Yael V. Greenberg (YG): Today is Friday, May 23rd, 2003. My name is Yael Greenberg, oral history program assistant for the Florida Studies Center. We continue a series of interviews in our studio here in the Tampa campus library with USF faculty, students, and alumni in order to commemorate 50 years of university history. Today, we will be interviewing Kathy Arsenault, who came to USF in 1982 as a collection development librarian in the St. Petersburg library. Currently, she is the dean of libraries at the USF St. Petersburg campus. Good afternoon, Kathy. Let’s begin by you taking us to the year you arrived in St. Pete and what circumstances brought you to the St. Petersburg USF campus.

Kathleen Arsenault (KA): Actually, we arrived in 1980; my husband, Ray Arsenault, who is the history professor, was hired to teach American history at USF St. Petersburg. I was pregnant at the time, had a baby the following March, and I didn’t even think about going back to work for maybe a year and a half or so. And then, Sam Fustukjian who came to St. Petersburg the same month was Grey, actually, who was director of the library. And we got to know them socially. We had children the same age, and he and Ray played tennis. We would do a lot of stuff together.

And he convinced me to come to work half time as a collection development librarian. I was reluctant to leave Anne, our second child, but it was definitely a stroke of fate. I thought it was the perfect job for me, and I worked 20 hours a week, thoroughly enjoyed working with the faculty, examining the collection, making sure we had a good coverage in all the areas that I could. Ray always said I had the best job in the world because I got to read book reviews all day. But that was Grey.
I was also a reference librarian. Everyone in our library, which is small, has to work a certain amount of reference, which I enjoyed very much. I had come from a cataloguing background, so this was a new world for me, but I did enjoy it very much. As the years went by, I moved up to 30 hours a week and, later, to full time, as my children grew older.

I survived the transition to electronic catalogs and the trauma of shipping out the card catalogs about 1986, probably, after the first state program for electronic program came in. And I worked with a slowly growing faculty. We expanded in business, information sciences, of course, as the computer age dawned. The campus got a program in mass communications, which was very interesting to work with. Little by little, we became a real, small college.

In 1999, the library director at that time resigned. Perhaps I should say, I worked with Sam Fustukjian, who had become librarian in 1980 after Doris Cook had come over from the Tampa campus. She was actually a reference librarian. I thought that’s all St. Petersburg needed. She came over and gradually assumed more responsibilities as campus grew. We started with, I think, 3,000 volumes in the old maritime station. I believe it might have been the shower room, actually. I never went into the older library, but I think I have heard that story. After Doris Cook was Sam Fustukjian who was on leave on a couple of occasions; once to go to Beirut, the other one was to go to Washington for a program in an educational information institution. And then became interim director here and later permanent director and the dean at Tampa campus. During his absences, Jackie Shewmaker, who was one of our reference librarians, served as the interim director.

It was always a seamless transition when Jackie took over. But in 1999, after Landon Greaves decided to retire, I was concerned with a part of the USF strategic plan that called for unifying all of the libraries. Because I was in collection development, I felt it was just essential that we retain our independence, so we could respond with flexibility and with speed to curriculum changes as new faculty came in and out. We just felt strongly that it was essential to maintain our independence in the collections and certainly personnel; people on site need to be doing (inaudible). So I said, “Let me be the interim director while you do the search.” And so, that was accepted. Eventually, we did manage to talk the provost out of this proposal and we gained our independence. I found out I enjoyed being director.

I had done the same job for 20 years, and it was a very positive change for me. It was a very exciting time. I was interim for two years, which was a time of great expansion for our campus. First, we got approved to have a very small freshman program, a learning
community program. And I had, because I was the interim library director, I was on the executive team. And I was able to go up to Tallahassee with a group of students and administrators and the cabinet approved the plan that we would have freshmen, at last. And it was really exciting. I had never done anything like that before. I had hardly been to Tallahassee. I was a Floridian originally. Soon after that, we become autonomous, a fiscally autonomous campus, and we began taking on more and more responsibilities in St. Petersburg.

That’s a process that’s actually still going on. It was just a very exciting time to become an administrator, and I have certainly enjoyed the process, although it’s been exhausting at some points. It’s been a wonderful few years. And I worked with Vice President, Bill Heller, from the beginning of my term. He was replaced by interim Vice President Ralph Wilcox this year, ’02-’03 academic year, and he has made a lot of changes, and we are poised to grow and expand under a new president and Vice President Karen White. We are all very excited about it. It’ll be a big change to have a woman in charge. I happened to be the first woman dean on campus when my title was changed, and it’s going to be even better to have a woman vice president, I think. Let’s see, do you have—?

YG: Oh, I have a lot.

KA: Okay.

YG: I want to go back because you said a lot of important things. You mentioned, in ’99, the strategic plan of the University of South Florida to unify all of the USF libraries. Why did they even—why do you think the university even considered doing that at that point?

KA: I think they probably felt it might be more economical to do it that way, perhaps integrate the collections better, although I think that was a mistake. I think there is real strength in the diversity of the collections. The university is enormous, and if we have multiple copies, that’s not all that unusual for a university of our size, as long as the basic books for undergraduates are maintained and we are able to provide for the unique needs of our faculty members.

It makes the library system a lot stronger. Our collections in marine science, for instance, are very good. We have some unique things. We’re good in mass communications, some sort of idiosyncratic interests of faculty members over the years. But this is what makes a research library. So we would’ve probably had a plain, vanilla collection, had we been unified.
YG: I certainly understand the reasons why librarians themselves would be a little upset about unifying a collection. Can you go into more detail about why, particularly in St. Pete, the librarians and the staff were upset about this idea of unifying all of the collections?

KA: I’m sure part of it is always fear of the unknown. But it is good to have a personal relationship with the person you report to, rather than someone over the bridge you may see a couple of times a year. We felt like we had the latitude to start on new programs and respond to campus needs, perhaps, better than the larger university could do. We had a lot of community support, from the St. Petersburg local community, that probably would not have been there with the larger arrangement.

I think the USF library’s idea, as we worked it out, has been a wonderful selection. We have the best of both worlds. Certainly, we are extremely grateful to be able to make the most of the resources of all of USF and some of the very specialized things that you can do with a much bigger budget and a much bigger staff. But still, we are small enough to be able to respond to our smaller campus with aplomb and flexibility and personal attention.

YG: You mentioned this new idea of the USF library system. Can you tell me what that is, specifically?

KA: Yes, of course. Derrie Perez, dean of the library at Tampa campus is our outside person. She deals with what used to be the SUS, the [Florida] State University System, library. So DCU I think is the new acronym. She attends the statewide meeting, she is being delegate to the Southeastern Association of Research Librarians. She works with, her position is in charge of technologies that all of the libraries share, the digitization center, which would be a very expensive process to duplicate. The website is developed in Tampa. Tampa has always provided cataloging and acquisition services. We just stick with selection up in St. Petersburg. Sarasota always did their technical services as we call them, but we don’t always have time to do that.

They also do the GIS center, Geographic Information System center, and some of the imaging programs that we just could not handle as a small campus. But we still maintain our public services indefinitely; do the collections, as I said, independently; although we share in the electronic collection, which, again, has been a huge thing to us; and control of the library budget and personnel. So it really is the best of both worlds. Some of the electronic resources, we share; we are a very, very good college library. I think our faculty don’t begin to realize how well off they are because of that arrangement.
YG: I want to take you back to the ’80s.

KA: Okay.

YG: If you will. When you came and when you started working on the St. Petersburg campus, the campus was still part of—was considered a regional campus of the University of South Florida, correct?

KA: Definitely, definitely. The budget was set by the provost. We could not lobby independently. Although there were occasions when the Pinellas delegation was able to get us a new building, for instance, a new library, partly with local support. Faculty members were hired and evaluated by the departments centered in Tampa, which could occasionally cause friction. The big decisions were just made in Tampa, and occasionally there were real conflicts. We were not able to develop the distinctive programs that we felt our community needed, in some cases.

And I believe the faculty felt that their Tampa colleagues did not really appreciate the special burdens of teaching on a smaller campus where everybody knows your name and everyone expects you to be available, and there are double committees for just about everything—one here, one in Tampa. And they felt that they were slighted or considered to be second-string, which was not true because there were some outstanding faculty members who did significant research and still do, of course. We always felt like we were part of the research institution too. I think, sometimes, that was not the perception of the branch campuses.

YG: Why was there a need for a USF St. Petersburg campus in the first place?

KA: Nelson Poynter of the *St. Petersburg Times* was one of the agitators for a new campus in the ’50s. FSU, UF, and Florida A&M were the only state universities. And, after World War II, the population moved south, and the universities were in the northern part of the state. Certainly, with population and population distribution made it crystal clear that there should be another university. Nelson Poynter went at it like a bulldog and was soon to be devastated when Tampa got the nod for the campus. There were several sites suggested in Pinellas County and also one near the airport, which might have been a good solution between the two communities. But there was this huge tract of land here on Fowler Avenue, so Tampa is the main campus. But after, oh, five or ten years, I guess, Poynter was able to convince them to make a temporary site for an excess of freshman, one year, into a permanent campus.
There was a US maritime station on Bayboro Harbor, and after World War II, the maritime station phased out, the buildings were available. Eckerd College, who was then Florida Presbyterian [College], got its start at Bayboro too. But when they moved out buildings were free. When USF had a big enrollment, they sent some freshmen over, and it just grew over the years. When Ray came in 1980, he was actually in one of the old maritime buildings, a building that still exists, actually, and is part of the marine science department. Although, all but one of the buildings had been carefully torn down and got replaced with bigger facilities. And Nelson Poynter and the *St. Pete Times* really advocated strongly all through the years for the campus. It’s been a wonderful relationship.

YG: Do you think that, because USF, the main campus was first built in Tampa rather than St. Petersburg, this began the initial friction—once the St. Petersburg campus came into fruition—between St. Pete and Tampa?

KA: I think, as USF grew and developed, I think everyone accepted it. But St. Petersburg is a good-sized city without a public institution, except for Eckerd College, the private institution, and the junior college. At the time, there was a need for what we were doing. We specialized in business, education, and basic liberal arts. There was always more call from community leaders to expand those programs. It’s a difficult line to overhear, at 5:00 o’clock, to make evening classes for the people who are both working and taking courses, nontraditional students, which is mostly what we have had, over the years. So there always has been a push to get more services within St. Petersburg. I think our growth rate has worn that out; we have more than doubled in five years, and we expect to double again in the next five, to 8,000 to 10,000 students. So we’ll be a solid school, a regular university in a short period of time.

YG: When you started working in ’82 on the campus, can you tell me what the USF St. Petersburg campus looked like in ’82?

KA: The current marine science building was Building A, the one closest to the harbor. There were two, old, one-story, long-row, wooden buildings, the barracks building (inaudible). The first buildings were Davis Hall and the older library, which is now Baker Hall, where the administrative offices are, currently. That’s an interesting story that I probably should tell. Nelson Poynter was honored to break ground for the original library. He had a heart attack and died the afternoon of the groundbreaking, and the building was named in his honor, and we carried the name to the new building, which was opened in ’96. But, to backtrack, after the Nelson Poynter Library and what is now Davis Hall, they built Coquina Hall, and they built the campus activity center, the new Nelson Poynter Library and the [Peter Rudy Wallace Florida] Center for Teachers.
Plus, there have been some add-ons along the way. We have a building called Piano Man that was an old piano warehouse; we just still call it the Piano Man, a smaller, warehouse-y kind of building that’s now the site of some programs for St. Pete College. They wanted a downtown presence; it seemed like a good relationship, so we would get our graduating sophomores into our upper-division school. And Bill Heller, a previous dean and then vice president, was interested in historic preservation. And when two historic buildings in St. Petersburg were available and were going to be torn down, he arranged for grants to move two buildings to campus. This is the Williams House—Williams was one of the founders of St. Petersburg—and the other is the Gary Snell House, who was a land developer who developed Snell Isle, one of the lovely areas of St. Petersburg. So now we have this lovely, historic block to the campus, as well as more modern buildings.

That was a real touch of character, I think, to this state institution. The Harbor area has developed incredibly over the years. It was a pretty tough industrial area, as I understand. The Poynter Institute moved south of us. No, the Poynter Institute is to the west of the campus. To the south of us is the Salvador Dali Museum. That was an exciting new neighbor. A marina opened up where there had been scruffy looking boats. And now, a Florida Power building straight across the harbor from us has become the new home of our College of Business. We have leased space in that old warehouse for the next five years, I believe.

So we have sort of marched around the harbor. Going the other way around the harbor, marine science was able to build an oceanographic center, a fabulous, state of the art building and adjoining a new building for state agencies that share our campus. Another new neighbor has been the United States Geological Society’s coastal geology unit that is headquartered at an old Studebaker building on campus that was rehabbed and has labs and administers things for their program. We provide library service for all of these institutions around, so we’ve really grown over the years. It’s been exciting.

YG: Aside from the physical location, what major differences have you seen between the —overall, arching differences—between the St. Petersburg campus and the Tampa campus? Changes or emphases or—?

KA: We have much smaller classes and then are able to get much more personal attention than the big, lecture classes that are the fear—from the very beginning. Of course, the Tampa students eventually reach the point where they’re working closely with professors, but ours, even as freshmen, have classes with 40 maximum. So they do get to know the faculty and staff very well. For many years, the St. Pete campus was just a big family. Everything was discussed in the corridors and parking lots, and it has gradually become much more organized and bureaucratic. But we miss that. The image that’s sometimes presented is the dean fishing along the harbor and you’d just walk up and he’d tell you what to expect from your next contract. Well, I don’t literally remember that. John Hicks
was the dean when I came. He was a New York English professor who was hardly the fishing on the harbor type. But that’s the really iconic image of the St. Petersburg campus, I guess I would say.

Other differences, I think our students are much more nontraditional at present, although there is definitely a transition. Although we originally began as a campus for freshmen, we quickly became an upper-level campus. The idea was students would go to the junior college for two years, then to us for junior and senior years. So we had a lot of working parents, a lot of people coming after work, the campus would be quite empty during the day but packed at night. That’s changing over the years, and applicants are growing quickly, so we will have a real culture change among the students, I think. Some of our librarians have been disconcerted to see students necking and stuff (laughs). That’s for instance, something we really didn’t have worry about, to encounter before, just maybe crying babies with mothers in our school. But certainly, we didn’t have the blue hair and nose studs that we’re seeing now. It’s really different, but it’s fun.

YG: Is there residence, housing, for students on the St. Petersburg campus now?

KA: Some of the freshmen in the very first year lived on campus, but no. We don’t have any residential students, but we should be opening a small complex—I believe maybe 150 units—in 2005. There is more and more residential housing around the campus. The area has really become much more upscale in the past two years, and a lot of students do live around. Although we don’t have dorms, we have many more students on the weekends and close neighbors, not residential students.

YG: You mentioned lobbying in the ’80s of St. Petersburg starting to lobby to become more independent from USF Tampa. Was that the first time that the St. Petersburg campus began vying for independence? Or were there other times, very early on in St. Petersburg history, that they were beginning to lobby?

KA: I think it never even seemed a possibility until probably the mid ’80s. There were some bad financial years for public education, and St. Petersburg went through a real urban renaissance in the ’90s. And I think we felt more and more ready, and felt confident that we could build on that. And I think relationships grow and change, and Tampa was very focused on becoming a research institution. We were just an add-on; I think the tensions began to be felt a little more at that point.

YG: What does being an independent university mean, in terms of funding, in terms of support? What does that independence—
KA: Well, we are not an independent university. That’s really a misperception. But we do have our own, independent budget that we can spend as we wish. We are also now able to present our own budget to the legislature. If we feel there is a need for—well, a science building is our latest concern. If we feel there is a need for that, we can present it directly to the legislature without it being way down the list. On campus, many, many needs—I mean, clearly, there are critical needs over here as well. But that is one aspect of it, as well as the faculty being hired and tenured on our campus and valued here, so that means a great deal to the faculty. There have been some conflicts about programs and wanting to go in, maybe, different directions than the Tampa campus is headed. So I think that’s been a big event for the faculty members. And they’re just beginning to be in a position to do some more innovative things.

Our interim vice president, Ralph Wilcox established four programs of distinction, he called them, which has been exciting. One is—I should’ve thought about this—Florida studies, which my husband, Ray, is very involved with along with Carrie Lamina, who is transferring from this campus. Journalism studies is another one. We’ve had a long, interest in journalism. Environmental studies, which is a great fit with our marine science program and the US Geological Society and the state agencies on campus. There just are many, many opportunities for partnerships with those institutions and our students and also a fourth program in corporate responsibility. Our accounting faculty is developing programs in forensic accounting—I think they call it—in response to, of course, all the con scandals everyone knows about in the press.

YG: What was Wilcox’s vision in starting up these programs of distinction? Why was he interesting in these four particular areas, and what kinds of support has he given to starting these programs?

KA: It was actually a competitive process. The different faculty groups got together, wrote up a plan; they had to talk about other, similar programs across the country, partnerships, possibilities for funding, potential number of students who would be interested. I think they had to do a ten year plan. There are probably five or six programs that were presented, and four were selected. We did reserve special funding for the programs. Some of them, of course, are more expensive than others. (laughing) I think history is the cheap one, and probably the accounting one is very top of the line. But it’s going to be very exciting to see how they grow and develop. I would’ve liked to have seen one in writing.

There has been a great interest in writing on our campus because of the Poynter Institute, our neighbor, that has worked with public schools in Pinellas County for many, many years to develop writing teachers and has student writing groups in the summer on our campus. And also the Florida Suncoast Writers Conference is in St. Petersburg. It’s
actually administered from the English department in Tampa. It’s always been in St. Petersburg, and I think that if there’s a fifth one, that’s the program that would be the most appropriate, very effective and popular program.

YG: In terms of community support for the St. Petersburg campus, what is the relationship like, between the community and the campus?

KA: The community, I believe, is very supportive. I think they may be a little frustrated at the pace of growth. The programs, in some segments, I would like to see our—English—not English, engineering, computer science, things like that. Very pragmatic courses that the high-tech industries in Pinellas County would like to see. Of course, those are extremely expensive to provide space. It’s not something that we can provide overnight. Although, we do work very hard to meet the community needs as much as possible. The community is really just getting to know us, I think. We’ve been so small historically, but we have grown, probably more than they wanted to. We’ve journeyed to icon-omy in the press. They know we’re here. There are not really “Town Down” issues because we don’t have residential students who are writhing in the streets causing many problems with neighbors. I think the faculty is very itching to contribute to this city and the county, and I think it’s a very positive atmosphere and, as we grow, it will certainly become more so.

YG: Where do you see the St. Petersburg campus in the next decade?

KA: We will be straining at the seams, obviously, unless we get more space. The library is supposed to be built for 10,000 students. It’s going to be pretty snug, although students do, more and more, do their research on an electronic presence. The master plan for the campus has been to grow that level for quite a few years, at least since the library was—the library plan began in, probably, the early ’90s. So the urge to grow is not new. The growth has come has we added faculty. Forty faculty members just could not provide the programs that students needed, so they would have to drive to Tampa to fulfill almost every single major. So it caused a lot of frustration. Some people just felt that it wasn’t worth the trouble. But now that we have more programs, more professors, more courses, the enrollments are growing astoundingly. It’s just been very exciting, very gratifying.

YG: In May of 2002, you became the first woman dean at USF St. Pete. That’s a pretty momentous occasion. Can you talk about your thoughts about being the first woman dean of your campus?

KA: When we became autonomous and we were projecting significant growth and the administrators gained much more responsibility, their titles were upgraded. And I was just part of that process, as it turned out. It wasn’t anything to do with my accomplishments.
It was just a campus-wide upgrading of titles as people did have much more responsibility. It’s certainly something I’m very pleased with. It’s meant a lot, I think, to the women on campus. I got flowers from women faculty members. There was so much support when I was promoted. There have been a few women administrators on our campus but it, by and large, was an all-boys club.

We had a wonderful associate dean, Karen Spear and the—it was I guess who took over when Lowell Davis, our dean at the time, died unexpectedly. She was wonderful. Everyone was ready to see her continue that job. It didn’t seem to fit the style of USF at that point, and she eventually left. She brought a lot of enthusiasm and self-confidence for the faculty. She really showed everyone new directions, I think. So it was a shame when she left us. And I think everybody remembered Karen and regretted to lose her and to see a woman dean finally seemed to get a breakthrough.

YG: In your 21 years of history at the St. Petersburg campus, what are you most proud of?

KA: Personally, I am proud of the library collection. I worked very, very hard on it for many, many years. The collection was 70,000 volumes when I began, and it’s, you know, three times that size. So over the years, I’ve just about personally picked out every third—every, well, two out of three volumes on the shelf right now. And I think it’s an excellent collection. It’s been pretty widely recognized in the area, and I am just really proud of the library collection that I’ve built over so many years. We were always small, but we were very good. There are a couple of faculty members who have come over from Tampa to study and use our collection, even in areas where we didn’t necessarily have programs. Although we didn’t have big collections, we had very good collections, so it was a wonderful process. I have not been able to totally let it go. I still do the English and art collection development, although other subjects have been allocated to other librarians. I loved it. It was a great intellectual challenge, a big satisfaction over the years.

YG: My final question to you, and this is something that I’ve asked everyone sitting in your chair: if there was a final statement, sentiment, that you could leave on camera, either to future faculty and students of the St. Petersburg campus, or of your 21 year history at the St. Petersburg campus, how would you sum up your career thus far at the St. Petersburg campus?

KA: Let me see, one of my mother’s favorite expressions, which I think is biblical, is, “You have a goodly heritage.” And I think that is something I hope St. Petersburg students will always realize. We had wonderful colleagues from the very beginning. Just the most committed and exciting undergraduate teachers that students could ever have were there from the very beginning. Val Hall, Harriet Deer, Harris Sherrelman, Regis
Specter, Bill Garrett. Just, really, very, gifted teachers. There was always a great commitment to the campus, every step of the way, in good times and bad. People were working to make the campus grow and improve and never let go of the commitment to scholarship and to dedicated teaching. I think it’s a tradition that I believe will continue; I certainly think it will. So that would be my message to the students. Just because it was small doesn’t mean it was inferior because it just a fabulous place.

YG: Kathy, I want to thank you very much.

KA: You’re very welcome. I’ve enjoyed it. Thank you.

*End of Interview*