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Lucy Jones (LJ): Today is October 28th, 2003. My name is Lucy Jones. I am a graduate assistant for Florida Studies Center, continuing a series of interview with USF faculty, students, staff, and alumni commemorating 50 years of university history. Today I’m interviewing Virginia Littrell, who came to USF in 1979, as a student. Currently she is a city councilwoman and today’s interview is taking place in her office in St. Petersburg’s city hall. Good afternoon and thank you for agreeing to this interview.

Virginia Littrell (VL): Sure. Look forward to it.

LJ: Let’s start with what circumstances took you to USF St. Petersburg.

VL: Well, I was born and raised in St. Petersburg. At the time that I entered South Florida, I had husband who had graduated from South Florida, and I had a mother who had not finished college at Stetson University in Deland because of World War II. So she was anticipating being a student at the University of South Florida in St. Pete. So it was kind of family affair.

LJ: The location was convenient.
VL: It was absolutely convenient. I was—I had all of my college education in St. Petersburg. I went to St. Pete Junior College\(^1\) and then transferred directly to USF in St. Petersburg.

LJ: Would you gone to college if St. Petersburg hadn’t had a university? Would that have been possible?

VL: Oh yeah. I actually could have gone to college anyplace that I wanted to, and I got married very early and it was imperative that I be around St. Petersburg. So fortunately we did have a university.

LJ: What was the university like when you started as a student?

VL: It was small. It was charming. It was quirky. It was fun. It was a party place. We went to school in old army barracks, took college classes in army barracks. What are now the marine science laboratories—it was a long thin hallway—that’s what we had our library in. I actually worked as a student assistant in the library when I first went to USF in St. Petersburg. So I spent a lot of time in that long, narrow, dusty hallway. And it was like a family. It was—no matter what your particular discipline was, you knew faculty members and students in other disciplines because there were so few students on campus. All of the social events, everybody kind of mingled together and it was great fun.

LJ: You got your degree in interdisciplinary social sciences, which would have been a good example of how the disciplines worked together.

VL: Uh-huh.

LJ: As a student in the Florida Studies Program, I get questioned all the time. What can you do with a degree in Florida Studies? How did your degree in integrative social sciences or interdisciplinary social sciences prepare you for your career? Or did it?

VL: Well, let me tell you that that degree program at that time allowed the student to build the curriculum, and it was two disciplinary tracks that were dovetailed together. So the two tracks that I chose were US history and world geography, so they dovetailed beautifully and, you know, basically they have played their role through everything that

\(^1\)St. Petersburg College was formerly known as St. Petersburg Junior College. It was founded in 1927 as a private, non-profit two-year junior college and has grown to become a four-year state college in Pinellas County with 11 campuses and centers
I’ve been interested in my life. As far as making money from that, you can’t do it unless you teach. And I’m not really interested in teaching. So you know, I really always went to school with an interest in mind of what wanted to do. I had classes that I didn’t care about and didn’t do well in them. And I had classes that I absolutely loved and it took me absolutely nothing to make good grades in them. So it was just a matter of being interested in that, and I always went to college with idea that you went there for interest.

LJ: Do you think that if you had gone to a different university, you wouldn’t have had that same experience or being able to take whatever interested you or—

VL: I probably would have been able to have that experience, but chances are good that I wouldn’t have taken that opportunity. If I had gone to a standard, large university or a broad-based college, chances are good that I would have been funneled into the curriculum, the standard curriculum. One the things that happened at USF in St. Petersburg early on was that not all of the offerings that you needed to complete your degree course were available every semester, so you opted for a lot of different disciplines. So we kind of fell into it by default, but it was great.

LJ: What were the relationships between the students and the faculty like? Were they closer because of the size?

VL: Yeah. I think so. Students were typically invited because the student body at South Florida in St. Petersburg—because it was a commuter campus—the majority of the student body was older than the traditional student body that you would see like on a freshman class on a regular university. So typically, we were invited into professors’ homes for social events. I have spent Christmases and Thanksgiving at professors’ dinner tables with their families, and it was great family kind of atmosphere. Very, it was kind of warm, you know, and it was comfortable. It was very comfortable.

LJ: What organizations were you involved with as a student?

VL: Well, I started the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, lecture series. That was very interesting. We brought a series of somewhat controversial speakers to the campus, including Russell Means² who was a Lakota Sioux Indian. He is traditionally thought of as having lead the siege on Wounded Knee³. [We also invited] a young man, a 19-year-old young man associated with the IRA [Irish Republican Army] in Ireland whose name was Sean Sands, and his brother was Bobby Sands⁴ who died in the H Blocks in Ireland. Both of those were very controversial, especially Sean Sands.

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²Russell Means was an Oglala Lakota activist and a prominent member of the American Indian Movement.
³Wounded Knee Massacre
⁴Bobby Sands was an Irish republican and hunger striker who died in prison during the Irish Troubles.
LJ: Yes, now you started the series?

VL: Uh-huh. Yeah.

LJ: Did you have any on-campus jobs?

VL: I had all the on-campus jobs. (VL and LJ both laugh) Oh yes. I worked in the library for several sessions. I worked for student affairs. I worked as a fill-in person in the physical plant area when their assistant was out having surgery. I did a lot of jobs on campus, and then ultimately, I hired as full-time person on campus in the registrar’s office. And worked, I think, probably about two years with the registrar.

LJ: So over the years that you’ve been at the university, how have the students changed? You were in contact with them in many different ways.

VL: Yeah. How have they changed? Well, I think as the disciplines have grown and been more available, they have become more segmented into those disciplines and less intermingled. I think probably now the business student doesn’t know what the geography student does. And none of them knows what the marine science student does, and that’s a loss for everybody. Although it makes your college career go faster, I guess, being able to take the classes that you need, you know, right in a row. But maybe it deprives today’s students of that kind of comingling that was really a valuable part of the experience.

LJ: Now your experience as a student was a little different because you mentioned that your mother was student also.

VL: Uh-huh.

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3On February 27, 1973, 200 Sioux, led by AIM, occupied Wounded Knee (site of 1890 massacre of Sioux by US 7th Cavalry) and took 11 hostages. The occupation lasted 71 days during which time gunfire exchanges between AIM members and federal marshals took place. The AIM members and their supporters surrendered on May 8th after being promised that officials would investigate broken Indian treaties.

4Bobby Sands was a member of the IRA who died of a hunger strike while imprisoned at the HM Prison Maze.
LJ: And what was it like going to college with your mother at the same time? Did you take classes together?

VL: No. Never. We really never crossed paths. Occasionally we would meet. I really kind of took the bulk of my classes at one time, and she took the bulk of her classes at a different year or so. You know, it really was never a problem. It wouldn’t have been a problem anyway even if we were class together. She was geography major. We both—everybody at the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg who took geography classes benefitted from Harry Shaleman. Harry Shaleman was an internationally known geographer. He took tours. He was the guide on tours by the Smithsonian and by—what is the name of the—I can’t remember the name of the group he used to go with but Smithsonian primarily. And he took people all over the world. And he was—he had a huge reputation. He was fabulous instructor, so it would have been fine because if Mother and I were both in Harry Shaleman’s class together we, you know—it would have been great fun.

LJ: Well, mentioning the professors, were there any professors who had a particular impact or positive or negative on your experience?

VL: Harry Shaleman of course. He was the greatest. Ray Arsenault⁵, I loved Ray. I was in Ray’s first class that he ever taught here. As I recall, it was a summer time class. And Ray enjoyed his own lectures a great deal, and because it was a summer time class, there were a lot of people registered in history classes, which normally, during the regular part of the year, there weren’t. But because the summertime classes were a limited offering and this history class was offered, a lot of people took it. You know, just to get their schedule filled. I remember he was giving a lecture one day about Diamond Jim Brady, and he thought this was the funniest thing he’d ever heard, and he would talk and he would just roar and laugh at what he was saying. It was very entertaining, so from that point on I always liked Ray and liked his sense of humor, and his outlook on the world too.

LJ: Well since you came to the campus a little bit further underway, you didn’t live on campus. Were most people living on campus or most people lived off campus or—

VL: There were no students living on campus.

LJ: So everybody just—

⁵An interview of Ray Arsenault is available as part of the USF 50th Anniversary Oral History Project collection
VL: Well uh, yeah. A lot of students lived in the nearby, you know, the cheap housing places, you know. I, of course, lived with my husband and then after I was divorced I lived in my own home, which was not too far from the university. I was able to walk to the university from my home. It was a nice existence.

LJ: When you were a student there what were some of the big political issues on campus? Do you remember any controversies or big debates about—

VL: Now, by political issues do you mean local to the University of South Florida, do you mean national issues, what specifically?

LJ: Well either one. Let’s start with local to St. Pete.

VL: The local to St. Pete issue is the one we have always had. Tampa campus will not allow us to offer what we want. We need some autonomy from the Tampa campus. The Tampa campus is a large university. It has a completely different outlook on education than the campus here. The campus in St. Petersburg was like going to an expensive private college with a limited enrollment. You can’t get a better education than sitting in a class with an extraordinary professor with seven or eight other students—you know—versus going over to Tampa where you may have an extraordinary professor but you’re sitting in an auditorium with 50 to 75 other students. Just that personalized kind of education was something that we valued and treasured, and so the Tampa campus has always kind of had a, you know, put their thumbs on top of what we wanted to do in St. Petersburg. So that was always the political issue when I was on campus.

LJ: What were the students interested in on a more national or state level? Was there a good deal of involvement with issues outside of campus?

VL: Well, my husband was the first president of the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] chapter on campus. So we had a (VL laughs) lot of involvement with kind of thing. I remember when McCarthy came to speak on campus, and it was a packed house. It was over in the what is now marine science—I guess they’ve carved it up now into laboratories, but it used to be the auditorium over there, which was also the social site on Friday nights. We used to show movies and people would come in for a, I don’t know, maybe a quarter and sit watch a movie on a Friday night. But that was also where we had political debates and speakers and that kind of thing. So, we did have some, I guess it was more of an outreach than it was an impact on both local and national politics at the time.
LJ: So you’ve seen interaction between the city and the campus from both the student’s point of view and a city official’s point of view.

VL: Right.

LJ: How do you think that relationship has changed over the years, and where is it going?

VL: Where is it going? That’s a good question. The University of South Florida in St. Petersburg had a series of deans who do not understand the importance of connecting the university to the city until Bill Heller came along. When Bill Heller came along, he became so involved with the city, with all kinds of nonprofit organizations that did charity work of a variety of things: mental health and just everything you can imagine, I mean, SPCA [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals], everything. He was just involved in everything. By virtue of his being an ambassador, people began to realize the importance with the connection between the city and the campus and certainly there is the importance if the campus wishes to expand, and I assume that it will have to. You know, city involvement [is needed] in that because it’s right in the middle of downtown St. Petersburg. City involvement of that is necessary.

So Bill really made the overture to the city and to the residents. He really, I guess, made everybody fall in love with the University of South Florida and realize its potential and its value. In the future, of course it’s a huge controversy right now as to which direction the university will expand. They will come to the city council to ask us to vacate streets for their expansion and to offer land and that kind of thing. Regardless of the referendum and the outcome of the referendum on November 4th, which is pertaining to whether or not we will keep the airport open, even if Parkland prevails, chances are very good that the City of St. Petersburg will not go in the direction of giving the University of South Florida the western portion of what is now airport land.

It’s pretty strongly believed by the council, and I believe also by the mayor, that the university should push towards the southwest, which would take it down towards Bartlett Park. And we feel that by doing that, the university has the potential of connecting even more to the surrounding area. And also pushing into the heart of Midtown, which helps everybody, gives a lot of opportunity. We really think that’s where the university can do the best good and that’s what we would hope they would go. Where we will kind of encourage them to do that.

LJ: Give them a little push. (VL laughs, long pause)
LJ: Oh, you mentioned the movies at the marine science place. What other activities were there for students to socialize on campus?

VL: Well, the movies of course on Friday night, but once we built our first library outside of that hallway that I previously mentioned, the marine science department took over the barracks on the southernmost tip of the peninsula, and they always had a Friday, a late Friday afternoon get together. So—and anybody from any discipline was invited—they played ping-pong; they played pool; they had beer, you know. It was just wonderful, and you go and be outside by the water and just have a great time and then just walk into the auditorium and watch a movie. So, you know, it was great. It was terrific.

LJ: What is your involvement with campus today? Do you continue to be involved with the campus in any way or—

VL: I continue to be interested in the campus. I’m not involved with the campus. Another council member actually serves on the campus advisory committee, which is pretty much defunct now that we’ve had the change in the leadership that has come from Tallahassee. Things—I’m not sure where the future of the university lies. I have some concerns that there will be an eventual combining of St. Pete College and the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg, which I do not think would be beneficial to this community.

Right now we have Eckerd College, which is a private college. We have a state university, a full-fledged state university with graduate programs. We have St. Pete College which takes people who need remedial work all the way up to, I guess, their first two years and in some disciplines, all the way through their four-year degree. But I would really hate to see St. Pete College and the University of South Florida combine because then we would have just one educational opportunity in the public arena, and I don’t think that’s beneficial to everyone.

LJ: In the years that you’ve been involved with and concerned with the university, what are you most proud of for yourself?

VL: Proud of as far as what the university has accomplished?

LJ: No, your personal experience or personal involvement at the university.

VL: That’s hard to say. I guess just having the ongoing love for the University of South Florida and the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg and an ongoing awareness
of what it is to the city, and to the residents, and the opportunity that it brings. (long pause) No that’s okay. We’ll we actually started late. So, don’t worry about—don’t worry about my time. It’s your time.

LJ: Actually I was just going to ask you if there was anything that I hadn’t mentioned that you had particularly wanted to talk about today, knowing that this interview was coming.

VL: I don’t know. There are things that I—yeah, sure—early on in the campus’s history because the students knew each other so well, there were things that we all were involved with that we all knew about. When Jacques Cousteau’s Calypso came—of course, he’s not generally considered a scientist. He’s considered, or was considered, an adventurer, an explorer if you will. But when Calypso was docked at Bayboro Harbor, you know, we spent hours on board Calypso, which is an opportunity most people just don’t have in their lifetime. All of the French staff and the French scientists, the French kids that were on board, and I say kids, I mean young, (recording skips) that were on board. At lunchtime they would come over and everybody would meet on the grass, and we would play soccer or that kind of thing.

The British navy used to have dockage at the University of South Florida as a getaway, kind of as a, you know, a vacation for their sailors, and we did a good job of entertaining the British navy. (VL and LJ laugh) And you know, soccer always seemed like it was catalyst, and there were a lot of soccer players on campus. We did a lot of sailing. We had a small, a couple of small sailing vessels at the time. On Labor Day, as many of us as possible would go down to City Island in Sarasota, and we would be involved with the Labor Day regatta. And it was an annual event. We loved it. So you know, a lot of my particular memories of South Florida—other than having you know, such really exceptional educational opportunities in these really exceptional professors and these small classes—was social. And [it] actually provided my entire social life for me at time in my life. So it was pretty terrific.

LJ: Were you able to make friends and contacts that you keep up to this day?

VL: Oh sure. Absolutely, Yeah. As a matter of fact, some the friends and contacts that I made at South Florida campaigned for me to be elected to city council, which I’m very grateful for.

6A French conservationist, ocean explorer and scientist. He co-developed the Aqua-lung which was later refined to the open-circuit scuba technology used today. During his life, he produced more than 120 documentaries and more than 50 books. His work allowed people to appreciate and understand the resources of the ocean.
LJ: Do you have any final thoughts that you'd like to add?

VL: No, I don’t think so. I’m looking forward to a bright future for the university.

LJ: Good. Thank you.

VL: Uh-huh. You bet.

*End of interview*