alive but I haven’t seen him in many years. But he was the managing partner of Carlton Fields at that point. And he had seen my resume and knew that I had a background in the arts as well as an MBA. And they felt a commitment, I think, to get me placed somewhere so that their attorney that they had just hired from New York would be happy and would stay in Tampa.

SB: How did you meet him?

AG: So he had heard that H.L. Culbreath had been asked by then Mayor [Robert] Martinez. ([He has] gone on to do many wonderful things for the state and the country.) But then, Mayor Martinez had come up with the idea that we needed a performing arts hall. Remember, back then it was a hall that we were building basically for the orchestra. Ed Atkins put me in touch with H.L. Culbreath and really the rest is history. We met, we hit
it off and he told [me] about the project. He said, “I can’t pay you. I’m not sure when I can pay you. I’m not even sure if it’s a go. But we would love to have—”

SB: H.L. is telling [you this]?

AG: Yes. H.L. is telling us this, about the project. And I said, “Sounds good to me.”

SB: Was he chairing? What was his position?

AG: What happened was— It wasn’t even incorporated yet when he approached the board. At that point Mayor Martinez had simply asked a few of his buddies, “What do you think about this idea?” And it was called the Mayor’s Committee for the Performing Arts. That was the original, pre-board name for the committee that Mayor Bob Martinez had put together. H.L. was the chair. Not even a chair— he was the organizer and he had asked people like Hinks Shimberg, Mr. Mac— Bill MacInnes from TECO [Tampa Electric Company], George Pennington from the City of Tampa. I believe Arnold Kotler, who of course is one of the fathers of the orchestra— was one of the fathers. He was involved and there were a few others. They were maybe a group of ten and they formed this little committee and wanted to study about the arts.

*pause in recording*

So we had the committee formed. H.L. decided to hire me, and I became the staff person. That was [my] title for about a year and a half. I was known as the “staff person”. I was the only staff. The first thing that I did was to incorporate this committee and then we decided it was time to hire an arts consultant, which we did. We got our initial funding, actually, from the county. The county was the first entity to give us— if I’m not mistaken, it was about thirty thousand dollars for that first year. So you can imagine how much I was not making.

SB: And the year was?

AG: That year was 1980. I was hired on June— I think it was the eighteenth— of 1980. I moved down in March from New York. And it took about, you know, the three months to get it all worked out.

SB: Sure.

AG: And I came on board in June of 1980. My first office was in old TECO. This is not the TECO headquarters that we know in downtown Tampa. This was the TECO at the corner of Kennedy [Boulevard] and Dale Mabry [Highway], because that’s where H.L. was. At that point I was just working very closely with him, obviously. And we, at that point, we felt that we needed an arts consultant to study the community and decide what we should build.
Now the other instrumental person that was on board at that very early date was Anne Solomon. She at that point—

SB: That far back. Oh, my gosh.

AG: (speaking at same time) Yes —had worked with H.L. at TECO. If I am not mistaken, she was the director of public relations for TECO. And I think if you remember H.L., when he asked you something it really wasn’t an ask. It was more like, “And you will do this.” So Anne became—well we used to kid around. She was the staff director and I was the staff directee because there were only two of us. She, however, was on a “volunteer,” in quotes, per H.L. volunteer basis. So the three of us, pretty much for the first year were the team that did all of the work.

SB: Did you interact with the committee or was it mainly with H.L.?

AG: Yes, all the time. We had monthly meetings and leaders slowly emerged. It became obvious that Hinks Shimberg would later be involved with the actual building and all of the technical aspects based on his experience with the arts, especially as a Broadway producer. I mean he has—and his relationship with people in England and in London in the theater. It became very clear that George Pennington would be our government liaison with the mayor’s office because he was then the city administrator under Sandy Freedman’s reign as the mayor. Arnold Kotler, of course his heart was always with the orchestra. So he was most interested in the design aspects of a space that would be suitable to an orchestra.

So slowly leaders emerged and everybody kind of got their territory of what their expertise would be and the contribution that they could make to the center. Or actually back then, remember it was a hall.

SB: (speaking at same time) It was a hall.

AG: We used to call it the Performing Arts Hall. So Don Engle out of Minneapolis [and] was hired to be our arts consultant. He was nationally known and had worked with several other arts centers around the country. He came on board, and he did an extensive feasibility study. And it is his report that began to hint at the fact that we probably should not be looking at a hall. Because this hall would have had to meet so many different needs.

The first and foremost need was a home for the symphony, for the Florida Orchestra. But we also knew that at some point, and probably at the beginning we would want Broadway shows to come touring through. Before that, the Broadway shows came to Curtis Hixon Hall, so you can imagine. Can you imagine Phantom of the Opera in old Curtis Hixon Hall?

SB: No, I could not.
AG: We never ever would have gotten the shows that we now have if we had kept on the track that Tampa was going towards.

SB: Was this before or after the era of touring shows?

AG: Shows have always toured but as they have gotten–– as the shows themselves have become more technical and more extravagant and more sophisticated, the tours have become more sophisticated. But Broadway has always toured.


AG: But it’s just the difference in shows.

SB: I don’t think I realized that.

AG: Right. You have probably always lived in a metropolitan area, I’m thinking.

SB: Most likely. I mean yes, I have, but in–– I really I would have been younger––

AG: And not realized.

SB: —and not really realized that. But especially, as you emphasized, coming to Tampa from New York it was sort of the outskirts.

AG: It was definitely the outskirts. But I realized also at that time— remember this was early eighties. I think of that time as the age of the renaissance for Tampa because a lot of things were happening at that point for Tampa. And even more so, there were a lot [of] dreams that were developing at that point.

SB: Who originated these dreams? Was it Sandy Freedman as mayor? What was her role in this?

AG: You know—Do you know where the dream really started?

SB: Yes. No, I don’t. I’d like to know.

AG: (laughing) No, you don’t. I guess that’s why you have asked. Okay. That was a rhetorical question.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: It was actually Mayor Greco, first-time Mayor Greco not second-time Mayor Greco.

SB: Interesting.
AG: When he was— back in the seventies I guess was when he was mayor for the first time. Dick Greco.

SB: Yes. Yes.

AG: And he started to think— I mean he has always been an advocate for the arts as well as for business, and it’s wonderful that the two can thrive together. But back in the seventies he started talking about a governmental arts complex. And they were, I think at that point. And Bill Poe also, who I think pre—I can’t remember if Bill Poe came before or after him.¹

SB: I am not sure either.

AG: But the two of them together, there was a reign for about seven or eight years in the seventies where the thought of the governmental arts complex came to the forefront and they were at first thinking about putting it up at USF [University of South Florida] on the campus. I think even UT [University of Tampa] was considered when they thought maybe it should be downtown.

SB: (speaking at same time) How interesting!

AG: And there were a few other sights. I think another sight believe, it or not, was where the stadium was. And I can’t remember when they built the Bucs’ [Tampa Bay Buccaneers NFL franchise] stadium—

SB: The Sombrero, oh gosh.

AG: Right. But there was a time where they thought that maybe—

SB: Like thirty-one years ago.

AG: Okay well—

SB: Thirty-two years ago.

AG: Well, the thought was then that perhaps adding— you know where we park now— they were thinking maybe that could be a sight for a performing arts center, right next to the stadium. So there were a lot of interesting ideas being thrown around in the seventies [1970s]. And some old reports that I actually came upon when I first started collecting things.

But it was in the eighties [1980s] when the dreams became more of a reality. And I look at that era in the eighties as the age of the renaissance because it’s when the Chamber started thinking that maybe, just maybe, Tampa could be the next great American city.

¹ Bill Poe succeeded Dick Greco’s first term as mayor. He was elected in 1974 and served until 1979.
We already had the airport, we had the stadium. You know, the educational system was just beginning to be improved. And what was left? It was the arts.

SB: The arts.

AG: And it was a little niche that people like—you just asked who were really the people—it was Mayor Martinez who had it as his plank. Which means he said when he was elected mayor that he would make a place for the performing arts. And I think he had in mind the downtown area. That was his goal. That is what a plank is. When you’re running for office you say, “This is one thing I promise I will get done.”

SB: H.L.—and this I do remember—wanted the downtown revitalization.

AG: Uh-huh.

SB: And he chose to move TECO downtown. In my mind, that’s when it happened. That’s when it started to blossom. But did, does that relate time-wise?

AG: I really—I think was just a few after we had already gotten started. But I wouldn’t be surprised if between Mayor Martinez asking him to chair this arts committee and at the same tie with H.L. moving TECO down, which I think was mid-eighties; I think it was before the opening of the [Tampa Bay] Performing Arts Center. But I am not sure. I think it was probably mid-eighties. And there were other people involved that had a commitment to the downtown area. People like Chester Ferguson with the whole Lykes empire. Remember, they moved their bank, the First—

SB: Florida.

AG: — the First Florida to the downtown area. And if you remember also, I think that’s when Maas Brothers moved downtown.

SB: That’s right.

AG: Those— TECO a little bit later— but First Florida, Maas Brothers. Tampa Theatre was always there. I mean Tampa Theatre is the pioneer in all of this. You know, back in the 1920s when it was a vaudeville house. And if you look at the marquee now and you see those lights twinkling. I mean the Tampa Theatre I think always knew that it would have sister institutions around us, around it. And I think it just had to wait until its time. And the 1980s were its time.

SB: The renaissance.

AG: Yes. And that was also a time when the Tampa downtown partnership—I think that’s when it developed. Now it’s a very strong, influential, active part of the downtown development. But back then there was a downtown partnership. Their downtown devel—
It was actually called the DDC— the Downtown Development Corporation, which I think morphed into the Tampa Downtown Partnership.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: If you also remember that the [Greater Tampa] Chamber of Commerce was always very active— Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce. And there was another organization that was very involved and that was the [Tampa] Merchants Association. They’re more on the periphery now but back then—

SB: Well, did you interact with —

AG: Oh yes.

SB: —those organizations.

AG: I’m trying to think [of the] gentleman’s name who was head of the Merchants Association. Al Trainer.

SB: And they felt—

AG: Al Trainer!

SB: I remember him.

AG: And he was a visionary. He was a go-getter.

SB: Strong arts advocate?

AG: Strong arts advocate involved with the chamber. He was one of the original networkers. You know, the Merchants Association, I think, in other cities is a smaller group especially if you have a very active chamber of commerce. The Merchants Association, I think, takes a back seat. He never took a back seat. He was right out there networking and saying his two cents at city council meetings. And he was on every committee that we ever formed. He was very, very active.

SB: So this committee expanded over time?

AG: The Performing Arts Center Committee?

SB: Yes.

AG: The board— Yes. Once we incorporated it was officially a board. Even back by our second year there were probably about twenty-five to thirty people on the board. Compared to now, when I think there are probably eighty people on the board.
SB: Quite a few.

AG: But I think the board and the growth of the board has really mirrored the growth of the Performing Arts Center itself but... [missing audio]

Suzette, before we go on I want to make one correction and that is Al Trainer was with the Chamber of Commerce not the Merchants Association.

SB: Okay. Thank you.

AG: And I wish I could remember the name of the man with the Merchants Association because he was very active. But Al Trainer was definitely Chamber of Commerce and another person who was on every committee I think I ever showed up for.

But after we got the board together and we got the results of Don Engle’s study we decided that we probably needed to move forward yet again. And what we did was we formed or started to hire the different specialties that we would need to design the center. And the first organization that we hired was Artec Consultants.

Let me back-step for one second. In 1981 another very important, probably the most important person was hired and that was David Midland. Now the reason that we had hired him was that he had gone through several expansion and construction projects at Artpark up in Buffalo. So he knew how to grow an organization. He came very, very highly recommended and he joined us in January of 1981 and just in time to do a national search for which of the architects and the acousticians that we wanted to hire. So the next step was that we did indeed that we hired Artec Consultants.

SB: Who—Whose decision was that? I mean was it the board, was it you, was anybody?

AG: No it was definitely—the board was very, very involved. The staff—basically David and I, and again Anne Solomon as that volunteer staff person. She remained involved with the project through its entirety and is in fact still involved as a consultant to the board on various different issues. But she’s still very involved, always a behind-the-scenes person. But the board at that point, particularly the technical committee, which was in charge of putting the design team together was under Hinks Shimberg’s leadership. They made the decision in terms of who to hire.

But what we did was, we took about six months and traveled to about five different performing arts halls throughout pretty much the southeast—not the—the northeast and the southeast. And what we did was we asked each of the acousticians that we were going to hire—ultimately it was Artec—we asked them, “Which halls are you the most proud of and which would make the most [sense] for us to see so that we judge whether or not you are the right acoustician for our project?”

So, we loaded up the board of directors—I mean people like Louise Ferguson, obviously Hinks Shimberg, Chester Ferguson I think might have gone on a few of them. But in any
case, there we were flying around the country and visiting these performing arts centers. It was probably one of the smartest moves that we’d ever made. And by the way, each of the board members paid for their own travel.

SB: Okay.

AG: I want to make that perfectly clear.

SB: (laughing) Thank you for clarifying.

AG: It was only the little staff person that got to go, but she had a lot of work to do in putting the trip together and making all the meetings work. But I really have to give credit to the board because they not only did reading and telephone interviews with the acousticians, but they actually went to hear their work. And we tried to pick times to go to these halls when they were performing. So they actually got to hear symphonies performing in the halls that the different acousticians that we were considering had built.

SB: Only symphonies? Or plays?

AG: We tried— The world of the acoustician, the most difficult music, and the most highly refined music that you need to build your center for is symphony.

SB: Sure.

AG: With things like Broadway shows, even back then, most of them are miked. So really what you need is just a hall that is very passive, that doesn’t reverberate. But for symphony—and the second in line for most difficult of course is opera because not only does it have the beautiful music but it has the beautiful voice not amplified. You know, what opera have you ever seen where they are wearing mikes. So we felt that the music we needed to hear was symphony and we tried to hear symphony performances wherever we went. It didn’t always work out. But we found it was hands-down, Russell Johnson of Artec Consultants that was truly the leader in the world of acoustics.

And it was also a fairly brazen step that we made back then by hiring the acoustician first. There is a lot of argument in the field of performing arts as to whether or not you hire the architect first and then the architect hires the acoustician. And in fact the acoustician reports to the architect and in a sense a sub who feeds information to the architects, and then the architects sets the relationship with the owner. We decided early on the acoustics of the theater— and remember at that point it was still a theater, a hall—

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: —that the acoustics were so important that we decided to hire the acoustician first and then the architect. And throughout the whole building process, the acousticians reported directly to the board, to the technical committee, which was Hink Shimberg. It was quite unusual in the industry.
SB: How often does that [happen]? Well—

AG: It’s more and more— and actually as we did research, the projects that went the most smoothly during the process of design and building were those where both the architect and the acoustician had a direct report to the board of directors. And that way you didn’t end up with what you might call boo-boos in your building. You know, with the architect, oh it looks beautiful, but the scenery goes up and down so well, and oh the seats are so comfortable. But how did you like the orchestra? Well, you know it was okay, it sounded all right. Well, how was the soloist? It was a little blurry I really—I was sitting in the back and I really couldn’t hear the words or the music that she was singing. And that’s really what you didn’t want.

SB: Well, I have to tell you, being active with the orchestra and hearing visiting guest artists come in to that hall and speaking with them, they rave about the acoustics. And I would like to add too, I don’t know if you’re aware that Russell Johnson passed away this past year.

AG: Yes, that’s right.

SB: Interestingly, Leonard Stone who is the former CEO of the [Florida] Orchestra was asked to give the eulogy, which is really quite an honor.

AG: I heard that. I did.

SB: But he had used him in Dallas where he had come from before.

AG: Right, right. Yeah.

SB: So it’s kind of full circle, and it is small world, you know, arts world.

AG: It is a small world especially with the people who have the most expertise.

SB: Sure.

AG: You know, the leaders in the industry.

SB: Well, he is considered the best.

AG: The best—and we got him.

SB: How you arrived at that and put that first is just amazing.

AG: It was great. We have the wonderful sound today really to thank for it. The other thing that Artec Consultants had was a very strong theater department. So not only did they design, or were able to design the acoustics, but they also were the theater
specialists. Now they also did a feasibility study—this [was] probably around 1982–eighty-three. They did a feasibility study to determine the need in the community. And this was where the big news was divulged that, based on need in the community, we really should not be building a performing arts hall. But really what we needed was a complex. Now I can’t tell you what the feeling was like to have this board of directors of people who already knew they were literally jumping off a cliff for the good of the community. You know, a performing arts hall. The reaction at this point was, we have Curtis Hixon [Convention Center] why do we need a hall? You know, or we have Falk Theatre or the symphony I think—the orchestra at that point was performing on the grounds of UT.

SB: The University of Tampa.

AG: Right.

SB: I can’t think of the hall right now.

AG: Exactly. And you know people were kind of satisfied with—they didn’t know. Sometimes you don’t know what you don’t know.

SB: Our tickets were under a leaky air conditioning unit and the acoustics were pretty bad.

AG: Pretty bad. Right.

SB: So I don’t know if that reflects on just status quo, but thank goodness you took this major move.

AG: I remember certainly—obviously there were people who knew that we could move up a notch. Because remember what the time period was.

SB: Thank goodness there [were] leaders.

AG: It was the age of the renaissance; my renaissance in Tampa. My thoughts. It was when Tampa was thinking we can do better. And certainly in the arts. So the result of this feasibility study was to build a complex. And originally, there were four halls. So it—Morsani was called Festival Hall.

SB: So you jumped from one hall to four just like that.

AG: To four!

SB: Wow!

AG: It was later reduced when we were putting together the construction documents to three halls because remember, the Shimberg Theater which in essence was out, the fourth
hall was not built until just five, seven years ago. So the three halls that we eventually designed were Morsani, which was then called the Festival Hall. Then there was the Playhouse, which is now Ferguson Hall, and the Jaeb Theater, which we originally called the Studio Theater until the Jaebs came in to name it.

So there were a few weeks of a lot of consternation about how much this is going to cost. And the original feasibility study—you know there was price tag. I think it was something like for forty-seven million dollars.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

AG: Now just—that was back in 1982 as you probably know, the project eventually came in at about sixty-seven million. But—fifty-seven million, is that it?

SB: Yeah.

AG: Okay. But when you compare just a few years later—

SB: Incredible.

AG: —to performing arts complexes that were built around the country it was double the price. So in a sense we got a steal.

SB: You did. Absolutely.

AG: But the price tag at that point in the initial feasibility study, I think was forty-two million and was difficult.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

AG: That much money had never been raised in this community. But the other really interesting factor that I think really helped to jettison this project into the realm of possibility was that from the beginning it was always seen that a partnership between the public sector which at that point you know was the city and the county, and the private sector which was represented by the board members who had stepped forward to be involved in this project. And they were the business leaders of the community. And right from the beginning they said—it was kind of like if you show me yours. I’ll show you mine.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: You know, if you put in a little, I’ll put a little. And that is literally the way this thing got funded. It was you do that; okay, I’ll do this. You do that, I’ll do this.

SB: Now who did the fundraising— the board, you?
AG: The board did the fundraising. The staff obviously was there every step of the way. You know we did the research; we put the presentation materials together. But, you know—I know you know this and other people may not. The way you raise the most money is not because you have a nice brochure. It’s because the right person makes a phone call and invites the right person to lunch. And it’s [like], “Remember when you wanted to build the stadium and I helped you get the bonds approved and done and sold in the market? Well, I now want to build a Performing Arts Center, and I need a million dollars from your company.” The first ten million dollars from the private sector were raised in probably three or four months and it was by two people. And those two people were Mr. Mac—Bill MacInnes who was then the chairman of TECO. Basically H.L. [Culbreath] reported to him. And Chester Ferguson—Louise Lykes Ferguson’s husband.

SB: Sure.

AG: And what they did was—I mean literally, they would—you know we would have our committee meeting for fundraising—

*pause in tape*

AG: So the first ten million dollars was raised like this. Some unsuspecting person would get a phone call and Mr. Mac or his secretary would say, probably his secretary, “Mr. Mac invites you to lunch at—” I think it was called the Exchange Club then, which is now the Tampa Club “—to the Exchange Club for lunch. He’ll meet you at his table.” Mr. Mac had his own table there. And that person knew, I am going to be hit and it is going to be a biggy.

SB: (chuckles)

AG: And Mr. Mac’s favorite drink was Wild Turkey. So you knew you could kind of soften the blow if you showed up with a bottle of Wild Turkey. So he collected a lot of Wild Turkey in those days. And he met with our first ten donors between he and Chester Ferguson, and it literally was over lunch. And that was how we got our first ten one-million dollar gifts. So the first ten millions—

SB: Jeez.

AG: —you could almost say was easy. It was the next forty-seven millions that was a little more difficult.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

AG: But that’s how the fundraising went. But we also hired—and I am thinking that was probably in 1982 or three—a fundraising firm out of New York. And the lead—there were two leads that came down and actually one of them lived here for a year. John Riley, an older gentleman that literally had traveled the world raising money from everybody, for everything. And then one of the partners of the firm Henry—and I am
laughing, I’ll tell you in a second. His name was Henry Bessiere. And the joke was—I don’t know if I should say this but I am sure this will never end up on the air—H.L. [Culbreath] could never pronounce his name and unfortunately in all of our minutes of meeting he would say Henry Brassiere.

SB: (laughs)

AG: So anyway, we had Henry Braessiere—(correcting herself) actually Bessiere—who worked with us for a year to do a feasibility study in terms of fundraising. We knew where the first ten million were going to come from but it was the remainder of the money. Ant they did—It was probably the most intensive fundraising feasibility study that had ever been done. And it wouldn’t surprise me if a study of that depth has ever been done again.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: They—

SB: What was the name of the firm?

AG: It had Bessiere in the name. I can’t think of the name. But I know who would know the name (laughs)—Lindsey Michael would know that name of the firm. But Henry Bessiere was one of the partners. And he is still fundraising and still working out of New York. And John Riley actually was the resident person who lived in Tampa for a year while we did all of the interviews. And there was a secret rating committee and—can’t tell you the names of those people—but they were people who were asked to be on the rating committee.

And that’s the way fundraising works. You have your consultants to research. And you know they didn’t have the Internet then so it’s—I mean everything was phone calling, phone books, you know, reports, newspapers. I mean it was amazing how they got research done. They interviewed every member obviously on the board of directors. And, you know, people lead to people. They must have interviewed over two hundred people during the course of many, many months. And you know how that goes. It’s can you think of anybody who might be interested in getting involved and giving money to the center? And usually, it’s the person who is sitting in front of you that [you are] really trying to get to give money. That’s no surprise. Right?

SB: What was the reaction? What was the initial public reaction?

AG: You know, it really varied. A lot of people got it right away. The people who got it right away were those who had money and were able to travel to New York, to London, to L.A. to Chicago to see shows. But what they realized was—and I think our consultants really helped them see the picture—don’t you want this for your community and for the children of the community? Not everybody can fly off to New York three times a year to
get their fix—so they can get to see all the shows that they want. Wouldn’t you rather have the choice of seeing some of that arts and culture here? And they got it.

So I think the larger gifts were easier to get at that point. You know, the million dollar gifts, the five hundred thousand, the two hundred and fifty thousand. The ones that were a little more difficult were the ones in say the ten thousand to fifty thousand dollar range, because those people really didn’t get it quite as much. They weren’t quite as involved in the arts. They didn’t travel off to other cities to see the arts.

SB: Did you get many of those gifts?

AG: We did.

SB: You did?

AG: We absolutely did. I mean it’s amazing how much private money that we raised. In fact, our original goal was twelve million from the private sector. Well, in the first three months we had already raised ten million, so we then increased to fifteen million. After we realized we got fifteen million it was then 17.5 million. The amount of private funds that we eventually raised throughout that six [or] seven-year period of developing the center was twenty-one million dollars. It was the most money that had ever been raised for a project like this in the community.

SB: Incredible, Andrea, to be a part of it. Wow. Could you talk about that penny tax and Mayor Martinez’ involvement.

AG: That was, I must say, a brilliant way to have funded the performing arts center. The Penny for the Good Life, as we called it, involved a one-year period where the sales tax would be increased by one penny, by one cent, only for that year. And the amount of money that could have been raised by that was tens of millions of dollars. The center would have gotten a portion of it. It was for sports, arts and recreation. That would have been the focus of the money that would have been raised. And there [more] several football fields for high schools that would have been built. There were other community centers that would have been built plus a lot of improvement to those facilities that were already in existence.

SB: Whose idea was it? Do you remember?

AG: You know I can’t remember whose idea it was. I wouldn’t [be] surprised if it was Mayor Martinez’ brainstorm. But there [were] a lot people who would have jumped on board for it to happen. And what happened was, they decided to [make] it as a public referendum, which was—in hindsight, I wished they hadn’t. I wish that the government politicos had said, “This is a good idea. Let’s do it. And take the flak when we get it.” Because I think the public would have realized instead of floating the bond issue... (knock on door)
pause in recording

AG: But unfortunately, instead of having the politicians decide to just do it, they decided it would be best to just put it out as a public referendum. And of course, as we know, the referendum was defeated and when you think about it, what people in their right mind would vote to tax themselves? Even though it was for one year and for one penny. You know the effect that would have had on most families would have been marginal. I think there was, however, some fair criticism that a sales tax increase adversely affected poorer people because they too would have had to pay the additional penny on their sales tax. So I could understand that argument and that point of view. But I truly believed most people truly did not want to pay money that way. And the way, in hindsight, that we really had to look at that was not really a vote against the performing arts center but was really against a sales tax.

SB: Taxation, yeah.

AG: So that’s the way we looked at it.

SB: Well, what did Mayor Martinez do then to help the center after—?

AG: Well, then we really had to float a bond issue and it’s not we but the city to contribute that portion of the public funds.

SB: Do you remember the time period between the defeat of the penny tax and the bond issue?

AG: The defeat of the penny tax was early on. That was in 1981.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: We broke ground in eighty-four [1984] so—and the funding had to have been in place before we broke ground so by early 1983 the funding package had to have been in place or we never would have broken ground.

SB: Sure.

AG: So by 1983 it had already been decided if twenty-one million is the private sector, the rest would be the public sector.

SB: Were there articles in the paper at this point?

AG: Oh yes.

SB: A huge hullaballoo you would think.
AG: There were always articles in the newspaper, especially from the Penny for the Good Life on. And if it wasn’t [one] thing, it was another. You know, between funding, there were good things and there bad things. There was actually—I have to say the press was for the most part I think fairly positive and fairly—they covered a lot of it. It is sadder nowadays I think because the press coverage that the arts get, I mean I just think is pitiful. In fact most of the newspapers have fired their arts critics. I mean they have—

SB: There used to be a whole arts section years ago.

AG: Oh yes, there was a music critic and a theater critic. I think at one point there was even a dance critic. I mean that’s three critics on one staff. I mean now we have the fishing expert covering theater. And it’s really sad.

SB: It is kind of sad.

AG: And I hope, I really hope that will turn around in the future.

SB: Tell me—now I am trying to figure, sort of determine what year you became acting director. What year?

AG: A chronology of staffing, okay. I was hired in June of 1980. By January of eighty-one [1981]—actually the next person who was hired was Roxanna Gosweiler. At the beginning she was hired as, I would say, my secretary but she really was the secretary to everybody. And as you know, she stayed on with the center for many, many years and only left the center, I think two or three years ago. So she was there the longest of any of us. But then Roxanna was hired and then in January of eighty-one [1981]. David Midland was hired. By nineteen—that was eighty-one—by 1982 we hired development people. Lindsey Michael was hired in eighty-two [1982] to help do some of the research in the community that was the support for the fundraising. By nineteen—let’s see, we opened in eighty-seven [1987] so by 1985 we started hiring technical people who could help make some of the decisions in the design of the inside so that the spaces worked well. We hired another person who was kind of our keep-your-eye-on-the-contractor person.

SB: (laughs)

AG: And he would make his visits to the site to make sure that everything that was supposed to be happening was happening. And he reported directly to the staff and thus to the board, so not to the contractor. But by 1985 we brought a marketing person in—Jan Hicken. I think she came on—no, she was there for groundbreaking so I take that back. She was probably hired in eighty-four [1984] as well. I believe she was there at groundbreaking. I don’t really remember. But by 1983 we had the first unveiling of the design concept.

SB: Uh-huh. You’re acting director at this point?

AG: No I wasn’t acting director until—
SB: I meant assistant director.

AG: Assistant director, yes. When we hired David—and this was the funny part, I was in on the interviews to hire David—so I kind of hired my boss. It was a nice position to be in. Who do I think will be nicest to me? And I was kind of part of the package. Thank goodness the board felt strongly enough about keeping me. I mean they let the person know that this person will be on staff. And thank goodness I had a great, wonderful working relationship with David.

But we had in—shortly before groundbreaking, must have been in 1983, we had the unveiling of the first design concept. Now I don’t know if many people remember this. We had the unveiling of the concept in the Tampa Theatre. We must have [had] hundreds of people there who were interested to see. And the first design concept was all brick. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen this.

SB: Never.

AG: It was nothing like we have now. The placement of the theaters was the same. The way the back stages worked and where the offices were was the same. But the design aesthetic was brick.


AG: It was dark brick.

SB: Oh.

AG: You know, we looked at them when we first saw it we went, “Oh wow! It looks—It’s great. It looks so New England.” And then we looked at each other and said, “What?” It looked so New England. No, totally wrong. Not taking advantage of the water. And so they kind of went back to the drawing board with our input and of course came up with what we have now, which is just spectacular.

SB: Who were the architects?

AG: The architects were—this is another interesting concept that we came up with, modeling it after what else had been done throughout the country. We decided that for a project of this significance, it would be good to get an architecture firm that had experience in designing theaters. And we found the company again in New York and they were called ARCOP. A-R-C-O-P. We hired them after extensive interviews. I have to admit the board really did their homework well. They got material, they did phone interviews. And for the final two or three they brought everybody down to Tampa, they met the board, they saw the site, they came up with initial design concepts. They really did their homework well and chose well. They really knew how to do that.
So we hired ARCOP. And the two lead architects were Art Nichol and Fred Lebensold. Fred unfortunately, I think, died several years ago. And I think Art just died about two or three years ago. But they were brilliant.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: And then we decided we wanted the heart to be in the project. So we decided we needed a local architecture firm that would marry or wed the international architecture firm so that we would always have the best interest of the community at heart in all of the design choices. And the firm that we ended up with was, of course, McKelvey-Jennewein. Then called McKelvey-Jennewein. The lead architect was of course Jim Jennewien. And you know this was the project that would be the dearest—I mean I think—I don’t mean to speak for him but what other great thing can happen in your life to design a performing arts center for you, your community and for your children. So it was a dream job. And they worked well together. That the two—

SB: So that was their role was to work together.

AG: To work together. And they divided up the work. The ARCOP was more responsible for the overall concept—how the theaters would be situated; where the backstage areas would be. If you have ever been backstage at the center, you know that we have—then—the three halls. The Shimberg is new. But we had the three halls and they shared a common loading dock. Some theaters do it differently but there is a massive area backstage. So you can literally build sets back there. You can have a show like, now, Phantom of the Opera come in and when they—when Phantom first toured, I think they had something like twenty-one buses. We can dock I think—

Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.

AG: —it worked well. ARCOP was in charge of the overall concept, how the different theaters—where they would be located; how they would interact; how all the backstage tunnels would work and dressing rooms and customs shops. And McKelvey-Jennewein was more responsible for the aesthetics of the building: the textures, what the look of the building would be both outside and inside. We knew—

SB: Well who determined which architect would do what? Did they get their heads together and say, “Well this is my strength; I’d like to do this”? Or did the board instead?

AG: It was really fairly obvious what each should be doing and it was made clear when McKelvey-Jennewein was hired and it was really obvious to them. They had never built a performing arts center before. So it really fell into place nicely. But it was reconfirmed and held to by the technical committee, basically by Hinks Shimberg. You know, if there ever became a grey area, the technical committee or Hinks were called in to say, “All right. Let’s re-define again.” But I really don’t remember any problems in terms of territory fighting.
SB: You have mentioned Hinks a couple of times but for people who don’t know who he is or his background, it might be important to designate that.

AG: Sure. Hinks Shimberg was very, very active in the community before this. His real line of business of course is development. I mean he and his brother Jim Shimberg Sr.—who recently passed away—did a lot of the building in Town n’ Country. I think they are known as the fathers of Town n’ Country.

SB: They are.

AG: They—Their focus in life was building what one would call affordable housing. Housing that people can afford, you know, for families. Just in case you couldn’t live on Bayshore Boulevard in Tampa. And they just did a marvelous, marvelous job. They did well and both of the families were, and always have been very, very generous to the community.

SB: But he is professionally qualified in this instance to help with the building phase.

AG: Absolutely. He has built and he knows the industry and he knows how to monitor expenses. So he really was the perfect choice. Now on the other side, his hobby—which really goes beyond hobby—is of course theater. And he at that point was fairly active in producing shows on Broadway. In fact a few of us used to fly up to New York just to be there for opening night. You know, Cameron MacIntosh at that point was not inviting us to opening nights but Hinks Shimberg was. So he brought a little bit of the glamour to the project.

SB: That’s great.

AG: You know, working on a project like this where you know what you’re building but it’s not here yet and you could only dream about the change that it’s going to bring to this community. But with Hinks we always had the glimpse of neon lights and Broadway—the Great White Way. You know, we used to call Ashley Street the Great White Way.

SB: (laughs) Yes!

AG: (laughs) We were building up our own little Great Ashley Way. And in fact, originally—I had totally forgotten about this when we were trying to figure what type of restaurant do we want at the performing arts center, David Midlands first idea was to build—to see if we could get a relationship with Sardi’s. And I said, “Yes. We could call it Sardi’s South.”

SB: Oh! What a great idea.

AG: We of course never got there and now we’re so lucky that we have Maestro’s with their wonderful new Chef Rusty Evers. But that was the original idea that we had.
SB: (talking at same time) That’s so interesting.

AG: I don’t know if the board ever, you know, really pursued it. But anyway, Hinks Shimberg was the perfect person between being a philanthropist in the community, the background in building and the love and involvement of Broadway. He was perfect to head the technical committee.

So we had the architecture firm in place. So now we had the acoustician and the architects in place. The other firm that we hired early on, which I really need to give much credit to the board for, is a cost consultant company. They happened to have been located here in Tampa, which is highly unusual because they built and worked with boards that were building performing arts centers all over the world.

The lead from that company was Stuart Donnell, who is still here in Tampa building performing arts centers. And their role was to report to the board of directors. Basically, he reported to Hinks and was the check on the whole construction project to make sure that the costs were in line. To make sure that if, all of a sudden, we had cost overruns he was called in and would help us figure out how do we undo the cost overruns. If this is something we need, what’s another way we can do it that won’t cost as much. If marble was too expensive for the exterior of the building, which indeed it was, he would say, you know, there are a lot of interesting textures that you can do now with concrete. And of course that’s what we’ve ended up with. And who cares that it’s not marble.

And the other thing I will say about the board is that I think that they always had the right priority. Their priority always was: we will raise as much money as we can and as we need to. But the use of the money will always come from the inside out. And the architects knew that and the acousticians knew it. And they knew that the priority always would be what will make the interior of the building work—the acoustics, the theater, the lighting, the staging, the backstage area, the technical—all the technology that we need backstage to make everything work. And I really think that’s what we’ve ended up with.

I think the building is nice looking. There’s a lot of glass and it’s on the water. But it’s not marble. I mean when you see what other communities have built that are fashion statements and that’s great. But what we have is a facility that performers from all over the world know is an incredible place to work in. And that was the priority.

SB: Again, I have heard visiting artists say it’s a phenomenal facility. I have also heard Judy Lisi say, in her experience, which is extremely vast, she really doesn’t know any other facility of this age that has not had to be redone.

AG: And that’s true.

SB: And that’s saying a lot for those of you who did this from the beginning.

AG: I think that was really a lot of it between H.L. and Hinks and the other person who has since died but was very involved was J.H. Williams. And between the three of them,
their theory was we’ll built it right the first time. And they did that with the stadium and they did that with the airport. The airport is expanding but we really haven’t had to redo the airport. And the same thing with the Bucs stadium. I mean, we’ve never really had to redo it. We improved some of the levels and make it more pleasant and add restaurants and club levels and all that but we really haven’t had to redo it, it works. And that was the theory with the performing arts center. You’re right.

SB: If you go back later, the cost is astronomical.

AG: Oh it astronomical. Unbelievable.

SB: And the materials usually aren’t as good.

AG: Right, as good. Because of the cost you have to make further concessions when you’re redoing something. Right. So we had the first display of our brick building. And then in probably early eighty-four [1984] we came up with the design that we had and then the money was in place. We had started working on an extensive volunteer group. And many of those volunteers are still there today. It’s amazing.

From early on, back from my old days at TECO, the fourth floor of old TECO—and I had many offices obviously until—I would literally go where anybody would have me because we really didn’t want to spend money on the staff person’s office. But um—the—you know, between all those different offices and the volunteers that we had to have to make this project go—in three years there were hundreds of volunteers.

SB: (speaking at same time) What type of—what were they doing?

AG: We had a speaker’s bureau. We had what we called our office volunteers. You know, at the beginning especially, for two years it was basically me. Me and Roxanna. And for the type of publicity and education and support to all the different board committees that we needed, I mean it was nonstop work. I mean the work hours were one hundred hours a week. We loved doing it because we loved the project, but, you know, we had everything. Events—I mean the speaker’s bureau was extensive. We trained and sent out probably fifteen or twenty speakers at the time.

SB: Did you have a video? What type of—?

AG: Every now and then we would have a video—but we really—and we also had a little mini display. You know, a layout of the center.

SB: Oh. Oh wow.

AG: A little—there’s a name for it—

SB: Mock-up? Model?
AG: A model of the center that we would bring around. And that always worked best. At least when I was growing up, I would always try to adapt whatever I was saying to whomever I was talking to. That— it always amazed me the amount of lack of education that there was about the performing arts and in fact about building a performing arts center.

I’ll tell you a funny story. This was at one of the Kiwanis Clubs, I guess. The mock-up or the model that we had of the center obviously was open on top so that you could see into the theaters. So basically there was no top to it. There was just a roof. So I am talking about it. And here’s Festival Hall, and here’s the playhouse and here’s the backstage area. The people are standing around and I can see they’re puzzled. And one of the—it was a woman who said, “What’s going to happen when it rains?” And I realized, oh my god, she doesn’t realize that of course it’s a building. You know you’re used to a stadium, the Bucs stadium where there’s no roof. So they thought that this was going to be a theater in Florida where it rains.

SB: Oh, that’s so interesting.

AG: So that was the type of thing that we had to deal with.

SB: That’s great.

pause in recording

AG: So those were examples of what some of the early volunteers did. The really nice thing that happened is [that] so many of those volunteers are still involved. And just to give you perspective, we probably, during the early years, had about two hundred volunteers, you know between the speaker’s bureau, fundraising, office work and marketing. But now—and actually when we opened and it continues to this day—there are over nine hundred volunteers at the Performing Arts Center. The bulk of them of course are ushers.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: And I believe there are still some ushers there— because I see them— that were on the original force of the ushers when the Center opened. And I don’t know if you noticed but they wear pins and it marks how many years they have been with the center.

SB: Oh, I never noticed that.

AG: So there are some that have— let’s see, if it opened in eighty-seven [1987]— that’s right we just celebrated out twentieth anniversary— so there some ushers that still have their twenty-year pins.

SB: That’s wonderful. Just fabulous.
AG: So by 1984 we were ready to break ground. The groundbreaking ceremony was just wonderful. We knew that we wanted to involve kids. And what we did was, we got kids from the public school system there, and we also involved a lot of the local arts groups. It was always the intention of the performing arts center to not only build for the national touring shows and the great orchestras of the world but to also make a facility that the local arts groups could live in, and be nurtured and grow in. So we definitely wanted artists involved in the ground breaking. Obviously, the board was there and I got them—I don’t know if you’re familiar but there is a little bib that’s a black tie bib.

SB: (laughs) Yes.

AG: So we didn’t want to be formal for groundbreaking but I got those for the board members. So they sat up on their little stage and they were all wearing these bibs.

SB: Oh that’s great.

AG: And then—

SB: I assume there’s a photograph somewhere.

AG: Yes, there is. We have a video in fact of the groundbreaking as well. And I also ordered probably five hundred little mini—they were toy shovels. So we got little shovels. And what we did was simultaneously—oh we had the Olympia Brass Band there, so they did New Orleans-style “When the Saints Come Marching In.” It was very, very festive. You know, people spoke. Mayor Martinez—I believe at that point Sandy Freedman was mayor; she spoke. Beverly Sills was there from the New York City Opera, who really had been at every important moment in the development of the Performing Arts Center since she was a personal friend of David Midlands. So that’s why she was involved. But she was there at groundbreaking and spoke beautifully.

And then at one point we had—I don’t know—probably a drum roll and everybody—there were probably three hundred people there with their shovels, and we all broke ground together. It was quite a moment. And then we actually released balloons. Although, now I know the environmentalists would be up in arms against it and in hindsight I wish we hadn’t but at that point—

SB: What color balloons?

AG: All different colors.

SB: I mean which ones did you—

AG: They were—the visual was every single color.

SB: Oh that’s great.
AG: —to represent every person who would want to be involved in the arts, you know the joyous day that it was. So we broke ground in eighty-four [1984]. It took about two and a half years—two years to build. Some of the great times that we had—I remember a photography shoot that I did. I actually roped my husband Jeff Simon who was working at WEDU then to document the whole process of designing and building the performing arts center. He was working at WEDU then.

SB: Sure.

AG: And about once every month I would call him and say, “Jeff, I need a video crew.” And he would round up a video crew and we would go onto the sight. And we would video all of the workers and the building and site tours.

But one of my favorite things that we did artistically was I asked a local dancer Susan Taylor to come onto the site. And I said, “Wear a beautiful ballerina costume.” And we took still pictures of Susan on the site in these beautiful ballet poses. And the juxtaposition of the harsh lines of the building going up and the beautiful sensitivity of the arts to me was just amazing. It was heartwarming because to me it represented that the future, the technology that would bring us into the future, with the reason why we were doing it. And these pictures today are my favorite pictures of the performing arts center.

SB: And where are they?

AG: They’re just in my little book. I don’t know.

SB: Oh!

AG: It’s probably just me at this point.

SB: Oh!

AG: I am thinking maybe the Performing Arts Center might have them in the archives. But—I know they spent a lot of time since it’s—we just are still in the middle of the twentieth anniversary of the Performing Arts Center, and they did a lot of archiving and trying to get pictures together. So I will have to see if they still have them.

But in any case, after about two years the center was ready for its opening. I would have to say, the great gala that marked the official opening of the Performing Arts Centers is probably one of the most glorious days—certainly in my life and I think in terms of the life of this community. To have such a jewel, such a beautiful piece of art itself which was the building and the building represented all the potential that all of us had to experience and to perform in the arts. And it was like a gift to the community.

And we—before the great gala—a few weeks before—we had a massive opening and dedication of the Performing Arts Center. We called it the open house. It was sponsored
by American Express—very far-sighted of them because we had to ask them for a lot of money for an open house. We ended up with about thirty thousand people during the course of the day who came to the opening. You know, we had the ribbon cutting and then everybody walked in and we gave tours of the center and had lots of performers. And what we had done prior to that—during the summer prior to the official September opening, we had what we called a preview season. It was always our intent to test the facility before we really opened it. And David and I set up six weeks of performances of mostly local arts groups that, if I am not mistaken, I think that we actually paid, meager, for them to come and perform. It was a first.

And I remember the first performer, the first performance in what was then the playhouse, now Ferguson Hall, was Fred Johnson and his trio I guess he had.

SB: Oh!

AG: Fred Johnson and his jazz group. So he was the first performer.

SB: Explain who Fred Johnson is.

AG: Fred Johnson—it’s very hard to describe who he is. He’s a jazz musician; very talented, very creative. And he is an interactive artist. He uses not only jazz instruments but he uses his voice and an incredible sense of rhythm and sound to create what he calls sound sculptures. He does play straight jazz but he also does these sound sculptures. He has a little of Bobby McFerrin in him. He was a total vocalist. I mean he has no instruments and literally becomes an oboe or becomes the sound of a piano. And Fred Johnson has that same kind of use of his voice to create music and sound.

SB: Using drums.

AG: He uses drums, does a lot with rhythm. He’s quite an amazing artist.

SB: He later became vice-president of education.

AG: Exactly—at the Performing Arts Center. That’s right. That’s right.

SB: But he was the first performer?

AG: He was the first performer. And if you remember we brought him back for the twentieth anniversary celebration. And that’s why he did—and it was so fitting that he would do the performance on the twentieth anniversary of the performing arts center. In fact, [it was] in the hall where he’d first performed. I mean his was the first sound that anybody ever heard.

SB: (speaking at same time) Terrific. That’s just great.
AG: Yeah, we’re all standing back there weeping and weeping. Of course we were exhausted by that point.

SB: He was such a nice man.

AG: He was very generous. And understand div— he is a man of color and he’s always understood the importance of having an array of diversity at the Performing Arts Center. Both attending as well as performing. And he’s done wonders in terms of getting kids and people of all different backgrounds involved in the center. So it was great.

SB: Tremendous asset.

AG: And that’s what we did during those six weeks. We had different performances. Every ticket was six dollars. We wanted people to get used to coming to the Performing Arts Center. That was one of our biggest hurdles back then in the early days was people—I would almost say they were afraid of the Performing Arts Center. People would—have been traveled to other cities and know that, yeah, you can go in jeans to [a] Broadway show; you can dress up if you want. You know, you don’t have to speak with a proper voice to go to theater. You know, there’s a lot of theater that’s down in the gutter as well. But you know, just be yourself and go to theater. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you look like. There is something for everyone there. It may not be opera but it might be, hey, Def Poetry Jam. You know, get down, get dirty.

SB: Well that leads to the programming in the beginning.

AG: And the programming—

SB: Were you involved in it?

AG: I was very involved in it. And I will tell you Suzette, it was one of the hardest things I think I have ever done in my life. The world was at our feet. We did do mark— you may not believe this—but we actually did do marketing research about types of performances that people—and here’s the key—thought they wanted to see. And that’s why, to this day, I am always very skeptical about marketing research. Because it’s very hard to measure what people will actually go and see. And what I’m talking about if there’s a performance and a Bucs game, people will say, “Oh, I really want to see this. I would rather pay whatever it is and go see this performance.” As opposed to what they think they should see.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: And I think too much of what we measured through this company that we had hired was what people think they should see. Oh, we want opera. Oh, we want the great orchestras of the world. We want all of these wonderful dance companies. Well we booked all of these shows. I must say, we [were] very successful with— the New York City Opera was one [of] our great successes. It was very expensive to get the resident
company—not the touring company—the resident company at the New York City Opera. Sometimes it just pays to know Beverly Sills.

SB: Sure.

AG: But they came down and did a three-week run—two- or three-week. And we were at ninety-three percent capacity for every show.

SB: That is amazing.

AG: I mean we took a (inaudible) on it because this was so expensive.

SB: Sure.

AG: But it got people in and they realized, “I can like opera. I can do this.”

SB: Isn’t that terrific?

AG: So the fact that Judy Lisi now is revitalizing the whole opera program, I think is wonderful. Because we proved the first year that you can run a mixture—I think it was La Bohème and two other shows. You can run them for three weeks and get ninety-three percent capacity. It was amazing.

SB: Uh-huh. That is.

AG: But there were also some other shows that we booked which unfortunately did not do so well. We really tried to have a smattering. The research showed things like—people wanted to see people like Liza Minnelli. But then when you did price elasticity—what are they willing to pay. Well they thought they could pay twenty dollars a ticket and book in Liza Minnelli.

So we found a lot of the research that we did was not useful because people wanted Tom Jones but what price were they willing to go up to? Well nineteen dollars and twenty-two cents. Even back then, you couldn’t book Tom Jones and charge that amount. You had to charge, you know, thirty-five or forty-five dollars back then. We’re talking twenty years ago, which was a lot of money. So we tried to book you know a smattering.

I think the other thing that we totally misjudged was that the population of Hillsborough County if you look at it statistically is kind of like a bell curve. We are like a normal city. We have workers; we have professionals. We have rich; we have poor; we have middle-income. We have cultures of diversity. We have, you know, African-Americans; we have Hispanic; we have right now [people] from the Far East. I think even then we had some of the population from that area.

But they weren’t people who were used to going to the Performing Arts Center. And we tried to book—we tried to copycat I think what Ruth Eckerd Hall was doing. And we
thought well maybe we have an older population that will come and see these shows. And we booked people like— oh I can’t— like Debbie Reynolds or—not Doris Day because she never toured. I can’t even think of the— it’s cause we took a bath on them, I think I have blocked them out of my mind forever.

But we booked a lot of those types of shows and we had a great Broadway season right from the beginning. Then we were working with Zev Buffman, which later, after many transformations turned into Live Nation, and, as you probably know now, Judy Lisi is booking Broadway on her own which is fabulous because we’re keeping all of the money here in the community.

But the first two or three shows we took a bath.

SB: (speaking at same time) How many Broadway shows?

AG: I mean we just could not get the program right. You know, we booked in jazz, the jazz greats. I mean I’d book the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and we’d have two hundred people.

SB: Oh my!

AG: There were some shows that were just shocking that we didn’t get more people. Uh—Donald O’Connor. I thought, he’s a great. He’s going to die soon. Who wouldn’t want to see Donald O’Connor in a show, live. I think I had to pay— I had to threaten the ushers. “After you seat people, go sit down.” Because in his contract, he said that the first few rows must be filled. Because he apparently— he doesn’t like to look out and see empty seats.

SB: (gasps) Oh, my gosh.

AG: Well, the people in the front row didn’t show up and then there were like maybe two hundred people in Morsani Hall. It was empty. You could hear a pin drop. I mean these were devastating days. There were other reasons too that those first few years were so hard. One, I have already mentioned and that is people had to feel comfortable coming to the Performing Arts Center.

The types of calls we would get, usually through the box office, because that people’s first point of contact were things like, “Are there bathrooms there? Where do we park?” And you know it was in all of the marketing materials. We had the Poe Garage. “But what if it’s raining, won’t I get wet?” No, there’s a covered walkway. “Well how long will the show be? Does it just like go on? Or is there an intermission like a football game?” Or sometimes they would even say, “Is there halftime? Is there a show during halftime, or is that when we go to the lobby?”

You know, totally, people were not educated in the Performing Arts Center. “Do I have to wear a gown?” No, of course you don’t. “Because I can’t afford a gown right now.”
SB: This is really interesting.

AG: “Please come in whatever you feel comfortable in.” So that was one of the problems was doing a good enough job to make people feel comfortable coming to the Center. The second thing is, that first year, although the city of Tampa had been incredibly generous with their support right from day one, from the early developmental stages, that year they were going through some budget crunches and they pulled (I think it was five hundred thousand dollars.) And we found out, after we had already opened the center that that would not be part of out budget. So right from the start, we were down five hundred thousand.

And the third or fourth— I forgot what reason I’m on— but the gala, the great gala, which was magnificent—it was a magical evening. We had performances from all over the world. We had all three theaters going and it was like a smorgasbord. Some people went into Morsani Hall first and then they went into the Jaeb Theater to hear jazz. And they went into Ferguson Hall to see theater. And I think we had the Royal Shakespeare Company—not the Royal Shakespeare—it was a Shakespeare company from Canada that came down and did a short little excerpt from a show. We had Teddy and Alice, also—a scene from that. We had the Florida Orchestra, of course. And we had the New York City Opera Performing the second act from La Bohème, which was amazing.

SB: Wow.

AG: I mean it was [a] feast for the senses.

SB: Wow.

AG: We sold out, but we still lost a lot of money. And it was probably close to five hundred thousand dollars. We raised a million, but we needed to raise 1.5 million to cover all the expenses plus make enough. So we were down another five hundred thousand dollars.

And another thing that I don’t think many people know was, we had to for about the first three months have a fire marshal in fact depending on which theater the show was in. For instance in Morsani Hall, I think we had to have two or three fire marshals at every show. Apparently there was a problem with the sprinkler system. And until we got it straightened out—we didn’t want to delay opening just because of the sprinkler system—

SB: Sure.

AG: But the deal we made with the city was to have a fire marshal at every performance. So should there be a problem, they would be there to take to be able to take control.

SB: Sure, sure.
AG: Which was a good choice.

SB: Expensive?

AG: Expensive. *Expensive.* So that was another several—probably at least another hundred thousand dollars. Well starting off the season, the first year of operation, if you’ve added up what I just told you—we were already down 1.1 million.

SB: (sighs)

AG: And we already had to raise more money than we ever had to raise before for operations. Not for capital, but for operations. People who might have given a hundred dollars as a sponsor for a show maybe at Curtis Hixon. I mean we were now asking people for five, ten, fifteen, twenty-five thousand dollars to sponsor a show. If you wanted to be a friend of the Center, it wasn’t going to be five dollars. I mean it was going to be twenty-five dollars was the lowest. But we needed people to be friends at a thousand and two thousand [dollars].

So fundraising was great, but it still wasn’t enough. So the first year I think our deficit was over a million between the lack of audiences for some of the shows, the gala, the city and the fire marshals. And it was sad.

The second year it got better and better. But as you know working with not-for profits, once you’re in the position where you have a deficit. And then all of a sudden, the second year you’re paying interest on a bank loan to make up the deficit. So the first three years were just so hard. By the third year of operation, I think we were making better choices.

SB: At this point, David left?

AG: That was after the second year of operation. There was—he was very frustrated. I know I was very frustrated. We certainly were giving it our all. It was a lot of positive spirit that had been created. I know for the first year, David and I were at every performance. I am talking three hundred performances that year. We had no personal life. Every night, I told my husband Geoff, you want to see me, you come to the Center. And the ushers made him a little name tag, so he could come in and wouldn’t have to buy a ticket to three hundred performances that said, “Andrea’s Husband.” And they always—we still have that nametag. It’s dear to us. And that’s how we were able to see each other in the first few years of our marriage. But we were there every night and—and we would stand out in the lobby and greet people as they came in. We were trying to make everybody feel so comfortable there.

I think when it comes down to the end of it, David was very, very frustrated. I feel that he felt he had done what he could. He had guided the board of directors and this community through the process of building probably the best performing arts center definitely south of Kennedy Center. And it wouldn’t be [surprising] is people said we rivaled Kennedy
Center. We are certainly better than any theater that is built in New York City. As we all know and love Broadway—we love Broadway but the theaters are horrible.

SB: Of course. They are pretty bad. But yes—

AG: It was a mutual decision for him, You know, he started talking with board and I know it was on the board’s mind that it was probably time for him to leave. And you know, he stayed for a few months until it was a good time to leave. And he actually went back to ArtPark which was where he had come from. And it worked out perfectly because they had hired someone when he left that was not working out and they desperately wanted him back. And we later found out that they had been bombarding him with “Leave that place. Leave that place.” And of course you know he wouldn’t until the board felt it was appropriate. It was a very sad time. He had very mixed feelings about leaving. You know, it was his baby.

SB: Sure.

AG: And we both felt that we wished we could turn it around but it was obvious that he and I were the people that could turn it around. I agreed to stay on for another year and I was the acting director, a terrifying time in my life. It’s not fun.

SB: So courageous.

AG: It was courageous because I had already been working hundred-hour work weeks and it was like how much more can I give to this place. You know I am totally maxed out.

SB: I will make an editorial aside. It is questionable whether it would have gotten to this point had you not been in agreement to stay in that interim period. Very questionable.

AG: I really appreciate a comment like that. I’ll tell you how I feel about that because I have thought about that so often, and I ended up not even throwing my hat in the ring. At that point, actually personally, it was a time when I really needed to leave. I don’t know if you know this but my brother died of AIDS just at that time and I had actually— right before— it was after we had already hired Warren Sumners, who was the person who replaced David Midland, I stepped down as acting director and was his assistant, and I had agreed to stay on for six months and kind of show him the ropes. That was the point at which my brother really took a turn for the worse and I knew he would be dying in the next month or two or three. And I had told Warren that in June of whatever year that was— probably ninety-three, ninety-one [1993-1991]. That I really needed to leave. Sorry it was ninety-one. That I needed to leave.

I stayed through June. Unfortunately, my brother died in April so that whole plan, you know, didn’t work. But Warren was wonderful I mean I was gone almost every weekend.
I was able to spend time with my brother, which was where I needed to be. So it worked out okay.

But I really feel— as much as I love the Center and as much of an asset that I think that I was— and I still feel that I’m making a contribution to the Center. It always will—

SB: You’re back on the board.

AG: I’m on the board. I mean I love that place. I love it. I really feel that we needed somebody with the experience, the maturity, the confidence of a Judy Lisi to come in at that time. Warren Sumners wasn’t even the right person. He started the process but it just wasn’t—

SB: How long was he there?

AG: He was there maybe a year. Maybe a year.

SB: Gosh I thought it was longer.

AG: No. It was very short. I think he realized early on that he wasn’t going to be able to make the change that was needed. He was getting a lot of pressure from the board [to] turn this place around. And he left.

And I don’t know if you know this but H.L. Culbreath then stepped in, excuse me, as the acting director—executive director.

SB: You’re right. I didn’t know that.

AG: So he was there for almost a year. Six or nine months, he came to the office every day.

SB: Oh, I had no idea.

AG: And I had left by that time but I was kind of working behind the scenes. Anne Soloman and I have always been there. We’re like these two ghosts working behind the scenes. So I would work with him on an executive committee on a volunteer basis to kind of help them through. And it was amazing. A man of H.L.’s stature and brilliance. I mean it just shows you— H.L. stepped in and run the ship for us, he can do that. H.L. run in and, you know, run TECO.

SB: Incredible.

AG: You know he ran TECO beautifully. You run in and run the sports authority. If you’re brilliant and have good business sense, you can run anything.
SB: This is very true. I would like to add for people listening, he is no longer living or we would certainly gladly interview him as well.

AG: And we did get an interview thank goodness. Red Soloman interviewed him for about two hours.

SB: Great. Great. Oh, that’s wonderful.

AG: A wealth of information. The things he did for this community.

SB: And where can people hear that?

AG: No. No.

SB: No, I meant the interview would be—

AG: It’s just archived up at the Performing Arts Center.

SB: Okay.

AG: So—

SB: That’s great to know.

AG: It’s probably something you can take out. We would be happy.

SB: Wonderful.

AG: I am sure the Center would make it available to WUSF as well in a sharing place. But in any case then we had the wonderfulness of Judy Lisi. My biggest disappointment is, I have been through the wars and I just wish the stars were in alignment so I might have been able to work for Judy Lisi and—

SB: But you do as you’re on the board now and you’re chairing different committees and so forth.

AG: I know. But it’s not the same as working at that place. There is just— you feel so privileged to be working there. And I mean I still walk in and I look and I look at these, the buildings and half the time there’s tears coming down my face because of the place in my heart that I have for it. And maybe it’s because we had to work so hard to get there. There were so many obstacles and challenges and disappointments all along with the good wonderful things. But it was so hard at the beginning. We were working almost not in a vacuum but—we at anytime you’re in Antarctica and you’re literally cutting the ice so you boat can get through. We were on a path the boat had never been through. We were hiking up in the Himalayas where nobody had been before. They hadn’t cleared the path. And even when you clear the path, it’s still scary and shaky and sometimes they
even put up a rope so that you can hold on to it. But there was not even a path. So it was—

SB: I can only marvel, truly, Andrea. I mean it’s extremely courageous. All of you. All of you were pioneers.

AG: (laughing) We’re stupid! I don’t know!

SB: No. I think you knew from your consultants how difficult the road was. And you know as mature individuals that nothing worthwhile is usually easy.

AG: Right. No that’s true.

SB: But, still, until you experience it, it’s hard to know. So it’s just incredible and amazing. And as a user of the Center, I can only thank you profusely for what you’ve been through because it is certainly the shining star of this community.

AG: Yes. Oh I agree. I agree.

SB: There’s no question. But I do thank you so much for that. And— But we would like to know more about your other involvements in the community in the art world because you moved on to other areas. And we’d like to cover that as well.

AG: Right. Thank you.

end of October 30, 2007 interview, begin April 1, 2008 interview, begin Tape 2, side 1

[Transcriber’s note: There is extra material at the beginning of Side 1; Suzette Berkman does an equipment test from October 30th, 2007]

Suzette Berkman: Today is April 1, 2008 and I am here with Andrea Graham who was kind enough to provide us with an oral history on October 30. And we have been rescheduling ever since then! But thank you so much for being here this morning with me.

Andre Graham: You’re welcome. [We’re] two busy people; it’s hard.

SB: Oh, it’s very hard. Andrea becomes very significant to the history of Tampa Bay having been the very first paid employee at the Performing Arts Center. And obviously we all benefit from all of her efforts. In our last interview in October, we talked a lot about the Performing Arts Center and we will pick up again on that later in this interview. But for now, Andrea, please tell us when you were born, where you were born, how this all came about.

AG: I was born in New York, actually—I’m a New Yorker—September 13, 1952. So if you do the math, you can figure out how old I am. (laughs) Thank you for that. And we
lived just outside of New York City. I think I owe a lot to my parents in terms of nurturing me in a very creative house—in a house that took advantage of being so close the city—to New York City.

SB: And when exactly was that?

AG: I was born in Levittown, New York which is on Long Island—or (changes the pronunciation, emphasizing the g) Long Island, as we liked to say when we’re from Long Island. And then I actually grew up in New Rochelle, which is just north of the city in Westchester County.

And later on, after I went to college my parents moved into the city. So after that we became Manhattan people. And after that my whole family kind of centered around Manhattan until I, the black sheep of the family, moved down to Tampa. (laughs) Yes.

SB: Let’s go back.

AG: Let’s go back.

SB: Where did you go to school? What were you’re interests?

AG: My interests very early on were—was actually theater. I remember when I was about four or five my idol was Shirley Temple.

SB: Oh!

AG: I knew all of her films by heart. I could muddle through the dance routines and even sing them. And that’s what I used to do every Sunday morning. I also started with acting lessons very early on. My goal was to be an actress from about age four.

SB: Oh my goodness!

AG: That’s what I was interested in. In elementary school, I was the first person in my—oh, it must been my third grade class—to gather my friends on the weekends and say, “We’re doing a play. (laughs) Come over to my apartment.” Of course, I was the director and the star always.

SB: And who wrote the play?

AG: Oh, we made it up as we went along. We often did a—it was Peter Pan. And I would tell them, “You say this now. You say this now.” So [it’s] no surprise I developed into what I am today.

SB: Uh-huh.
AG: But also in elementary school I was in every play that any class ever did. I would just jump at the chance to—

SB: Did you get this from your parents?

AG: They were very well educated. My mother was a teacher; my father was a businessman. We used to go into New York to see plays. But neither of them were particularly theater-minded, but they were both, in their own way very, very creative. And creativity was always something that we cherished in our family. Just as an example—by the time I went off to college, every time that I would come back and visit them in New York, you know, in the apartment in the city, there would always be a very creative welcome sign and a very creative list of what the activities for the weekend were. Whenever mom would cook a dinner there would always be a cute little menu with design.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: My brother and I used to—for their anniversary—we would spend months on this. We would make the famous anniversary books. And we would cut out each, page by page, we would come up with a family joke. And, letter-by-letter, we would cut it from the newspapers and spell out every word that way and then put funny little pictures in. And it’s the way people often give ransom notes. (laughs) But that’s what our anniversary books were. So really, from a very early age on, we were always very creative.

I played—we both played the piano, my brother and I. My mother was a piano player for fun—nothing serious. And we would listen to—music was always playing in the house. Records—remember those?

SB: I certainly do.

AG: My parents were actually wonderful dancers, and they had a lot of the—what was this? I grew up in fifties so you know it was some big band music. I remember when bossa nova was introduced and they were great at it. So they did Latin dancing and regular—I guess you would call it—today we call it ballroom dancing. But you know they did the cha-cha and all of those old dances. And that was the type of music they had. So that was always playing in the house.

SB: You just had one sibling?

AG: Yes. I had one sibling. Right. Yes. A brother. And I say had because—I think you know this—that unfortunately, in the early—1990 as a matter of fact—he died from AIDS, unfortunately.

SB: You were very close.
AG: *Very close—he was my best friend. And I really never had understood people who were—it frustrates me when I see [people] who are not close with their siblings because I know what it’s like to have had a sibling and then to have lost it. Thank goodness I am very, very close with my husband Geoff’s family. So I feel like I have brothers and sisters now but anyway. That’s a message out there. Love your brother and sister! Take advantage of having them.

SB: (laughs)

AG: But my brother was also very creative—he was also very bright, extremely bright. You know, [he got] eight hundreds on his SATs—both of them—on all of his achievement tests. I mean he was just an eight-hundred-type guy. But he was also very, very creative.

SB: And he went to theater?

AG: He actually was—went to business school when I went to business school. We actually overlap which was so much fun. But then he went on to get an architecture degree. And then I think is when his real creativity came out.

But in elementary school he and I would often be in shows together. So he dabbled also. He dabbled.

SB: Well tell us about your school environment. Where did you go to school?

AG: Well, we were living in New Rochelle and I went to the public schools there, which was a pretty tense time. I don’t know how familiar you are with New Rochelle—it’s north of the city, a lot of racial tension. So I grew up in—although New Rochelle was known as a very good neighborhood, there were pockets of different socio-economic classes and different ethnic classes and racial classes. So my experience in junior high school was nothing like the experience my kids are having here in Tampa at Berkeley [Preparatory School]. I mean there were drug raids every day, there were lunchroom fights—

SB: This was in elementary?

AG: No, this was actually by—not middle division—

SB: Middle school?

AG: Middle school, right. Elementary school was pretty much okay, but by the time I got to middle school that’s where different neighborhoods started joining together in the school. And it was total integration and it was just—it was kind of a scary place. You know, I was in a lot of the very academically oriented classes, but the problem was you had to get from one class to the other without being hit, tripped, pushed, shoved or called some bad names. So it was pretty exciting.
Therefore, by the time I was ready for high school I did go to a private school called Rye Country Day School—very similar to Berkeley or Tampa Prep, like we have here in Tampa. Beautiful campus. It was a day school but they had what they thought was a nice theater department, but now that I look back on it, we basically did all of our shows in the lunchroom. You know, the auditorium/lunchroom.

SB: Okay. Sure.

AG: They only did one show a year in upper division or high school. So I guess it was the same thing. I think I always had the producer in me. I would gather my friends together and I’d say, “Let’s do a show. You direct this time and I’ll play the lead.” So we kind of did the same thing that I had done when I was younger. And we used to do incredible shows there. And it just goes to show that you don’t need a nice splashy new theater. You know, that’s nice and there are some advantages to it, but we made do with that. So that was high school.

For college I applied to a wide variety of schools. I was looking for a theater program but in a liberal arts school. I knew that I wanted to do theater but I wasn’t sure where, how, or how serious I really was about it. So I applied to UCLA, got in. Applied to the NYU School of Drama—got in there.

SB: (inaudible)

AG: Yes. And I applied to Northwestern [University]— got in there. But I also applied to Smith College. And when I went up to visit Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, they had just completed a gorgeous, new theater complex—a large theater, a small theater. The dressing rooms were incredible. The studios where you had your classes—anyway, it sold me. I ended up—I passed up all those incredible theater schools and I went to Smith.

Little did I know that when I got there—first—two things. First of all, as you probably know, it is still a single-sexed school. It’s all female. My freshman year, I knew we were voting on co-education. I assumed we would vote yes. I voted yes—let the guys in! Bring ’em on! But no, the females there voted it down. So there was a week or two when I got a little upset about whether or not I should stay there but I’d decided, you know, the theater department looks great, so I will stay.

And I did quite a few shows my freshman year, but I really didn’t like the theater department that much—the professors. It was very avant-garde. Then—

SB: In what way?

AG: When you had auditions for plays, you didn’t go in and read from the play. You had to prepare something and then you had to do improvs. And they were pretty freaky and far out improvs. And the classes that they had were all very, very avant-garde. The type
of—I remember my first acting class we spent four weeks on a four-page script by
Antonin Artaud—A-r-t-a-u-d—who is a French playwright and part of the movement
called Theater of Cruelty.

SB: Oh, my gosh!

AG: And it was just because of the idea—We spent four weeks on this—four pages of
total perversion. And we’re rolling around on the floor and sensing things and I thought,
“Oh my god, this is exactly what I didn’t want theater to be like.”

SB: Ugh!

AG: So towards the end of the year I went down the road about fifteen minutes to
Amherst College. And I auditioned for The Iceman Cometh there. And being a boys’—a
men’s school at that time—they are now coed—but at that time they were a men’s school
that obviously needed women. So I said I’ll give it a try.

[I] went in. It was a very conventional, traditional theater department. You go in; you’re
doing The Iceman Cometh; you read from the script; and they’d [let] you know whether
or not you got the part. Now this is a theater department I can fit right into. I got a part.
There were only three women in that show. Got one of the part—two, two women. No,
three women. And it was one of the greatest experiences of my life. And I ended up
doing all of my theater at Amherst—Amherst College. They had a bus that connected
five colleges in that area. Smith, Amherst, Holyoke, UMass [University of
Massachusetts] and Hampshire College were on the bus route and you could take courses
there, and they had a bus every fifteen minutes there doing a loop.

SB: So you liked their professors?

AG: I liked their professors. I liked their attitude. Basically, I liked the guys too. (laughs)
And it was fun because they really appreciated you because there were so few women on
campus.

SB: Oh that’s great. So you stuck it out.

AG: So I did that. But something happened towards the end of my sophomore year. I
realized something about myself and what I realized was—I’m good as an actress, but
I’m not overwhelming. And I also realized that although I can kind of sing and dance, I
would always be chorus and as the competition got tough, particularly in singing, I would
not be the one they would cast. And I realized—the practical side of me took over and
said, “You better end up majoring in something that you can get a job in, just in case.”

So the end of my sophomore year I switched and became an economics major, believe it
or not.

SB: What a change!
AG: And that pretty much summarizes me—very artistic, very creative and then the other side very business, very structured. I am just great with numbers. I can write well, but I’m great [with] numbers. Ask me to put a budget together, analyze it, do a cost analysis.

Anyway—so I ended up doing economics. But I feel like I always no matter what I am doing, I always bring creativity to whatever it is even when I am doing, even when I am doing something in business.

One project that I did that combined my love of the theater with my economics was—this was—I think it was junior year. I saw a sign in the theater department [that] said, “Sociology major needs actress for prison play.” And, you know, we’re in college and college is about experience right? So I said, “That’s for me. That has my name written all over it.”

So I called up the woman who was doing the thesis on criminology. She was working in a boy’s detention center right near the college. Little did we know there was a men’s detention center so close by, about half an hour away. And one of the addicts—she was working with drug addicts there—one of the addicts, a perpetual offender—I mean almost in for life—gets out, gets in, gets out, gets in—just can’t keep away from drugs. [He] wrote a play, an anti-drug play. It was fascinating, and he wanted to have it produced within the prison. And there were two female parts. So they needed females—it was a men’s detention center. So guess who went to jail three times a week? Which was quite an experience. The parents were not particularly thrilled about it.

Anyway, we did this play about drug addiction and to see these guys, most of the perpetual offenders, to participate in a play that was basically anti-drug was phenomenal. To me it said [that] these guys don’t want to be drug addicts and dealers. Most of them were dealers not addicts. But it was such a vicious circle of a society where, you know, we let them out and, still today, what do we do for them when they get out. There are some programs but we really don’t connect well with people who are not functioning well in society.

Anyway, [I] did that and one of the things I ended up doing was, I went to warden and I said, “I think this has been a really therapeutic [experience] for the guys as well as myself—interesting.” I said, “Is there any chance we could take this play and perform it at Smith?”

SB: (laughs)

AG: He’s like, “Let the guys out of jail?” A get out of jail free card, you know, like *Monopoly*.

SB: Yes.
AG: Anyway, it took weeks but finally we did it. They bussed them in. When they got into the theater backstage area they took off the shackles. They had guards all over them. We had publicized it so people from the campus came in to see the play, and we did the play.

SB: What a great experience for everybody!

AG: And it was totally amazing.

SB: So was that one of the highlights of your economical experiences?

AG: It really was, yeah. So I ended up graduating from Smith College with an economics degree but lots of experience in theater. And my first job back in to New York—at that time my whole family was in New York, my parents and my brother. It was great to have everybody back together. My first job was with an economic consulting firm down on Wall Street. You wouldn’t even begin to believe what I did. Econometric modeling—

SB: Andrea, I can’t imagine.

AG: It’s computer—it’s regression analysis. I mean I can throw out all the words.

SB: And you liked this?

AG: I loved it. I love it. I mean, I was the low person on the totem pole. I did all the research and, you know, ran the computer programs and figured out the equations and stuff. Anyway, so that’s what I did by day and by night I worked at the Roundabout Theatre, before Broadway, way before. They’re now on Broadway. I helped them build their new theater, then Twenty-third Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenue.

SB: You did this in your spare time?

AG: I did this at night. I would work, you know, till—actually I worked long hours at the economic consulting firm, usually to around six, seven or eight. And then I would pop over to the Roundabout and work on the set, assistant direct. And they had some really good shows there then with some really good, famous people. So I got to work with a lot of greats on some great shows.

So I did that. Did that for two years and then decided [I] wanted to go back to school and get a business degree.

SB: Do you remember the year? Just so we know what time?


AG: And then I also combined—you know you can take the girl out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the girl. You can the theater out of the girl but you can’t keep the theater out of the girl.

SB: Sure. (chuckles)

AG: So even at Wharton, I did two things, which kept me totally connected with theater. The first thing was that I applied and got a theater RA residency. So I lived with undergraduates at Penn in what they called the theater house—not the theater house, the arts house. And they had five RAs there, graduate students each of whom had an expertise in a discipline: music, theater, dance, media and one other, I forgot. And we put them with undergraduates that loved the arts. Some of them were arts majors and some of them weren’t. So in the evenings, I would go home and we’d put on plays. [It was] the same thing—I’m always putting on plays. We’d put on a play; we’d do a reading. I did workshops with them in acting or directing. Or sometimes we just sit together and read a play together and talk about it. It is wonderful.

SB: Have you ever written a play?

AG: No. And I do—

SB: That seems strange.

AG: Right because I am a good writer. But I am not sure how good I would be at writing a play. That’s an interesting question. But I have found here in Tampa that I love directing, which I never—I mean I have always been acting, but here I have been doing some directing.

So anyway [I] went through Wharton and lived with the undergrads in the arts house. The other thing that I did at Wharton, in the midst of finance and marketing and all that was, in my first year there, we started the Wharton Follies. We have since celebrated our twenty-fifth anniversary.

SB: Amazing.

AG: I mean the Wharton—When we did it—

SB: Who was we?

AG: Wharton graduate students, a few of us. I tend to seek out those who are not the real, traditional, rigid business school students. I kind of was on the fringe, shall we say? And we got together one night, and we’re just sitting there and we’re saying, “Goodness, we can’t believe we’re in business school. How did we go astray?” And we said, “Let’s do
something. Let’s spoof Wharton.” You know, it’s Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, let’s put on a show.

Anyway, we developed a play, which developed into the Wharton Follies. They do it every year now. They tour the country; they have been on *Good Morning America*.

SB: Oh gosh.

AG: And it’s a multi-hundred thousand-dollar show now. We did it for less than five thousand. We got the school to donate the theater. I mean the costumes were what we could bring to it. We virtually had no set. We wrote all the music, everybody donated. We got somebody to direct; we all performed. And yes, I do write. I wrote songs for that play.

SB: Oh great! Oh wow, that’s great.

AG: ——and helped write that play. The first play we did was a spoof on *A Chorus Line*. And it’s called *A Placement Line*. So we spoofed the whole process of getting jobs at Wharton. You know, the recruiting process.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: *A Placement Line*. At Wharton it was called *Where Are You Going To Be Placed*. The first day you get to Wharton, they tell you, “Get your resume ready, the summer is almost here.” It’s the first day of Wharton Business School. So we’re already worrying about where they’re going to place you. So anyway, that was just a dream.

SB: How many of you were there?

AG: Oh there were about twenty or thirty of us involved in the production. And I still go up about every five or six years to see the production. There’s like an alumni group of the Wharton Follies.

SB: You mentioned they tour. Have they ever been here?

AG: They haven’t. No. There’s really not enough of a—The reason they tour—they do New York, L.A., Chicago—they use it as a fundraising show in each of the communities to fundraise for Wharton. And there’s a small Wharton Alumni Club here, but it’s not very strong and unfortunately, it’s not as impactful as it could be.

So we did Wharton. And I was hoping to get an Arts Management degree but the program there was not as strong as I thought it would be. Having worked in New York, it turned out that I had more contacts than anybody there. I got an internship between the two years at Lincoln Center. Chosen one of two out of the whole country from business schools, so that was a dream come true.
SB: What did you do in that position?

AG: I worked with all of the different constituent groups: the New York City Ballet, the Philharmonic, the Lincoln Center Theater, the Metropolitan Opera. One of the first things I did was called the consolidation study and each one of those separate groups had their own staffs, their own back offices. There was a lot of duplication.

SB: Fundraising?

AG: And fundraising too. And Lincoln Center Inc., which is like the payment or holding company for all those constituent arts groups decided, let’s just study and see if we can save some money by consolidating services. Like maybe by having one human resources office. Maybe have one ticketing office. Anyway, I did a [study]. One, it also included staff. So the staff wasn’t particularly happy about me going around doing interviews asking, “And what exactly do you do here at the Metropolitan Opera?” And then I would go the New York City Ballet and say, “what exactly do you do here?” There was indeed, a lot of duplication. I don’t know what came from the study, but that was one of the things.

Another thing I did was, at that time [Mikhail] Baryshnikov had just emigrated from Russia and was performing with the Metropolitan Opera. And, in the first week that he arrived in this country, Lincoln Center put on a Welcome to America party. And my job was to stick by Baryshnikov, who spoke no English—

SB: Oh, my gosh. How interesting! [Were you] like a translator?

AG: No.

SB: No?

AG: I used sign language. (gestures) Are you thirsty? You know—hand going up and down. Do you have to go to the bathroom? (gestures) You know—I’d squeeze my legs. (gesture) Come this way—I’d use my arms. May I introduce to you John Mazzola, who was the head of Lincoln Center then. President—I was trying to figure out what word would he understand. So my job was to kind of make sure Baryshnikov was attended to. So it was fun.

SB: Fascinating.

AG: Yeah. So I did that. When I graduated from Wharton, I took another corporate job. I worked with WestVaco in corporate PR [public relations]. I did their annual report on all their financial communication with shareholders. Wrote all the speeches for all the presidents and all the officers. It was a really multi-faceted job. I really enjoyed it. It was a very conservative company. The same thing [as earlier]: by night I would be working at theaters all over the city. Anyway—
SB: (chuckles) How long were you with them?

AG: I was with them for two years.

SB: Okay.

AG: Then I was dating someone—not my current husband [but] husband number one—who wanted to leave New York. I believed in the New Yorker magazine poster. I thought New York was the center of the universe and then, maybe, Russia and then maybe the cosmos. So for me to think of even leaving New York was a very scary and sad proposition. Then end of the story, obviously, is we decided to leave. We got married and came down all in the same week.

SB: Down?

AG: Down here. And my first husband still works with Carlton Fields. And Carlton Fields moved us down.

SB: And this was when Andrea?

AG: This was in 1980. And there was one of the senor partners at Carlton Fields, Ed Adkins, who is no longer with us—but wonderful Ed decided, okay we’re going to help Andrea get a job here in Tampa. And he knew about my background. And he also knew that then Mayor Martinez, H.L. Culbreath and Hinks Shimberg were talking about the possibility of maybe—everything was maybe back then in 1980—building a performing arts hall, not a complex.

SB: Not a center.

AG: Basically [it was] for the orchestra. He put me in touch with H.L. I had an interview. H.L. didn’t know what to make of me. You know, [I was] a woman with a business degree. Wow. And a woman who had [his] sense of humor and had, you know, [his] way of talking. And I think I gave H.L. a ride for his money.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: But between he and Hinks, they decided, “Okay, let’s hire this girl.” They called me girl; “We’re going to hire you, girl.” Times have changed now; we are no longer girl. But God bless H.L. That’s what he used to call me—“girl.” And he was wonderful. He and Hinks Shimberg are my two mentors.

SB: What a vote of confidence!

AG: Those are the people—

SB: Wow.
AG: —that I spent my first few years here in Tampa working with. And well we know what it developed into.

SB: And your title?

AG: Since it was only me I was called staff person. I believe that one of the first I did was to incorporate the board and we developed letterhead. And way at the bottom with all of the significant names of the community: Andrea Graham—staff person.

SB: Oh my goodness. How interesting.

AG: So that was it. That was how it all started.

SB: But your role was to bring in a board—

AG: To help incorporate the board and we started a feasibility study. An arts consultant named Don Engle who was out of Minneapolis—we brought him in and we worked with the—it wasn’t Art Keeble then; it was Skip Shriver from the Arts Council of Hillsborough County. And we started pulling in major corporate people and arts people and many people from the orchestra. And [we] just talked about what are the needs; you know, how many performances; what can you grow into; who else could use the hall, et cetera. And within about two years, it grew into let’s not just build a hall, we need a complex here because once the orchestra gets all of its nights there’s really not much room for Broadway, for big dance companies. And then what if the orchestra wants to do a chamber music performance? Morsani Hall, which back then was Festival Hall, would not have been appropriate. And then the thought always was what about small jazz quartets. Where are we going to put that? So that’s how the Jaeb [Theater] got to [be].

SB: Fascinating that this degree of thinking evolved.

AG: It was all really very need driven: what are the needs? What’s lacking in the community? And I have to admit that we really were able to hire the right consultants at the right time. H.L. and Hinks and the other leaders—Arnold Kotler, and J.H. Williams. and George Pennington—they really—and Louise Ferguson—they really knew that they didn’t know. And I think that’s what made the Performing Arts Center develop into the incredible, multi-purpose facility that it is.

SB: It’s amazing. Which facility was designed for the orchestra? Morsani?

AG: Originally it was Morsani, but you know where that retention pond is? We always thought that there would be what we called a fourth hall. This was before the Shimberg was built.

SB: Yes.
AG: So it was what is now Morsani, Ferguson, and Jaeb. We always thought there would be a fourth hall called Symphony Hall.

SB: Oh okay.

AG: And in the early stages we decided not to build that, probably due to costs and also due to capacity. Let’s fill the halls and then build it when we need it. And that would have been a sixteen hundred-seat theater. Remember, Morsani Hall is about twenty-eight hundred. Twenty—I’m sorry.

SB: Twenty-five.

AG: Twenty-five hundred. But I know we’re talking about expanding the capacity for the future. About twenty-five hundred. The middle hall, Ferguson Hall is about eight-fifty, eight hundred, right? Ad the Jaeb is about three hundred, give or take. It varies between two fifty and three hundred depending on the configuration. And sixteen hundred would have been perfect for the symphony.

SB: Well tell me what you were going to use to fill those halls? I am trying to think back to what theater existed at the time.

AG: Actually, there were more theater companies in terms of theater back then than there are now.

SB: Uh-huh. Like what was there?

AG: There was the Playmakers, who performed at the Cuban Club in Ybor and there was Tampa Players who was almost like Stageworks Theater. And Stageworks Theater was also there, which I am now involved with.

SB: Right.

AG: So there was Playmakers, Tampa Players, Stageworks. There always was Carrollwood Players.

SB: Was there hope to bring them in to this end?

AG: Oh yes. I mean the focus of the Performing Arts Center twenty years ago was much more local oriented. Looking back now, I understand the change in direction that had to be taken in order to make it financially successful. But our charge from the city [of Tampa], the county [Hillsborough], and from the board leaders was make this a facility and make it a community facility. Bring in a Broadway show, you know, maybe five a year. Bring in major orchestras, very few because we have our own. And supplement our local groups.
It was always the intention that, particularly with the smaller halls, the Jaeb—the Jaeb was really seen as the theater that would house Stageworks and Tampa Players and Playmakers and any other local USF companies coming down. It didn’t happen that way, unfortunately, but that was always then intent.

And the orchestra was always prime. In fact when I was—after we built the Center I was there for three years in helping to manage the center. And while I was there the orchestra—we always tried to give the orchestra priority. I remember negotiating with the orchestra when we finally, after years of negotiating, we finally got David Copperfield to come. Before that, Ruth Eckerd Hall always had the rights so to speak to David Copperfield. They were there first, David Copperfield went there and I just couldn’t get the agents to even look at our facility. Finally, one year, [we] got it. It was like a major coup.

SB: That’s fascinating.

AG: Unfortunately for the four performances, one of them was a symphony night. And I mean, I told David Copperfield, “Wait. I will let you know tomorrow if this deal—” after I had worked weeks on this deal “—is going to work. I must talk to our local orchestra.”

SB: Oh, my gosh.

AG: And I spoke with them; I explained the situation. We ended up moving them to another night. We gave them free rent, free publicity, and we helped them fill their weird night. I can’t remember, it was like a Monday or Tuesday.

SB: Was that the David Copperfield performance where he actually filmed it for broadcast?

AG: Oh, I don’t remember. That was many—That’s right.

SB: (speaking at same time—inaudible) But actually we were at the performance where they did that.

AG: Oh yes.

SB: It was fascinating and totally sold out.

AG: Oh yes. We did four shows totally sold out.

SB: It was very exciting. Was that the first performance—

AG: I can’t remember if that’s the one that they’ve taped for broadcast.

SB: But I meant, were there any other performances like that that were just so popular, so sold out?
AG: Yes. My favorite performance was—although it’s come back each other—was Baryshnikov.

SB: Oh how interesting!

AG: Little did I know—my good friend Baryshnikov. We booked him for four performances and that was also one where we worked day and night on this deal trying to get him here. It was at the height of his popularity. He was touring the world and we I think had the only Florida performance. He might have done Miami. But other than that, it was us. We had four performances. We sold out in two hours.

SB: Oh my goodness! (gasps)

AG: It was like a rock concert. We had people camped out.

SB: Terrific.

AG: The box office opened I think at ten. At four in the morning we had people camped out in line to get tickets.

SB: Was he in a troupe? Did he perform singly?

AG: Him.

SB: Just him?

AG: *Him. Alone. It was incredible. A—*

SB: Amazing.

AG: And he gave us quite a nice compliment when he first arrived. At that point it was my job to not only to book the shows but also to meet the performers, get them settled in, show them the stage—

SB: Sure.

AG: —pay them.

SB: (chuckles)

AG: He arrived. I showed him the stage, and he tested it out and he said—he spoke English by that time—and he said, “This is an incredible floor.” And he got down on his knees and he kissed the floor.

SB: (gasps) Oh my gosh!
AG: He said something like, “God bless your floor. Thank you for spending the money to have such an incredible floor.”

SB: (speaking at same time) Isn’t that wonderful?

AG: He loved the floor. And we had spent a lot of money on the Morsani floor to make it just perfect for dancers.

SB: When was that? Can you remember?

AG: It was probably the second year that I was there, so it was our second year of operation. We opened in eighty-seven [1987] so this was in like eighty-eight [1988] [or] eighty-nine [1989].

SB: Okay.

AG: He has since come back with his—he had the White Oak Project. He came back many years later with his dance troupe.

SB: Do you remember what you paid him by any chance?

AG: Oh gosh, what a question.

SB: I am not testing your memory but—

AG: What a question! Oh gosh. Back then, twenty-five thousand dollars for an artist was an incredible amount. I remember this is about twenty-one, twenty-two years ago.

SB: Sure.

AG: Right? 1980?

SB: Uh-huh. Yes.

AG: No that’s wrong. I’m sorry not 1980. Nineteen eighty-seven, eighty-eight [1988]. So it was like twenty [or] twenty-one years ago. Twenty-five thousand dollars was like, this must be a God.

SB: (laughs)

AG: He, for the four performances was probably something like two hundred thousand. So fifty thousand a night.

SB: Wow! (gasp)
AG: And fifty thousand was like—

SB: It was worth it.

AG: —you could either have the Pope or Baryshnikov, you know?

SB: Could you remember what the ticket prices might [have been]? 

AG: Back then we were doing a series called Up Close and Personal and we had seats, like the first ten rows where we sold seventy-five dollar tickets. We did that with Baryshnikov.

SB: Which back then was wow—

AG: Back then it was probably like one hundred and fifty or two hundred now.

SB: Yes.

AG: We did that for Bill Cosby. In fact we booked Bill Cosby in Ferguson Hall during our second year. And the tickets were, I think a hundred.

SB: Oh my goodness. Did you sell out?

AG: Oh yes. Sold out and he came out afterwards and we put him up in the lobby. You know in Ferguson Hall there’s that little stage area, and we put him up there and he answered questions.

SB: Right.

AG: I’m sure you were there too. Right? It was just a great evening.

SB: So much fun.

AG: So we were testing the market back then. Our theory was that for some shows people who could pay the price would pay the price to, instead of seeing Baryshnikov or Cosby I’m a big arena like the [University of South Florida] Sun Dome might pay a larger ticket price to see him in a comfortable seat then in our a beautiful performing arts center.

SB: At that point in time would you say Ruth Eckerd Hall, Mahaffey [Theater], Lakeland—I am trying to think what other venues—would they have been drawing this type of caliber?

AG: No. And the reason why we got a lot of the shows, and we did this very specifically—why do you think Morsani Hall is twenty-five hundred seats and not
twenty-three hundred or twenty-two hundred? Because Ruth Eckerd Hall was twenty-one hundred seats.

SB: Okay.

AG: Bayfront [Theater], Mahaffey was less. We wanted to be the largest, larger, largest of the venues so that when Baryshnikov would have to decide, “Hmmm should I book four shows in a twenty-one hundred seat theater or a twenty-five hundred seat theater.”

SB: I see.

AG: Might I say, “Duh.”

SB: (laughs)

AG: So we had a lot of those big shows. Now, on the other hand, Ruth Eckerd Hall is a jewel. And I know Ruth Eckerd Hall better than I know Bayfront, and it’s the only reason I bring it up. Performers love Ruth Eckerd Hall.

SB: They do.

AG: They love the management there; they love the people; they love the theater; they love the stage; they love Clearwater [Florida]. So on the other hand, there were a lot of artists that I never was able to get.

SB: I see.

AG: Because as much as they might have wanted a larger venue, there’s something to be said for—be nice. Be nice to the artists when they come.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: And the little things that you can do to make them feel really comfortable, really pays.

SB: That’s very interesting.

AG: [It] really pays in the end. Yeah.

SB: Andrea, tell us what you did after the Performing Arts Center gig, if I may call it that. And then, we’ll go back, and I’d love to ask you to tell some of the stories.

AG: Backstage at the Center.

SB: Right.
AG: What did I do after the Center? I was exhausted. I had worked there for ten years. Six years of studying, developing building and then—actually seven years, pre-opening—and then three years after we opened. You know, my work weeks were a minimum of a hundred hours, especially our first year of operation. Our then executive director, David Midland, and I were at every show. We felt that in order to make the community feel at home that he or I or both of us should be standing right at the front. We stood in every lobby and greeted people. If we had multiple shows going on, we’d switch back and forth. And when you walked in we’d say, “Oh, good evening Suzette and Monroe.”

SB: Right.

AG: And when H.L. walked in, or you know, especially if a donor or a volunteer or someone who had helped us get the Center built, we wanted to be there to make them feel at home. The other thing we did was at the beginning of every show, either David or I did a little curtain speech. Similar to what Judy Lisi is doing now at some shows.

SB: Sure, sure.

AG: But he or I would get up and we’d welcome everybody and thank them for coming and tell them please spread the word, da-da-da really make them feel at home like it was their Center. Anyway, I was exhausted. My last year there, I was serving as the acting executive director. And that really, really, really took a toll on me.

We knew—I mean I didn’t even throw my name in the hat. I knew I was exhausted. I knew I was not the right person. We really needed to bring someone in who was going to take the center to the next level.

SB: Were you still married at this time?

AG: Uh, no. Geoff and I got married the year before the opening of the Center.

SB: Your first husband?

AG: Um, no I wasn’t.

SB: Okay.

AG: I was actually dating Geoff at that [point]. Through most of the building of the Center—

SB: Okay.

AG: —I was actually dating Geoff, who is my current husband. And then we got married the year before the opening of the center.
AG: So I knew it was time to go. It was like saying goodbye to a child. It was probably the hardest decision I have ever made in my life to leave. But you know, I knew it was time. My brother had actually just died at that point. So in between trying to work at the Center and serving as acting director plus running up to Philly to be with him during his last few months was really, really difficult.

Anyway, we had the grandest farewell party that I will ever remember. They spoofed me, of course. There was H.L. and Hinks and, oh gosh, I don’t remember the other people who got up. And basically a (inaudible) was there and did a little spoofing. But it was great. It was in the lobby of Morsani Hall. It was my sendoff. About two or three hundred people came to say goodbye. And, you know—

SB: And then you left.

AG: —and then I left. Then I went to work with Hospice, Hospice of Hillsborough.

SB: You didn’t take a rest?

AG: I took a few months off.

SB: Wow. You deserved it.

AG: And—

SB: Was this as a volunteer?

AG: No, I was hired. I was hired as their VP of marketing and I worked—having gone through the AIDS epidemic, having helped Tampa AIDS network here in Tampa and having gone through a personal experience with AIDS I knew that I wanted to be involved in health care if it wasn’t the arts. My first love would always be the arts but my second love is healthcare.

So I worked for about four years with Hospice as the marketing director and, you know, marketing a performing arts center in its early years to a community that was not particularly arts receptive was difficult. Try marketing Hospice. It was a really, really challenging job, but I loved it, loved the organization. After that, I took time off because we had actually adopted our second child by that point. The other thing that started happening was Geoff and I adopted our first child, Spencer, who is now sixteen. But he was just a baby at that point. And about a year after I left the Center, we adopted our first child and then we adopted a second one.

So by the time Hanna came along, I realized, this was hard. I don’t have any degree that’s really teaching me well. I don’t have the skills to be, you know, a parent. So I did take time off then when we had both kids. And I did a lot of volunteer work. And I did some—
SB: Where did you do that?

AG: Oh gosh—I was working—I worked with everybody. I did some—actually, I did paid work with Jewish Federation for two years. I worked with the women’s philanthropy group with federation. Did all of their events. I did their annual reports. They had never had a full-fledged real annual report. So I worked on that. I came back, actually just a few years ago, to work on the Weinberg Village Gala. And I hear they may be doing that again. So I need to get my theater project up, built and operating with Stageworks so I can go work on the Weinberg Village event that’s—I think they are talking about it coming up in a year or two.

But I have worked with all—every theater company here, all the dance companies; I used to help Tampa Ballet. It was a new ballet company we tried to get going. I didn’t work out. I was on the board finance committee of the Tampa General Hospital for a while. I did some peripheral stuff with the Children’s Home. I have always worked in the AIDS community. I mean that was for twenty years. I helped form and then was president of the Tampa AIDS Network. [I] worked a little bit with Florida Gulf Coast Jewish Family Services.

SB: Tell us about the awards?

AG: Oh I—

SB: Please. I am going to pull that out of you.

AG: Okay. (chuckles)

SB: And I don’t want to mess up the name because I know a couple of them are very lengthy.

AG: They are long names! Right. I know you have been through that too. Here’s the award, now bring a thousand people with you to the dinner. (laughs)

SB: (laughs)

AG: So it’s a—

SB: (speaking at same time—inaudible)

AG: It is. Yes.

SB: And obviously all of your experience has been leading up to being honored.

AG: I have always thought it was an honor to think that they think you have so many friends. (laughing) That to me is always the honor!
SB: It’s not just that.

AG: I know. I’m only joshing. I’m kidding around a little.

SB: Uh-huh.

AG: Uh the first award I got was actually with—and actually Geoff and I got it as a celebrity couple with Gulf Coast Jewish Family Services. And we got that award largely because of the work I had done in the AIDS community. While I was [with] the Performing Arts Center, whenever there was Broadway show coming in, I would talk very early on with the managers and say, “Please, will you do an AIDS benefit?”

So we must have done about five AIDS benefits with the Broadway shows. We did one with the *Cats* cast [in] our first year, 1987. We did one with Tommy Tune when he toured in *Bye, Bye Birdie*. He and Anne Reinking who was working here locally and, in fact, was in *Bye, Bye Birdie*—they went all out. That was an affair to remember.

SB: Wonderful.

AG: And then the *Phantom* cast did an AIDS benefit. Anyway, I had done a lot of work in the AIDS community and had tried to tie the arts community in. So Florida Gulf Coast Jewish Services chose Geoff and I as one of their celebrity couples.

SB: That’s quite an honor.

AG: It was an amazing evening. They were probably about—they would get probably seven or eight hundred people to come to the dinner. And Geoff and I have this habit of when we do awards or sometimes we are asked to be emcees of evenings, we usually do things a little differently. So for this time, we actually did—we are often known to do a little dance or skits. We actually did a skit at this one. We sang a rap song as our acceptance speech and then Geoff told a story, a very touching story about someone he had helped that had had ALS, who had since died. And I did a tribute to my brother, actually, commemorating the work that I had done, you know, in AIDS. And we had slides. And we took up more than the five minutes they had allotted us, which was the only bad part. It was probably about fifteen minutes. But I think people were very moved. They laughed and then they cried. But anyway, that was just a wonderful, wonderful evening.

SB: You were a cultural contributor?

AG: Yes. That was probably about five years ago now. I was chosen by the Chamber of Commerce to be Cultural Contributor of the Year. And I think that probably—all the awards mean so much, you’re always so surprised. You can only imagine what it’s like at the Academy Awards. It’s like I am up against those people and you choose me. What’s wrong with you?
But Cultural Contributor of the Year just touched me so. To me theater and the arts, it’s a way of life. And for people who don’t understand that, I feel like it’s my calling to let people know that you think you don’t like theater but you just don’t know. You haven’t tried it on yet. And when government or the public start talking about budget cuts and they say, “Well, the arts are kind of superfluous.” It just—(coughs)— excuse me. It’s like a dagger in my heart.

I believe food, clothing, a place to live and the arts are the four major things you need in your life.

SB: I totally agree.

AG: I am preaching to the choir here.

SB: I know but this is with other people.

AG: If you don’t have creativity—which I believe is what truly touches your soul and makes your insides tingle. I mean creativity is what makes you either cry or laugh. If it touches you, it changes you. It makes you think differently. It makes you feel differently about yourself. It makes me feel differently about you. It makes me feel differently about my community, about my world, about politics.

I mean to me, creativity and therefore the arts is at the core of what they do. I would rather go hungry and go see a show. Now, that’s a heartless thing to say because I have never been starving, so I take that back. That’s a cruel thing to say. I believe we should feed people first and then give some theater.

SB: By your very words you are showing us why you were selected for that award.

AG: Oh, well, thank you.

SB: Clearly your passion is just amazing and it has taken you all these years through the arts. But currently you’re working on something. Please share.

AG: I am now President of the Board of Stageworks Theater, the oldest and longest surviving professional theater company in Tampa. It’s the only one that’s still here. It has survived. And we currently perform in the Shimberg Playhouse and at Gorilla Theater. Stageworks has never had its own home and statistics show that its theaters that have a home that are the ones that survive. It just has to do a lot with people knowing where they’re going in order to see their theater. It’s that sense of place that’s instrumental. It’s amazing Stageworks has survived this long without really ever having its own theater.

Anyway, we got space donated in the Channel District [Tampa] in one of the condos. We’re in ground floor space in the interior and I’m raising money to build it out. It’s a long haul. It’s a small theater company. It’s, you know, a tough ride raising money for
something. But you know, the Performing Arts Center now, we were raising money when people were not believers. Now, it’s like, join the bandwagon. I am not saying it’s ever easy to raise money, but it’s a known entity.

SB: Sure, right.

AG: I am back again raising money for something that is not quite as well known.

SB: Why? Why are you doing that? What do you like about it?

AG: I am doing it because I believe in Stageworks and I believe in the founder, Anna Brenan. I love all the other theater companies that are here: Jobsite, Gorilla Theater. There are other community theaters, which are wonderful. You know, Carrollwood Players. But we are the only professional theater company in Tampa. We pay all of our actors. We pay all of our staff. We have a board of directors that is not made up only of the people who act and direct like the other theater companies. And we also have an extensive children’s program. We use theater to change lives one by one. We are in the prison system, in the housing authority.

SB: Could you explain that?

AG: Sure. Long ago Anna [Brennan] figured this out that to use theater in things like anger management—that’s what we’re doing in the prison system. We’re working with young men—boys really, sixteen and under—who are sex and drug offenders. I mean, they are the bad guys. Some of them—I am trying to think if any of them have killed anybody, but that’s the next step.

SB: Oh my gosh.

AG: We are working with them on anger management, and we’re using theater. And the results are incredible. We go through a series of workshops. We, with the warden, identity fifteen per program. We do a ten-week workshop using theater to work through anger. And it culminates in a performance of the boys for their peers.

SB: Amazing.

AG: And I have been to one of those performances and you would not believe it. The sense of pride, the sense of hope that these boys tend to show is amazing.

SB: Is it supervised? How does that work?

AG: Oh, well, we hire—we have people who are educators. They are theater educators who are trained to work with these boys and they are people of a totally different feather shall we say. But we are also in the Tampa Housing Authority and we have created an anti-gang initiative. And, oh, Suzette, this is so sad. We are working with six and seven year olds.
Believe it or not, by six or seven, if you’re living in the Housing Authority, that’s when you start getting bullied to join a gang. There’s these little kids and we’re working through theater to try and teach them about—you know, to be encouraged; to be strong, to be self-empowered and how to resist being bullied so that they don’t end up in a gang and don’t end up in the detention centers where they now teach anger management.

So we are doing that. We are in all of the (inaudible) school systems doing shows about African-Americans and workshops with the kids there to teach empowerment. And—

*Tape 2, Side 1 ends; side 2 begins.*

AG: We choose the songs that people, the elderly would love and enjoy and the look on their faces when we are in there just singing to them, smiling.

SB: Incredible.

AG: You know bringing a little joy in. You know, that’s another program. We have just this year done a program with TECO. We wrote a play about energy conservation and we’ll be touring in the school system doing a play about that. We’re calling it TECO energy kids. It’s really a fun show. Anyway, that’s just a sampling of the types of shows that we are doing.

SB: Are you involved in the creative process now? Do you do any directing and producing?

AG: That’s the other thing, you asked me why am [I] involved in Stageworks? And part of it is because I believe so firmly in the mission; the types of plays that we do and of course our outreach program. And the other thing is that Anna is a very—a lot of artistic directors are very protective of their turf. Anna is not. If you prove to her about your—you know about the type of person that you are, she is very receptive—

*pause in recording*

AG: —not very protective about her turf. And she has allowed me in to what we call the inner-sanctum. So I work with her now in helping to choose the season, which is hard but so much fun. But the other thing is, she actually, about fifteen years ago, cast me in a play.

SB: Wow!

AG: That’s the other thing I think I didn’t tell you is when I got to Tampa. In New York, I didn’t act. I volunteered and worked in theaters—

SB: Uh-huh.
AG: —on the production side as well as the management side. In Tampa, when I first moved down here, I was in four shows within my first two years—

SB: Oh my gosh! That’s amazing.

AG: —with the theater companies. And I mean, ask me what I really want to do in life—I kind of just want to be on stage and act because I love it. I love it. But I was given the opportunity and she was, you know, one of the first people to cast me in a play. Since then, now that I am on the board—and the president of the board and working on the fundraising—in the last few years I helped design this fundraising program where we do staged readings, which means we do full productions and we use community people. The only things is you don’t have to memorize the lines. You read from the book.

And I have directed, oh goodness, about four or five of these plays. And I have had such a blast. We just finished doing one called Murder Among Friends, which I didn’t direct. I actually produced it. But just being around you know, the smell of the grease paint, the roar of the crowd, I just love it. I salivate when I am on stage.

SB: Oh, that’s great.

AG: And several shows before that, one show called Beau Jest and the other called Jest a Second: The Sequel—

SB: Oh, my gosh!

AG: —and some of our favorite people in the community were in that. You know Elaine Shimberg, her son Scott Shimberg, Sherri Mezra, Paul Wilborn, Mike Deeson. I mean we just had some really, really fun people in the shows.

SB: That’s great.

AG: And I just loved doing it. To me that’s my reward. If I go out and I have had a successful few weeks, and I have raised money for the capital campaign, then I allow myself to direct the show.

SB: Oh, great.

AG: So that’s why I am involved with Stageworks. And in our new space, we will have not only an incredible theater, but we will have a hall that will serve as the headquarters of the outreach program. And we are the only theater company doing what we are doing.

SB: That’s amazing.

AG: Definitely here in Tampa. And I have a feeling there are not many theater companies in the country doing what we are doing and so successfully.
SB: I wish we had more time to go more in depth into that because that alone warrants an incredible amount of time. Let’s zero in on some of those stories that you have prepared because I know that you have fond memories and I know that our audience would really appreciate that.

AG: Now these are probably stories that if I tell them, I am probably going to have to kill all of the people that are listening.

SB: (laughs)

AG: Because if not, they may come after me.

SB: (laughs)

AG: But we had so much fun. In the early days when we were not quite financially solvent, we still had such incredible spirit. I remember—my favorite story is the B.B. King story.

SB: (gasps)

AG: And B.B. King is an incredible artist. We were so happy to have the first time booked in our space and we wanted everything to go so well. But here’s what happened: The normal course of (inaudible) in a show is, you book the show; you get a contract and you get a loan—it’s called a technical rider. And there are a lot of things that have to happen before an eight o’clock performance.

The normal way that a B.B. King show would happen is: he and his truck and his crew and musicians arrive at the center at 10:00 AM. in the morning of the concert. They look around; they meet with our crew, and they decide how they are going to set things up. Then they leave.

The crew—their crew and our crew—work together for about five or six hours, [and] set everything up. And then usually, sometime between two and four in the afternoon, the band, B.B. King and the band would come back and they would do a sound check. They then would go back to their hotel and probably arrive around 7:00 or 7:30 for an eight o’clock show. That’s the normal course of what should happen. We booked B.B King, we sell out, and it’s a glorious night.

SB: In what year was this? Sorry—

AG: Okay. This is first year—second year of operations so it was eighty-seven [1987], probably eighty-eight [1988]. So it’s 10:00 AM, no B.B. King. It’s 11:00 AM, no B.B. King.

SB: Oh gosh.
AG: It’s one in the afternoon, no B.B. King. I am calling all the phone numbers I have in the contract. I’m talking to the production crew. I mean the guys, my crew, they’re standing at the stage door entrance, literally standing outside looking for the bus and truck with all the equipment. I mean, I am having a heart attack.

We’re sold out. I am thinking how are we ever going to get ready. They need eight hours to all of what I just described. Three o’clock, no B.B. King (phone rings) four o’clock—

*pause in recording*

AG: So it’s four o’clock, still no B.B King. I finally get in touch, via cell phone with the driver with all the equipment. They are up in Tarpon Springs and are so lost. They have no idea. [They ask] “Are we near Tampa?”

*pause in recording*

AG: So I am finally in touch by phone with the truck and he’s lost in Tarpon Springs, saying, “How close are we?” I am saying, “You are still like an hour and a half away.” So we kind of give him the directions. So that’s four o’clock. Five o’clock, no B.B. King. Six o’clock, still no B.B. King. I called them back and said, “What is going on? You should have been here by now?” [They reply] “Well, we’re in Clearwater. We thought that was Tampa.”

SB: (gasps) Oh, my gosh!

AG: Anyway, the end of this long frustrating story: I am already trying to figure with the box office how—we’ve never done a refund. How do we do a refund? How do we get in touch with everybody if we have to cancel? Full house—twenty-five hundred people coming to see B.B. King. He says, “We’ll be there. Don’t worry.” Seven o’clock, the audience is arriving. It’s an eight o’clock show; still no B.B. King.

SB: Oh my gosh.

AG: Seven-thirty, the audience is drinking; still no B.B. King. Eight o’clock, and you know we’re in touch with the phone; still no B.B. King. They are lost out the wazoo. They are in St. Pete, they never made it over the Causeway. I’m—I’m a nervous wreck—We decided let’s let the audience in. They’ll be here.

And I am talking with the crew—how does it happen? What do we do? Well, we’ll just have to set up while the audience is watching. Anyway—meanwhile, it’s eight o’clock, and I send Geoff out on stage, my husband. I say, “Go tell the audience something.” I am a nervous wreck. I can’t talk straight.

So he goes out and kids around with the audience saying, “Well, you ever had one of those days? B.B. King will be here any minute. We’re giving everybody a free drink, go chill.” So they all leave; they go into the lobby and they go chill.
SB: (chuckles)

AG: Finally, at 8:15, we are standing outside at the stage door entrance. We see the bus with B.B. King coming down off of [Interstate] 275, and they don’t make the turn.

SB: (laughing) Oh, no!

AG: And we’re standing there thinking maybe they would see us. Of course they don’t. And they don’t make the turn to come into MacInnes Place. They are heading down to like Harbour Island. So I tell Geoff, “Quick, grab somebody’s car and go flag down the bus.”

So he gets in the car—

SB: You have a wonderful husband!

AG: A wonderful husband. And he’s like riding side-by-side with the bus honking—he tells me this. He finally cuts them off at Harbour Island and says, “Follow me!” And so there’s the bus and the truck following Geoff back to the Center.

It is now 8:30. B.B. King gets off that bus and I am almost catatonic. I just look at him and I say, “How do you do, B.B.? The audience is there. Just go in and do something.” And he’s laughing and saying, “Don’t worry. Lucille and I—” Lucille is his guitar, if you know B.B. King, that’s his famous guitar. “Lucille and I will do a great show.”

They walk in, we call the audience back in. It’s quarter of nine. He walks on the stage, the guys are furiously setting stuff up. And he just, in the B.B. King way, very low-key, he says, “Hi y’all. We’re going to play some music. I got my sound guy in the back. We’re going to kind of do a sound check while you’re watching, and we’ll keep adding instruments as we get them set up.”

SB: Oh, my gosh!

AG: And for the first hour it was like work in progress. But the audience loved it.

SB: Oh, I bet they did!

AG: They were screaming and were on their feet, waving their hands. It was one of the greatest shows ever done. I had just about a heart attack, but it turned out fine.

SB: I have seen him but evidently it was not that performance.

AG: Thank god it was a jazz audience.

SB: Yeah.
AG: Because they are kind of low-key. Yeah man, whatever happens, happens.

SB: They’re out there anyway.

AG: Right. They’re out there anyway. So that’s the B.B. King story. I have another very funny story with Miles Davis.

SB: Okay.

AG: We got to have Miles Davis right before he died. I think he died, I don’t know, within the last five years. [He was] a jazz artist that plays the trumpet. I mean he’s one of the classical—I mean he’s the master. When you like trumpet and jazz, it’s Miles Davis.

SB: Ah.

AG: We got him. We booked him. He also—if you know about Miles Davis, pretty much has no voice left because he abused a lot of drugs when he was young and in the, you know, the height of his jazz career. He also is known as a very kind of—although he has a band and when he plays jazz he’s very together with his group. But other than that he’s a little kind of standoffish. He’s also very demanding. So I found out.

Anyway, I was thrilled to have him. The show starts, they’re doing an incredible show. I happen to be—I got them set. I came into the audience. I had guests there that night. So there was a group of maybe eight of us. We were like fourth row. I always, when I was in a show, would sit on the aisle so if any of the staff needed me, they would always know where I am, the house manager.

Sure enough, about three quarters of the way through the show—and this is the show of all shows—he’s doing great. And Miles Davis plays—this is his modus operandi. He’ll play and groove with the band and then he’ll walk off. And God knows what he does off stage. And he’ll just kind of pick up and then he’ll play and he goes off.

About three-quarters of the way through the show, I notice show he has drifted off again. The house manager comes and taps me on the shoulder and says, “Emergency. We need you backstage, now.” So I tell everybody, (whispering) “Got to go. I’ll be right back. Right back.”

So I go backstage, Miles Davis standing there and in his scruffy voice he says, (feigning Miles Davis) “I want to go home. Now!”

SB: (laughs)

AG: (feigning Miles Davis) “Take me to my hotel.” I said, “Mr. Davis, you’re in the middle of a concert. You’re band is out there playing. You have, like maybe a half an hour to go.” [He replied] (feigning Miles Davis) “I want to go home now!”
SB: Oh, my gosh.

AG: I thought what do I do. I said, “Okay.” So I went outside I bring my little Fiat—I think I was driving a little Fiat then—up to the stage door. I came back in. I got him in the car. He was staying across the street in the Holiday Inn, but artists don’t walk, you always have to drive them. Thank goodness he didn’t ask for his limousine.

SB: What about his contract?

AG: Well, you know, when the artist says, “I want to go home,” you kind of do it.

SB: Okay.

AG: And I didn’t want any yelling or screaming in the middle of the show. I pulled up, went in, got him, put him in the car, drove him, what a hundred feet to the Holiday Inn, deposited him there and said, “Good night, Mr. Davis.” [I] went back to the center, went back into the theater, sat down with my friends. The band is still playing!

SB: Oh, my gosh!

AG: Nobody has noticed that Miles Davis hasn’t been playing.

SB: They didn’t know that he had gone?

AG: Nobody knows!

SB: (high-pitched laughing)

AG: The band is playing and my friend leans over and says, “So when do you think Miles Davis is going to come back on?” I just bust out laughing and I said, “I can guarantee you he’s not coming back on.” They played for fifteen more minutes. They did the curtain call without Miles Davis and that was the end of the story.

SB: Oh, my gosh. And nobody complained.

AG: Nobody complained, jazz audiences, God bless them. Another—I think one of the most beautiful, heartwarming, I-know-why-I-did-this nights was when Arlo Guthrie played. He was—he played during our preview season, which was during the summer. We had a series of performances that we had brought in to the center as kind of the test to make sure that all the theaters were operating. The staff knew what to do.

So we had local groups and then we also booked in some other artists. Arlo Guthrie was one of those artists. And I think he was the last show of the preview season right before the big gala opening. So it was like late August. He performed in Morsani Hall, and if
you’re a child of the sixties, you know and love Arlo Guthrie. He did an amazing concert. And he—you know if there still is a flower child he was still a flower child.

The last song he did—he made wonderful comments about the beautiful hall and how lucky we are as a community, and then what he said was, “I would like to christen this hall for you.” And without his guitar—he was playing solo, no band back-up, just his guitar—he said, “I am going to do this a cappella.” And he sang “Amazing Grace.”

SB: Oh!

AG: You could hear a pin drop with his beautiful voice. And everyone was sitting in the audience you know going like this. (gestures) It was like oh, my gosh. It made it for me. It said, (high pitched voice) “I am the one who did this. I am the one who did this.” So that was just a one of those performances where if you were there—like when we were talking about theater [being] life changing. (laughter—inaudible)

SB: (laughing)

AG: That’s such a happy fun story.

SB: That was a happy story.

AG: That was just ethereal story, very soulful, spiritual. We also were very lucky. Even in our first few years of operation we able to be chosen as the theater to launch several of the Broadway tours of major Broadway shows. We launched one the Chorus Line tours. Now by that point, Chorus Line had lots of Broadway tours, touring the country and the world, but we launched one of the tours, and I think they went off to Japan.

The one that had the most impact for me was Les Misérables. We launched the first Broadway tour of Les Mis.

SB: That’s amazing.

AG: The Broadway tour cast came down to our facility and worked for two weeks. We had to close off Morsani Hall and they worked for two weeks training the new performers who were doing their first Broadway tour going throughout the country. So for two weeks, I would treat myself. I’d be working up in the office, [and] I’d would sneak down at lunchtime or two in the afternoon, and I would watch them rehearsing.

SB: Oh my goodness.

AG: And the first time that I saw that huge—what do they call it? The barricade that acts actually separate and moves and turns—you know it is during the French Resistance and they barricaded themselves on one of the streets in Paris. The first time that I went down and saw that huge monstrosity on our stage, I thought, “Oh, my goodness, this is what our
“stage is built for.” It was huge and then I saw it break apart and turn. I had never seen anything like it in a Broadway show.

SB: Is the Morsani stage that much larger than others?

AG: Yes, it is. That was the other thing that we did. It is the largest stage south of Kennedy Center. We can fit a full Metropolitan Opera Set on our stage, and, even more important, we have enough wing space so that we can pull a set off and bring another one on.

SB: Incredible.

AG: So the foresight, and again, bringing in the people that told us to do that. We’re just so lucky that we did that.

SB: So you can do shows like Les Mis that other venues cannot.

AG: Yes. And in fact what happens is—I mean this is a good example like with Phantom of the Opera—We were in on one of the first tours of Phantom of the Opera. I believe we were the first facility in Florida to get that show. It’s changed now, but we had to block off three months in our theater for Phantom, for the first tour.

SB: Oh gosh.

AG: We did I think six weeks. That was the minimum. You could not book Phantom unless you booked six weeks of performance. And—maybe it wasn’t three months; I think it was two months. And it was a two-week or a three-week load in. Now they’ve done it where, I think, in a day or two they can load in Phantom. They’ve changed the set; they’ve become more efficient. But back then when we first got Phantom it took two weeks to load that show.

SB: That’s amazing.

AG: So it was a major accomplishment that we were chosen as the Florida site for that show, and we were probably the only stage in Florida that could handle it.

SB: I kind of—I am sorry I interrupted you for the Les Mis story.

AG: Yes.

SB: But you would go down at lunchtime—

AG: Oh, right. But that was the end of that. And then we had the two-week run of Les Mis. And at that point it maybe had been running on Broadway for like three or four years, so a lot of people hadn’t seen it yet. But the hubbub about Les Mis, Les Mis—it was amazing. Obviously we sold out the two weeks. But it was one of those plays that
will always be dear to my heart because I feel like our whole staff got to see a production mounted of that magnitude.

SB: Wow. That’s special.

AG: Johnny Mathis comes to mind. He is one of those artists who is very friendly, very chatty. It would get to the point where I had to say, “Johnny, I gotta go home. I’m tired. I know you just did your show and you want to sit here and talk, but I have been here since eight in [the] morning. You haven’t.”

But what he wanted was—ahead of time his agent called—manager called and said, “Johnny likes to play golf. Can you put together some people to take him out golfing?”

SB: Oh!

AG: So the day of his performance I set up—oh I wish I could remember who it was—some lucky donor got the call. I wish I had thought of Monroe. I know your husband is an avid golfer.

SB: (laughs)

AG: I called some of our donors and said, “Are you doing anything tomorrow? Johnny Mathis is coming in and wants to play golf.” [They replied] “Yes.” So, you know, we would send someone to do that.

Another very touching, creative moment—the first year, eighty-seven [1987], eighty-eight [1988], we booked in two people who were doing a tour together: Doc Watson and Tom Paxton—country music[ians] and very, very popular. I mean, Doc Watson is like the father—one of the fathers of country music. Tom Paxton, at that point, was becoming one of them. Doc would do the first half—we did this in the Jaeb—and Tom Paxton would do the second half.

During intermission Doc had already done his half—he’s backstage in the Jaeb in the hallway where the dressing rooms are. And he was just futzing around on his banjo—he played a banjo. And Tom Paxton is there with his guitar and he’s futzing around. I am standing in the hallway with two legends of country.

SB: Superstars.

AG: And they’re playing—I realized oh my goodness—they’re playing a duet. They’re like riffing together. And I am standing here going—I am leaning against the wall going I am hearing something that no one in the world would ever hear. And then I got up the courage to say—I don’t even know how I opened my mouth—I said, “Would you consider the possibility of doing a few numbers together at the end of the show?”

SB: And normally they didn’t do that?
AG: You know, country musicians are kind of like jazz [musicians]. They said sure. So this night and this night only—because we had booked them in for like two weeks, they actually after Tom Paxton did his half-hour, forty-minutes, Doc came out and they played together. (inaudible) And people were sitting there going (gasps).

SB: Oh my gosh.

AG: It was phenomenal and I just happened to be standing there in the hallway hearing this. I mean this was—

SB: I can’t believe that happened.

AG: Another wonderful day that comes to mind was topping out, which means that was about a year before we opened we had a topping out ceremony. Which means that the top beam at the highest beam of your facility of your building is put into place. I think that we invited Beverly Sills to be there. We invited all of our donors. And we had a little ceremony on the site. And the crane launched the beam and set the beam in place and we topped out. That was the top beam for the building. And I remember the staff was just—we never even believed that we would get that far. We were the ones working twenty-hour days.

SB: Oh, my gosh!

AG: You know, just trying to make things work: raise the money, do the building, hire the staff, start planning the season. You know, it’s like Who’s on First? But we did take about ten minutes and we brought the staff up to the roof of the Holiday Inn after the topping out ceremony, and we had gotten bottles of champagne and we all did a toast to the Performing Arts Center.

SB: Oh how special!

AG: Just the staff. There were probably about twenty of us at that point.

SB: Wow! Interesting!

AG: Another memorable moment is—my birthday is in September. For one of my birthdays, I think it was a year before we opened, so it was in nineteen—September of eighty-six [1986]. We opened the grand opening September of eighty-seven [1987]. The staff planned a surprise party, you know, with Geoff, of course, my husband. And what they did was—they took me out on one of the boats. It was like a tugboat or some boat down the Hillsborough River across from the Performing Arts Center. And we actually had to have then-Mayor Sandy Freedman—they arranged this because we had maybe like fifteen minutes to spare. I mean it was like me of all people wouldn’t even let the staff go out. I don’t know how they got me to do that because it was a surprise party for me.
SB: Uh-huh.

AG: But I was a little taskmaster. But anyway, they got the Mayor, then Sandy Freedman, to open up all the bridges —

SB: Oh my god!

AG: So that we could get on the boat at somewhere like Harbour Island and go—bridges open, bridges open—get to the Performing Arts Center and they gave me a bottle and that was another so-called christening of the Performing Arts Center. They pulled close to where the wall is. You know, the river was right near—right in front of the performing arts center, which was a year from completion. And I got to throw this bottle against the wall, you know like you christen a ship so we, the staff again got to christen the Performing Arts Center.

SB: Special. Special moments.

AG: The staff was—when you go through something like that the staff was like a family.

SB: Well, they have to be, Andrea.

AG: Yeah.

SB: But I just can’t thank you enough for all those hours and all that time you spent. Look at what you have given to the community.

AG: I mean [it is] a gift of love; love, love, love. I mean for everyone who was involved in those early days.

SB: You didn’t have to do it.

AG: Ignorance was bliss.

SB: Well, I mean did you envision the enormity?

AG: Never, never. We had no clue that it would be what it is today with the Patel Conservatory and the Shimberg Theater and leading the country in Broadway sales, you know ticket revenue.

SB: And you talked about selling out one venue. I mean when you drive up to the Performing Arts Center, four venues are in use and often sold out all together.

AG: Right. Exactly.

SB: Incredible. Incredible.
AG: It was—yeah.

SB: Would you say that’s the highlight of your life so far?

AG: Uh—

SB: Excluding your family.

AG: Oh, absolutely. And there was nothing that will ever compare to it either. All of us on the original staff agree that you’re lucky if you have an experience like that once in your lifetime. And nothing compares to what we had in the early days of the Center. Nothing. And nothing ever will. And you can’t even look for anything.

SB: Oh, my gosh. Well I know we have to end this interview, and I am so reluctant to do so. You probably have a zillion stories. And I am just so grateful that you shared them with us. I hope everyone listening to them enjoys them as much as I did.

AG: My pleasure.

SB: Thank you so much! Amen.

end of interview