Suzette Berkman: My name is Suzette Berkman. I’m an oral historian. And I have the distinct pleasure of interviewing, this December 16th [2008], Wit Ostrenko, who is President of the Museum of Science and Industry [MOSI, Tampa, Florida]. Thank you, Wit, for doing this. [A] pure pleasure.

Wit Ostrenko: Well, it’s my pleasure.

SB: Well, typically, we begin in your early years, like where you were born.

WO: Oh. All the way back.

SB: Yes, please.

WO: I was born on an island—

SB: Where?

WO: —off New York State. It’s called Brooklyn.

SB: (laughs) I think you cheated.

WO: Well, you know, you say New York, and already you’re labeled as a Yankee, and then—
WO: But Brooklyn is—I only lived there for two years, and everybody—it’s really amazing. I was at a museum conference in Kansas City, and this guy was from the Brooklyn Museum and he stood up and said, “Listen, let me ask all of you. There’s about three hundred people out here in the audience, and I’m having an argument with my friend. I said that in any audience you come across, one out of five people have either lived in Brooklyn or were born in Brooklyn. Now, out of you three hundred people, how many does that hold true for?” And sixty people raised their hands.

SB: Oh, my goodness gracious.

WO: So, it’s—

SB: And how many stay there?

WO: Oh, no. They’re all—we’re—they’re all gone. (laughs)

SB: So, at the age of two, where did you go?

WO: Well, my grandfather, Peter Ostrenko, and two of his sons, decided to buy a dairy farm. My father was born in the Ukraine and lived in Poland until he was ten, on a farm. And my grandfather had worked a farm and so did my grandmother. So, they decided to get a dairy farm in the middle of New York State, for twelve thousand dollars, about two hundred acres in the middle of New York State, if you can imagine. So, I lived on a dairy farm with a one-room schoolhouse and a little white schoolhouse, next to a little white church, and walked to school in the snow, as they say.

SB: Amazing, and for how long?

WO: And that was until I was ten. And lived—worked in the—

SB: Did he teach you the language, Russian?

WO: You know, my father, when he came to this country, he spoke Polish, and my—he lived in Poland—and my grandfather came over before the kids came over. So, he worked in this country for about four or five years and then brought them over in 1929. (laughs)

SB: Great year to come. Oh, boy.

WO: So, my grandfather was appalled that they all—all the kids spoke Polish and didn’t speak Russian. He was, of course, Russian. And so, he forced everybody to speak—to learn Russian while the kids were learning English in the streets and in school. And so, my father said, “Never will I do that to my children,” and forced them to learn a language. So, I listened to my grandmother speak Polish and my father speak Russian and
never—I got totally confused listening to them. But it’s funny. In high school, I had a high school that taught Russian, so I took two years of Russian in high school and, then, two years in college.

SB: Oh, that’s great.

WO: So, *ya gavaru parusky. A te?*

SB: Oh, wonderful. (laughs) Wish I could answer you, but I can’t.

WO: I just said I speak Russian, but not fluently.

SB: Uh-huh. Well, what was your experience like in a small school—

WO: You know, it was funny, it was—

SB: —and what was the (inaudible) experience?

WO: —the one-room schoolhouses, I remember like the first day, it was September, but it was snowing outside. (laughs) And there were six grades in the—twenty-two students, six grades, one teacher. Just a classic, old time, one-room schoolhouse. I went there until I was fourth—through my fourth grade—nope, through my third grade. And then we had to go to the big school in Cobleskill, which had a population of about three thousand, versus—

SB: Oh, wow.

WO: —Barnerville, which had a population of one hundred. So, there were four kids in my class, but two of us were so far ahead of the other two kids that we sort of had our own little sub-grade of two, Carol Swienhardt and myself. We were—she taught me how to read, actually, in kindergarten, by reading comic books.

SB: Oh, my gosh. Great source.

WO: You know, I think it was—the education was so wonderful, because as a kindergarten kid, you got to listen to the third and fourth graders talking about American history and the fifth and six graders talking about world history. Where’s the elementary school where you ever got to do that at, where you could listen in? And you were—I like that multiple age group, instead of being stuck with all the four year olds and five year olds and six year olds, together. That’s all you know. You don’t have a role model of someone being—

SB: Well, did you have several?

WO: —more sophisticated. No, not at that time. I was an only child—
SB: So, in a way, those older kids were kind of like the (inaudible).

WO: Yeah. We were old enough to—the closest—living on a farm on top of the hill, we were—Carol, who was my nearest neighbor, was down the hill and down this—I remember this path and I spent so much time at her house that her parents called my parents to say, “You know, shouldn’t you keep your son for a while?” (both laugh) I was so devastated.

SB: Was she a special friend?

WO: Yes, it really was. She really was. And she had a brother who taught me sports and—

SB: Oh, that’s great.

WO: So, it was mostly a life spent roaming—there’s a famous story that, when we first moved to the farm, as a two and a half year old, I was walking and I had disappeared. They didn’t know where I was on a two hundred acre farm.

SB: Oh, my God.

WO: Finally, they got a phone call from somebody who said, “Do you have a child, small child? He’s sitting on the railroad trestle over the top of the railroad tracks that separate your property from my property.” And I was sitting there, sitting on the—on the edge of the trestle with my baby bottle. (laughs)

SB: Oh, how did you get there?

WO: It was a two mile walk from the house.

SB: But, I mean, the trestle you have to climb.

WO: Nah. It was a—actually, it was a cattle crossing trestle over the railroad. The railroad actually passed underneath. So, they were afraid I would fall off and get hurt.

SB: You were exploring.

WO: Yeah. And I think I still today feel—I’m an introvert, not an extrovert, which most people are surprised at. And I think I got that from, first of all, living on that dairy farm, spending a lot of time by myself. And then, after that, I lived on a sailboat with my parents for seven years. So, it was more time alone.

SB: I definitely want to hear about that experience. But back to the farm, did you have duties?
WO: No, I was—I’d just got to the point, other than making my own room, and the chores were shoveled a little snow but farm work is so, so heavy duty. The thing I did—was learning how to do when we first left—I was ten and I could lift a sixty pound bale of hay off the ground and put it up onto the hay wagon. So, they were real excited about that, that I was going to get to do some of the heavy lifting. But, luckily—so, I did not have any real farm chores. So I was just free to roam all over the—

SB: I’m curious if those early years—(clears throat) excuse me—affected, you know, your later interest in science. So, it was just exploring.

WO: Yeah, I think so. Yeah. My father would do crazy things. Like, in the dead of winter, Sunday, we’d go for a five-mile hike and we’d get into some woods somewhere. And he goes, “Okay. Here’s a match for you and here’s a match for Mary,” my mother, “and here’s my match. Now we have to—this is the one match we have. Now, this is—if we’re in the woods alone and we—and everybody—if you’re by yourself and you have to start a fire and you have one match, we’re going to practice doing that.” So, it—

SB: Wow! Sort of stimulated you.

WO: Lessons like that created a lot of problem-solving ability, and also the realization that sometimes what you have is what you’ve got to keep. If you have a match, you’ve got to hang on to it because you’re going to need it. And we all lit our fire. It was just snow covering the ground. Now you’ve got to find some stuff that will burn, so you’ve got to find little pieces of dried moss or pine needles or clear the snow away. And it was not an easy task, but we all did it.

SB: Sounds like he prepared you well.

WO: Yeah. And, then, there was the horses, I’d learn how to ride a horse. We had twenty-six cats, and so I learned to love cats. We were only allowed to have one inside the house. This was a twelve-room house. My grandparents lived on one end. My uncle was upstairs and my mother and father and I were at the other end. A one burner potbellied stove kept the house not warm—(laughs)

SB: Oh, no.

WO: —but that was the other thing that I realized. My mother could not sleep with the windows closed. And so, I remember one morning in the dead of winter, I woke up and wanted somebody to start the fire. So, I went upstairs and there was the window open with wind—with snow on the windowsill and snow outside—inside the bedroom on the floor. It wasn’t melting because it was—and then, I looked at the two of them sleeping and their breath had frozen on the blankets.

SB: Oh. (laughing) Oh, my gosh.

WO: I mean, it would get to you.
SB: That’s a vivid image.

WO: Below zero [degrees Fahrenheit] and freezing. So, it’s amazing you don’t need to stay at seventy-five degrees at all times, you just—I remember having eleven layers of blankets on my bed. And I remember my mother would feel sorry for me, so she’d take her winter coat and put it on top of that.

SB: Aw.

WO: And then, my favorite memory is waking up in the morning with my cat laying across my neck because it was the only warm part (laughs) that was exposed. And, then, she would, like, lick my ear to wake me up, or just—

SB: That’s a great story.

WO: So, lots of memories of—

SB: (inaudible) very (inaudible)

WO: —wide-open ranges in the summer time and springtime, damming up these little creeks and rivers and playing, catching sunfish and just go to the swimming hole. My father wouldn’t buy me a bicycle unless I swam this swimming hole. It was literally a dug out area to be the local area of swimming. I mean, it was just a rock pit. But it was far across, I thought, at the time. And he said, “Well, if you can—

SB: How old were you?

WO: I was seven or eight, and I had my eye on this three-speed Schwinn bike. And he goes, “No way.” So, he figured if he gave me this challenge, it would take me a year or two to swim across this lake. Well, I finished—I did it in that summer.

SB: That’s great.

WO: And that’s the other thing. Give me a goal, and I’ll get there.

SB: Even at the age of seven.

WO: Yeah.

SB: Great.

WO: I couldn’t ride this bike because it was too big for me. (both laugh) It was twenty-six inches high. But I said, “Don’t trade it in. I’m going to—I’ll figure it out.” I was one of those kids that you can’t lower the seat enough, so you just stand and pedal all the time. That’s what I was doing, up and down hills. It was crazy.
SB: Isn’t that something.

WO: So, I had to walk through the snow to get to school.

SB: So, at the age of ten, what happened?

WO: Well, we left the farm. In Schenectady, New York is a big General Electric plant, and my mother had gotten a secretarial job there. This is an eastern European family so you can imagine it was a boisterous, loud argumentative group of folks. My uncle left first. He couldn’t take it anymore. And so, my father followed suit and started commuting from the farm, thirty miles, in the snow. I mean, they were skidding down hills and it was crazy. He says, “Well, let’s move to Schenectady.” And he already, at that time, had this plan to go sailing around the world. So, the transition year, we all—and I didn’t know that at the time.

So, we moved to Schenectady, New York and I was right up the hill from the G.E. plant. My father was handy at tools—he taught himself how to be a machinist—and my mother was still a secretary. And they were saving every nickel they had. They were putting—just plowing it into the bank, probably amassed maybe—I think it was like twelve thousand dollars or fifteen thousand dollars, something like that. And we bought a sailboat for about—I think it was like five thousand dollars. But this was an ocean-going, thirty-three foot, double-ended ketch built in Denmark, a very stable, very secure boat that you could take around the world.¹

SB: What gave them this dream, do you think?

WO: Um, well, as living in New York—believe it or not, New Yorkers have lots of boats.

SB: I did know that.

WO: And they love their summers, and everybody’s out on a boat. So, when my father got back from World War II, they all decided—they had seen enough death and destruction, and my uncle caught leukemia while he was in the service. That was his third brother. He died and so he said, “You know, we need to get a boat, too.” So they bought this fifty-foot schooner. I remember seeing photographs of me on it. I was standing at the mast, on the foredeck, holding one of the halyards in my hand, total blond, bleached blond hair. Now I’ve got dark hair going grey going back to white again. So, they had this sailing dream. They’re all that eastern European romanticists of whatever—

SB: That’s interesting.

¹ A ketch is a sailing craft with two masts.
WO: —have a dream, you’re okay. So, he had that dream for a (inaudible) number of years until, I guess, for, maybe, fifteen years, to go sailing again. And he used to like to read Joshua Slocum’s single-handed voyage around the world, sailing. He read all of the Hornblower books and got me to read the Hornblower books. It was all this *Captain Blood*, and just sailing adventures on the high seas. And so, he—well, we went out to Long Island Sound and practiced sailing it on weekends. I’d get seasick every time we went. (both laugh)

SB: Oh, no.

WO: Okay, and, then, so, I got out of sixth—fifth grade in the Schenectady school system—which, by the way, I felt like I had repeated the fourth grade from my one room schoolhouse. Then we started out in the early summer on this sailboat and tried to get out the north end of Long Island Sound. Winds were terrible, couldn’t get out, had a good time hankering there and finally decided to go—cause either you’re out in the open ocean. If you go down to the southern end of Long Island Sound, you’ve got to go down the East River into New York Harbor and all that business. So, he didn’t want to do that, but we were forced to.

But I’m so glad that he did, because I still have the vivid memories of going down the East River and seeing this strange-looking building and my father going, “Oh, that’s the United Nations building. Hang on.” Then he’d start a little conversation about what the United Nations—you see, we were on a sailboat with this huge city on the left where I was born in Brooklyn, and this—and Manhattan on the right, under the Brooklyn Bridge—the 57th Street Bridge [59th Street Bridge], which later in life, I ran the Boston Marathon—I mean, the New York City Marathon—and ran over that bridge. We went and anchored by the Statue of Liberty.

SB: What a thrill. (WO laughs) I know exactly where you’re talking about.

WO: My grandmother lived in—my mother was born in Jersey City. My grandmother was still living in a brownstone on Whiton Street. He said, “Well, let’s go see—let’s go visit Grandma” (laughs) unannounced. They all—everybody knows we, like, left to go—

SB: Where did you dock?

WO: —sailing around the world. So we—(laughs) I remember we had a clear, plastic dinghy. You can—it was clear fiberglass. It was just—but you could see through it. It was pretty cool. (laughs)

SB: It’s great to see fish.

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2 Slocum (1844-1909) was the first man to sail single-handedly around the world, the story of which is told in his book *Sailing Alone Around the World*.
3 C.S. Forester’s series of novels about Horatio Hornblower, a Napoleonic era British naval officer.
4 *Captain Blood* was the first in a popular series of pirate novels by Rafael Sabatini.
WO: I remember the three of us, and we rode over to the—where now they re-did Ellis Island.

SB: Ellis Island.

WO: We were just up the Hudson River from that where the old broken-down wharf docks are. It was horrible. And we tied up the dinghy and clambered and walked to someplace where we could catch a taxi, and showed up at Grandma’s house.


WO: So everybody had to come on the boat and see the boat before we took off, so we rowed everybody back to the boat.

SB: What year was this?

WO: It was 1958. That would’ve been the summer of 1958.

SB: Okay. Just [to] get perspective.

WO: Yeah. So, we were there for three or four days and, then, so, “Okay. Bye.” (laughs) There was no bridge going over from Brooklyn to Staten Island, the Verrazano Bridge [Verrazano-Narrows Bridge]. That bridge wasn’t there. Then I remember running my marathon. You start in Staten Island and run over that bridge. It was just filled with memories and sailing out New York Harbor.

Then, when we got out on the ocean, I got seasick again, and stayed seasick for two days. The winds were—you actually travel southeast to go down the Eastern Seaboard. We were going to go to Miami [Florida] and stop off and see my uncle, who was on the farm; he moved to Miami—stop off to see him before we go into the Caribbean, to the Panama Canal, across the Pacific and—

SB: Gosh. And you did all that?

WO: No. But we did get to Miami. (both laugh) So, a crazy story, another—being close to death on the high seas brings you closer to life. ’Cause I thought I was going to die, being seasick for two days, but then my father said, “Okay, we’re going to go into the Chesapeake Bay, and then we’re going to take the Intracoastal Waterway and get out of this. ’Cause we’re tacking ten miles out to sea and tacking back into shore ten miles and, then, back out to sea.” So, we made a hundred miles by sailing five hundred miles. (both laugh) So, he couldn’t—we couldn’t—it was just too much.

I remember heading—one morning we were finally heading into the Chesapeake Bay, and you can’t—there’s no bridge there, either, crossing from Norfolk [Virginia] to—what is that, Maryland?—east coast of Maryland.
SB: On the Chesapeake Bay?

WO: There’s, I guess, a tunnel now. Is it a tunnel, or—

SB: There is a tunnel [Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel].

WO: It’s the tunnel.

SB: Yeah, it’s from Norfolk—

WO: So, they had ferries going back and forth. So, we’re sailing in and under full sail, and it’s getting calmer. So, I’m now conscious, and we see this black line coming off from the land. It looks like bad weather because—it was something strange, because all of these insects started clinging onto our rigging, dragonflies and wasps, and it gives me goosebumps on the back of my neck just remembering them. They’re just hanging. They’re going—we’re in the middle of—we cannot—barely see land on either side, and here comes this thunderstorm coming. I mean, not just a cell but a whole line, a squall line, coming off the land.

And then we see—we look off to the left, we see one of the ferries coming across in front of us and another ferry on the right coming in the other direction. And we’re going right in between ’em when the storm hits. So, we have to take all the sails down. We’ve been at sea for two and a half days. We break out soap. We’re going to wash up and cleanse off in the storm.

Well, the engine is running. It stops running. We throw out a sea anchor, which was our bucket. A sea anchor keeps you in, sort of, one position. But then we realize that now—we’re now stationary in between these two ferries. And you cannot see anything. So, here’s this blast from the south (makes sound of ship’s air horn), this blast from the north (makes a different ship’s horn sound), and we were in the middle of ’em. And I’m going, even as a ten year old—eleven year old—I figured that, “You know, this is not good.” (laughs)

SB: Did you have a horn?

WO: Well, luckily, they were looking for each other, not for us.

SB: But did you have a horn to signal them?

WO: No. They wouldn’t have—they couldn’t have heard.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: We didn’t have anything like that.
SB: To go that distance.

WO: I mean, these are huge three hundred, four-hundred-foot ferries. They’re giant ships compared to our thirty-three foot boat. They had life rafts bigger than our boat. So, they passed in front of us, and we luckily—

SB: Narrowly missed.

WO: We started the engine, again, after the waves were just sloshing everything around so much that it just stopped. So, we got that started. We put up some sails. The storm ended.

SB: Were you terrified?

WO: Yeah. It was very nerve-wracking. The boat was rocking side-to-side, horrendous waves. Yeah, it was pretty terrifying. But my father was singing songs in the rain, (both laugh) and then it was cold. First, we were too hot. Now we were freezing.

SB: God, I learned a lot about you.

WO: And you don’t want to go down below, because I knew I’d get sick if I went down below. So, we were all exhausted by the time we anchored in the—right off of Norfolk, in between Virginia Beach and Norfolk. Normally we’d be up by sunrise. And then we hear this commotion. I’m sleeping in the forward berth, and I hear this (makes repeating sound). I’m going, “What?” This repeating sound. I’m going, “Oh, wow, I’m trying to sleep.” So, I stick my head up the forward hatch, and all I see is this wall of grey. I can’t figure out—it’s moving. It’s this giant wall, as far to the left as I could see, and far to the right that I could see and as far up that I could see. We’re anchored off the major [U.S.] Navy ship channel, and this is a giant battleship coming by.

SB: From Norfolk.

WO: Yeah.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: There was an aircraft carrier, a battleship, cruisers, destroyers, the whole—it looked like the whole U.S. Navy was going to sea. (laughs)


WO: So then, (laughs) we stayed there all day watching the stuff go by.

SB: That is neat. So, how many years were you on this adventure?
WO: Well, it took us all summer. We stopped—we went down the Intracoastal Waterway, sailing and motoring. We’d stop every night, instead of being out at sea all night long. So we got to see everything, all these estuaries, beautiful estuaries, all the Virginia estuaries. I remember we stopped off of Charleston [South Carolina] for a number of days, actually got a—stayed at a dock. (laughter)

And we’d go in and visit these towns. It was like a tourist, but they’d say, “What hotel are you staying in?” “Oh, we’re on our sailboat.” And everybody thought that was very exotic. The sailing community is a very friendly community. So, you’re—we’d be sitting—as soon as we’d dock, we’d hear a (makes knocking sound) “Anybody aboard?” “Aw, c’mon aboard!” You know, “Who are you?” “Who are you?” “Hey, you want to stay for dinner and—” There’s all these “Where have you been?” “Oh, we’re sailing from Australia.” So, we get to meet people all around the world on this one trip to Miami.

I remember our engine totally blew up in Georgia, near Savannah. Savannah’s not on the Intracoastal, but it’s nearby. So, we—I remember we stopped in Thunderbolt [Georgia].

SB: Never heard of it. (both laugh)

WO: (laughing) I know. It’s this little bait shop, I think, on the water. And they go, “Oh, we can’t fix that engine. You need a new engine. You gotta go—” So, the next—we went to Isle of Hope [Georgia]. (laughs)

SB: Oh, gosh.

WO: (laughing) It’s the name of the town.

SB: Hopefully, more hopeful?

WO: Isle of Hope, Georgia. It was. They had a restaurant, and they had—

SB: Did they have an engine?

WO: They had a marine supply place that’s—

SB: Oh, that’s great.

WO: But it was only—it was like fifty, sixty people that lived in town. But it was close enough to Savannah, people lived in that and drove to Savannah for work. But then, I made some friends and it took eighteen days. We stayed there for eighteen days waiting for this engine to be shipped in from somewhere. So, it was all these Georgia salt marshes. We’d get in my little plastic see-through dinghy (SB laughs), two friends and I, and we’d go rowing into the estuaries, just places where only this little boat could go.

I remember this one kid said, “Hey. You know how to throw a cast net?” And I said, “No. What’s a cast net?” (laughs) Here I am, a New Yorker from a dairy farm—
WO: So, we go into these tidal tributaries with a cast net. And we start throwing into these things and catching blue crabs, shrimp, fish and he said, “You ever have deviled crabs?” And I go, “No. I don’t think so.” (SB laughs)

So we caught all this stuff and brought it back to his mother—

SB: That’s so fun.

WO: —and she cooked up those blue crabs and boiled all the fish and shrimp and chopped ’em up into pieces, and we had deviled crabs and sassafras tea. We had to go dig the sassafras roots out, and he showed me how to find it. But, man, a root that smells like root beer.

SB: Wow. What a great experience.

WO: (laughs) We’d boil them up. Then, of course, we wanted money to go buy Cokes, and their parents wouldn’t give us any money. So, we were watching—it was this—in this restaurant, one of their things they served was turtle soup. We watched them, and we couldn’t figure out what they [the turtles] were eating. And we go, “What do you feed these turtles?” And he says, “Well, we feed ’em just grain, but really, they love fiddler crabs. Hey, you boys. You bring me back a bucket of fiddler crabs; I’ll give you Cokes for a week.”

So, we knew where all the fiddler crabs were—you know, the crabs with the red, big—the males have a big fiddle, a big claw and a little claw. So, on the islands, in the saltwater marshes, there would be these sand spots where there would be hundreds of thousands of fiddler crabs. They would cover, literally cover, the ground. So, we go rowing up with buckets, empty buckets, (both laugh) and we’d go onto this island and these fiddler crabs were running all over the place. And we each run up with a bucket, and we’re scooping as fast as we can and throwing them into the bucket before they grab a hold of you. And one of ’em would grab a hold of you and you’d yelp and throw ’em in there. And you kept on throwing ’em in this bucket and they couldn’t crawl up the side.

Then, we didn’t know what they were going to do. So, we filled three buckets, brought ’em back to him, and they go, “Wow. Okay, y’all three have free Cokes for the week.”

SB: Oh, that’s great.

WO: And they threw these fiddler crabs with those turtles. And there was all this crunching sound of these turtles eating our fiddler crabs that we’d just had so much fun catching.

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5 Interviewee clarifies: “Cherry Cokes.”
SB: They eat crabs?

WO: Yeah.

SB: Who would know that?

WO: I don’t know. (laughs)

SB: How big were the turtles?

WO: They were good size, you know, like our sliders, red-bellied sliders; probably a foot long would be a big one and—to six inches. They would just—and then, they’d harvest those turtles to make turtle soup out of ’em.

SB: Oh, my gosh. How interesting.

WO: So, it was this whole “living off the land” is what—when we were—what I was engaged in. It was just fun being—and that restaurant would have—would be—was the movie theater. They had a sixteen-millimeter projector, and we’d drink our free Cokes and watch free movies at night.

SB: You have a lot of good memories.

WO: So then, we finally made it down to Miami. I remember anchoring—tying up at a dock in Miami, downtown Miami, at Bayfront Marina. Called my uncle up, we chatted, and my father was—they were going to teach me on the boat. So we got this correspondence course for my age group, and a box of books arrived. I met some of the other kids that were living on the docks and they said, “Oh, yeah. I did fifth grade on the boat. So, you’re going to do sixth grade.” And she says, “I go to school through here.” This was Labor Day weekend.

So, right after Labor Day weekend we’re going to shove off and go into the Caribbean. People said, “You can’t take your family into the Caribbean in the middle of hurricane season. (laughs) You won’t survive. You got to—everybody sails out of the Caribbean during the hurricane season. They go into shore. They go north. They go somewhere else other than into the Caribbean. You cannot do that.” So, my father says, “Okay. We’ll put Junior in school.”

We didn’t want to—my father didn’t want to pay the exorbitant dockage fees, so we went upriver to Nuta’s marina [Nuta’s Boatyard]. Old-time guy; his father used to run rum during the alcohol Prohibition back and forth from the Bahamas to Miami. He had enough money to buy this marina right across from the Seminole Indian Reservation tourist attraction. It’s all owned by the Seminole Indians.
So, I had entered this school, Southside Elementary, a whole new school in Miami.\(^6\) But I didn’t want to transfer, so I rode my bike all that distance. I’d put my bike into the dinghy, the plastic dinghy, row it across the Miami River to the Seminole Indian shore, and then, I asked them if I could tie my dinghy up there ’cause I had to go to school. And they said, “Sure.” So I rode my bike through the Seminole (laughs) Reservation to (inaudible).

SB: There are alligators in that area.

WO: Oh, there was alligators, there was manatee and moccasins and—

SB: Barracuda.

WO: Yeah.

SB: Yeah.

WO: No problem.

SB: Okay.

WO: So, my father said no. That was when I got into trouble in school. We had a recess, and I had—we were playing this game where you inhale and exhale a lot and then somebody will squeeze you from behind. I passed right out. (both laugh)

SB: Oh, no.

WO: Fell on the floor. They called my father, and he goes, “You’re gettin’ out of that school. People aren’t paying attention to what’s going on with you.” So, I finally had to move closer to the boat.\(^7\) And then we moved up the river, farther, because my father didn’t like the dockage fees there, either, ’cause now he’s not working. He’s just—we’re living off our savings. We’re supposed to be sailing and living off the ocean. So, he gets a job as a minimum wage—as a marine carpenter. Back then it was probably a dollar an hour or something, less than that. This is still fifty-eight [1958].

I remember he finds this place where there’s free dockage, farther up the Miami River, where the Miami Jai-Alai Fronton is. But there’s no running water, no electricity, and no docks. So, we go pulling up. I jump in the water, swim ashore with a line, tie it to a tree, he throws an anchor out and positioned the boat so it doesn’t run up against the shore. We go chop down two Australian pine trees and drive them into the ground and build a dock. (laughs)

SB: Oh, wow. Oh, how—

\(^6\) Interviewee clarifies: “New to me.”

\(^7\) Interviewee clarifies: “Move closer to school.”
WO: So, that’s where I lived for seven years, without—

SB: Seven years, all because of the hurricane season.

WO: —without running water or electricity. Yeah. (both laugh) He’s still there. This is 2008, so that was—

SB: Your dad?

WO: —that was fifty years ago, today. (inaudible)

SB: Your father?

WO: Yes.

SB: Is still in Miami?


SB: Isn’t that wonderful!

WO: So, here we are, living on this boat. We have an iceman who delivers ice twice a week, leaves this big cooler on the dock. He comes in with a big block of ice. It was just crazy. My dad bought a car to haul—a station wagon, so he could haul water in some five gallon Army G.I. cans. The tropics got to my mother and father, and I wound up with three sisters, born when I was thirteen, fifteen and seventeen. She was pregnant—

SB: In Miami.

WO: Yeah. So, when she—she had four children, and was pregnant eight times. And the last time she was pregnant, I ready had a car. I had to drive her to the hospital because my father was working. There was no cell phones. We had no phone. It’d have been ridiculous to go get my father, so I just put her in the car, and she was hemorrhaging. Took her to Mount Sinai [Medical Center]—no, not Mount Sinai. What was the name of it? It’s right across the street from Jackson Memorial [Hospital].

SB: Uh-huh. (inaudible).

WO: Anyway, I have my [bank] passbook. It’s no—we had no health insurance. I’m seventeen, eighteen, seventeen and a half. So, I know hospitals (inaudible), but the word’s out about hospitals. If you don’t have health insurance, you’ve got to have cash.

I have no cash. My mother’s bleeding. I take her in there and she’s standing there, and I’m arguing with this admissions clerk to let my mother in. And I said, “Hang on. I have this passbook. I have three thousand dollars.” Back then I had three thousand dollars. I
had saving and working odd jobs and stuff. Her whole hospital bill was going to be about seven hundred dollars. So, I remember this African-American gentleman. He looks at me and he winks. He puts my mother in a wheelchair and just takes her in.

SB: Oh, isn’t that wonderful.

WO: So, they let me go get five hundred dollars of cash out of the bank and bring it back to ’em. So, I felt—you know, all of those—

SB: That was some (inaudible) experience.

WO: Yeah. I was sort of a surrogate father, a big, big brother, to these—

SB: To your sisters.

WO: —three blond girls.

SB: How did you feel about that?

WO: Oh, it was a pain, (laughs) ’cause I—

SB: Wait. You were a pain or it was a pain?

WO: No. Oh, I was definitely a pain. I’d tease them to the point where they would—I’d have all three of ’em crying (SB laughs), just playing, not letting ’em pass by, all these games. Just tease ’em to the point where they couldn’t take it anymore.

SB: Did you like having siblings? ’Cause you had been the only child.

WO: (inaudible) ’cause I was the convenient babysitter, so I hated that. Here I am born to roam with baby bottles over train tracks and go sailing on the high seas. By that time, I was a scholar-athlete. I played all sports, and I wanted to go play sports with my friends. I didn’t want to hang around with these three girls.

SB: So, now you’re in high school.

WO: Yeah, when I was in high school. Yeah. I went to middle school, and then high school. Yeah, Miami Springs Junior High, and then high school. An interesting—four thousand people in my high school.

SB: Oh, that’s big.

WO: And that was only tenth, eleventh and twelfth [grades]. So, there were eleven hundred people that graduated in my senior year.

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8 Interviewee adds: “Hialeah High School.”
SB: That’s a big school. What did you study?

WO: In high school it was just general, but (inaudible)—

SB: Were sciences of interest?

WO: Well, like I said, I took my Russian. I took typical math. I was so mad because they wouldn’t let me into advanced—well, they wouldn’t let me start algebra in ninth grade. So, I had to take algebra in—I guess it was—

SB: That’s usually ninth grade, I think.

WO: Yeah. But there was a group of us that—we were sort of hotshot scholars, and I didn’t get in. They said, “See, you’re better at English.” And I said, “Me?” (laughs) “I can’t even spell. Look at my penmanship. Grammar? What’s that?” I couldn’t diagram a sentence. They said, “Oh, no. You’re so good at that.” So, anyway, I did geometry at—somehow I thought it was tenth grade. I guess it was maybe eleventh grade—

SB: Those four—

WO: —and, then, algebra II.  

SB: (inaudible)

WO: I should have been in calculus. I wanted to be. My biology teacher in tenth grade changed my life. He just liked my attitude. I caught on fairly—

SB: Which grade was this?

WO: Tenth grade. So, I really had a great time in biology. In this new curriculum, you could really dissect live frogs. You had to pith them, you had to stick the needles into their brains and scramble their brains, and then—so, I was really—somehow, I—

SB: So, was it the teacher or the subject?

WO: Yeah, it was the teacher. I remember, ’cause I was in—I was playing football, and in sports they told us, “No sex. No smoking. You’ve got to study, or you can’t play.” So, that was enough for me. All those sports kids were good athletes and good—

SB: A good teacher can really change your perspective.

WO: Yeah, and where I—it was really the coaches, the coaches and my father. My father’s rule was if I came up with a C I didn’t go out. I didn’t go out till the next grading period, till I brought that back up.

9 Interviewee clarifies: “As a senior.”
I remember in seventh grade I made a C in conduct. And it was a—you had to get an A, B, C, D, F for a grade, and then you had a 1, 2 or 3 for effort. I got a A-2-C. I made a 2 in effort. (both laugh) I really got an A and a C in conduct. And that was it. My father hit the roof. He was a total disciplinarian. He was a sergeant in the Army in World War II. He was the eastern—he hollered at you all the time. (inaudible)

SB: Well, did that help you (inaudible) today?

WO: Yeah. I think—yeah, it really regimented me. But it stifled me. I didn’t get to express myself or carry on a conversation with my parents. That was forbidden. But living on the river, my father—we would collect stuff out of—my mother would be, like, the original earth mother. She would haul all this wood that came floating down the river, and garbage. She collected it out of the river and it would pile up on the shore. And my father said, “We’ve got to get rid that stuff.” She goes, “Well, burn it.” So that’s what he did. We had chairs that float down the river. He’d pick them up and saw the legs off and then sit on the ground, and then these upholstered chairs, all kinds—the entire garbage of humanity floats down the river.

SB: Then. They would get a hefty fine today.

WO: Yeah. So my father and mother collected it all. So, my father, every night, since we had no TV [television] or electricity, so we’d have a fire. I felt like I had just gone back a hundred thousand (SB laughs) years in human evolution.

And we’re sitting around this fire talking. And all the other river rats, these other people living on boats in the same place—another boat had six children. My best friend was living on that boat. His father would come over. He smoked a pipe. And they would get into such arguments. One night my father would be arguing that black is black. (thumps on the furniture) He’d be arguing, “No. White is white or black is white.” And then, the next night he wouldn’t be there and another guy would come in and my father would take the other side. It was like this debate class, (laughs) ’cause these were all people who were well read. They were all—

SB: Profound impact.

WO: —they were artists. There was this—I remember this one guy was a total alcoholic and he was living on this dump of a boat. But when he was sober or un-sober he would paint, oil paint. I remember he was drawing the hand of God and man, just the hands. I didn’t quite understand it. He explained the whole thing to me.

He gave me a boat, an open ten footer with a little engine in. You learn how to take the engine apart all by yourself and fix it, fool with it, and go out into the water and go running around until the engine stops and you have to row back. My father would sail with the sailboat. I learned a lot of problem solving by scientific method. You’re confronted with a problem.
My eleventh and twelfth grades I worked with—not with them, but at the same marine yard where they built boats and repaired yachts. They just gave me jobs, real construction work, to do. But they wouldn’t let—they’d make me design it first, and then show it to the foreman, and then he’d say, “No. It’s not good. Go back and figure this out again.” And then I’d do another design. And then, he’d say, “Okay. Let’s go down and sit there and look at this.” ’Cause with a boat, it’s got all these curved lines. There’s nothing straight line, like a house with vertical lines and horizontal lines. Once in a while you have an arch, whoa. (inaudible)

SB: You were designing them?

WO: Just pieces of it, parts of it. I had to build the—

SB: Big boats, or (inaudible)?

WO: He had us—we—no. This was sixty foot. We were building a solid mahogany, sixty foot boat for a used car salesman in from Puerto Rico. And he wanted a live fish well in the back of the boat. Here’s this yacht, and you have to drill holes in bottom of the boat for this live fish well. (laughs) My father designed that. When I—I mean, I had to help build the flying bridge. So, there were three curves, one that was curved this way, and, then, the glass was curved this way. And so, we—and we had to fill the—make a jig, a mold where we could build this.

And then, I’d come up with these two ideas. And then the foreman says, “Well, how about this idea,” which was ten times better than my idea. So, he says, “Or, you could do it this way.” It was another idea, which was ten times better than the one he just came up with. Finally, we got to talking a little bit, and we came up with yet a third way which was, like, the way.

SB: What great experience.

WO: I think—yeah. And he took the time. This was an old-timer. This guy was—years of experience. They just all liked the fact that I was hard working, polite, quiet, (laughs) and all that upbringing of “Speak when you’re spoken to.”

SB: Isn’t that great.

WO: So, now I can’t shut up. (laughs) It’s all coming out of me now.

SB: (inaudible) I’m so glad. Oh, fascinating story!

WO: So, I think that there’s no correct answer for any solution or the other (inaudible) that there’s many solutions for any problem. So, as E.O. Wilson in biology says, it’s knowing the science, and then knowing social science, and having an ethical knowledge or ways of discussing ethics and science and social science. And together, those three
things work together in a very complex way, can actually move society in a positive
direction. If you’re missing one of those components, it moves it in the wrong direction.

SB: Very interesting. I mean, I’m—

WO: ’Cause you’re building a boat, and somebody’s going to take it on the high seas. It
can’t leak. People will die.

SB: You’re in trouble, right?

WO: So, it—

SB: But practical knowledge, you really got a lot.

WO: So, it ends with—the good thing about living without water was my father bought
me a car when I was fifteen. He bought two cars. He was the big—a good haggler. So, he
was buying a station wagon for himself. So, at sixteen you could drive. I think at fourteen
you had a—I was—you could have a learner’s permit.

SB: Back then.

WO: Back then. And I was already driving for a year. So he bought me a car so I could
go haul water. I figured out (laughs) what the ulterior motive was. So, I had a little hose
in the back of my car and I would go pull up behind Winn-Dixie or Publix and put my
hose onto the—and fill up these water cans, and then haul them.

SB: I (inaudible) a very vivid picture of your early years.

WO: Oh, it’s the only time my mother ever got mad at me. Can you imagine? She has a
two burner stove that she’s cooking meals [on], three meals a day for her children. And
she has a pump, a hand pump, inside the boat that she’s pumping water, and she runs out
of water and it’s my responsibility to keep that filled up. She was so mad. I was so hurt,
(laughs) ’cause I’d never seen her mad before. I never forgot after that.

SB: Gosh, what an experience.

WO: Oh, the mosquitoes would be eating me alive at night if I didn’t do it in the daytime.

SB: I can only imagine.

WO: And I had—I got a funnel on the deck, and I’m hauling five gallons of water at
eight pounds\(^\text{10}\) and forty pounds apiece. I had five of them. That’s two hundred pounds of
water I’m lugging onto the boat, putting into the tank. It’s good for three or four days.

SB: What was your decision about furthering your schooling? (inaudible)

\(^{10}\) Interviewee clarifies: “Eight pounds per gallon.”
WO: Well, that was a—

SB: —(inaudible) at eighteen, say.

WO: Yeah. At eighteen—

SB: What was your thinking?

WO: All my sports and contemporaries, one of ’em was—my best friend was a great athlete. Of course, I could beat him one-on-one doing anything, but when it came to game time he was a superstar. So, I was—he got the scholarship to attend the University of Tennessee.

SB: This was what sport?

WO: Football. He was a C student, flunked out of college. He got married December, the year after—the December after we graduated from high school in June—I mean, in May. Then he made a—he had, like, a 1.2 average, grade point average, at—he went to Tennessee full ride. And he got married and his wife settled him down. She was the smart one. So, she tried to help him, got him up to 1.7, but he had to have a 2.0 and they kicked him off—out of the—lost his scholarship.

I had no money. I had no scholarship. So I went to Miami-Dade Community College paying my own way.

SB: Wonderful.

WO: Yeah, I still had my three—now I had $3300.00 (SB laughs) in the bank. Then it was, like, $150.00 a semester. I started, and so, they—

SB: Did you know what your major—

WO: Of course, the first thing they wanted to do is, “Fill out this application. What do you want to major in?”

SB: Yeah.

WO: And I’m going—

SB: Uh oh. (laughs)

WO: “Wow. My father had said he liked biology when he was in school. And my biology teacher said I was really good.” So, I checked off biology.

SB: Isn’t that something.
WO: Isn’t that a stupid system we have?

SB: (inaudible).

WO: It’s the insane system we have in this world today.

SB: Yeah, it’s (inaudible).

WO: Instead of finding out what my behavioral profile was, I’d easily figured out it was an era of Jacques Cousteau. Heck, who wouldn’t want to be Jacques Cousteau? So that was sort of my dream, living on a sailboat and snorkeling and diving down in the Florida Keys and the Bahamas. So that sort of—but, then, you have to take what? You have to take history (laughs) and social sciences and—

SB: And Anglaise [English]. (laughs)

WO: —and English and chemistry. And basic biology was so much—so difficult. I did better—I did—made all A’s in chemistry. I should have been a chemist, probably.

SB: What? Did you have—you had two years there?

WO: Two years.

SB: And then what did you do?

WO: Well, there was this new school called Florida Atlantic University fifty minutes up the road, fifty miles away, fifty minutes up the road. Yeah. Nobody really gave me any guidance. I just continued on with a zoology major. And it’s a shame, because here I was, this outdoor lover of nature and I never took a class—

end of Mp3 file 001; begin Mp3 file 002.

WO: Oh, okay. So, here I was. I decided to continue on with my degree in biology, and it specializes in zoology instead of botany. I never heard Jacques Cousteau talk about plants. Anyway, for two years I was all in biochemistry classes, organic chemistry classes, cellular biology, embryology, physiology. Never went outside. But it was a very good education. But it was that awful year I took calculus, physics with calculus, and organic chemistry for an entire year.

SB: Oh, my gosh! Oh, torture!

WO: What does that have to do with being Jacques Cousteau?

SB: I don’t know. (both laugh)
WO: I graduated at the same time that the first—it took me an extra semester to graduate. So, I was graduating in the fall instead of the spring, when—in November, I think it was, during the Vietnam War; that would make it 1969—they came out with the first [draft] lottery. They were showing—I remember all the students were in the student union watching TV and they were showing the top ten. But I could see down to number twelve and there was my birthday, so I was going to be drafted. So, my draft lady and I (inaudible), we were good friends, and I had—I was—I had no intention of going to Vietnam. I didn’t believe in the war. I’m not a pacifist, but—

SB: (inaudible)

WO: You come on my shores, I’ll take your head off.

SB: Okay. (laughs)

WO: But to go to someplace else and do it, I’m not going to do that.

So, I was thinking Canada, pacifist—the objector status—you know, what am I going to do? My draft board lady says, “Well, you’ve got to go—I have to send you to go get your physical.” So, I tried my darndest to fail the physical. They ask you, “Have you ever had rheumatic fever?” I checked yes. (SB laughs) I think somebody said something about rheumatic fever. I might have died of rheumatic fever as a kid. So, they sent me to a cardiologist and I do have a squeaky heart, but it wasn’t (inaudible) enough to keep me out.

SB: (inaudible)

WO: They said, “No, you’re perfect.”

SB: Oh, my!

WO: So, I go and I say, “All right.” I tried to join the—I go to the Navy recruiting office and try take the Officer Candidate School test. I scored in the 95 percentile. I’m going, “Oh, my God. I never scored that high on a standardized test in my life.” (SB laughs) They say, “Congratulations, that’ll be—it’s a year wait to get into the Officers Candidate School.” I said, “No. I’m going to be drafted next month.” They said, “Oh, we can’t help you.”

All right, I go down—I said, “What about the Coast Guard?” They said, “American citizens on the high seas, more of a year and a half waiting list.” So, I said, “Oh, man.” I talked to a couple of friends that were in the Coast Guard and had a very rewarding experience helping American citizens on the high seas, semi-military out there. They were in Vietnam, too, but they were helping Americans on American waters and on the high seas and saving lives and rescuing people. And I said, “Well, I can do that. I want to do that,” cause they helped me when I was on our boat several times.
So, I go down to the Coast Guard recruiting office. I’m just going to enlist as a non-officer. They’re like, “We’re not accepting any applications. We’ve got an eighteen month waiting list for enlisted people.” I said, “I’m being drafted next month.” (both laugh) He goes, “Well, I’m sorry.” He goes, “You can take the exam. We have a multiple intelligence exam; we give everybody two-hundred multiple-choice questions.” (inaudible) Math, vocabulary, analytical skills, just a number of—a whole battery of tests.

I got a 100 percent. (inaudible). He started laughing. He goes, “I’ve never seen anybody get a hundred.” So, he goes, “Let me make a call. I’ve got to call somebody.” (laughs) So, he calls his boss and he goes, “You’re in.”

SB: Oh, gosh.

WO: He says, “But we can’t take you right away.” And I go, “Good.” (laughs) So, he—“We can take you in six months.” So, in the meantime, I was—

SB: Were you draft (inaudible)?

WO: No. I let—you know you to fill all the paperwork (inaudible) my draft board lady and she goes, “How the heck did you do that?” I go, “Well, I got a hundred. It was an easy test.” So—I mean, I’m a scientist. (laughs) I’m better at—worked at a boatyard all my life. I was prepared to take that test. I mean, I was resigned to be—okay, if I’m going to Vietnam, I want to be a sniper. I mean, how crude and inhumane is that? I did not want to kill any of my own, ’cause they would have made me a second lieutenant instantly, and second lieutenants lasted, in Vietnam, about one day. So, I said, “I don’t want to be in charge of anybody else. I just want to be—I want to go into the jungle myself, with my rifle, even in the middle of the night, and then come back in the morning. That’s how—that’s what it did to the whole group of—our whole generation.

SB: Mm. It was one of the worst things ever.

WO: My ancestors were Zaporozhian Cossacks, and we’re even the worst group of marauding, raping, pillaging peoples in the Cossacks, which is how I got the name Ostrenko. Ostrenko, in Russian—Ukrainian—means sharp-witted. There’s a painting by Rubens that depicts a band of Cossacks around this outdoor—like a giant picnic table. They’re having a feast. The Tsar had, in the early 1400s—the Tsar had hired these Cossacks to go harass the Turks on the Turkish-Russian border, keep the Turks from moving north.

11 The Zaporozhian Cossacks were from a militant community in Zaporozhia, in Central Ukrain. During the course of the 16th-18th centuries, the Zaporzhian Cossacks became a strong and political force that challenged the authority of Poland-Lithuania, the Ottoman Empire, and its vassal in the Crimean Khanate, and the Tsardom of Russia.
12 Interviewee corrects: “Illya Repin.” The title of the 1890 painting is Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire.
13 Interviewee corrects: “1676.”
So, they went—there’s a lull in the battle\textsuperscript{14} and they’re all drinking and eating and these big, barrel-chested—I’m a skinny guy, but here are these huge men with tufts of a hair and big handle [bar] mustaches. There’s this one little guy sitting at the table with (…).\textsuperscript{15} He had a quill pen. He’s writing what they’re saying. And so, they’re writing this letter to the Sultan of the Turkish Empire. And it’s in \textit{Ripley's Believe It or Not!}, and you can get it. \textsuperscript{16} It’s online. You can get the—[it] is credited with the most insulting letter from one head of state to another. (laughs)

SB: (inaudible)

WO: It’s just this letter that this guy wrote. And they loved it, because it’s a poem. (laughs) So, they called him Ostrenko. They called him sharp-witted after that. So that’s how the name Ostrenko came about.\textsuperscript{17}

SB: Interesting.

WO: And everybody—

SB: Oh, thanks for that.

WO: Yeah. Everybody in, when I went to Moscow, told me—they all knew—my own history and the history of the name Ostrenko.


WO: I’ve forgotten where we were, now. (laughs)

SB: We were—we were—

WO: Oh, I was in the Coast Guard.

SB: —in the Coast Guard. Not yet, but you were going to be.

WO: Yeah. So, I went to—so, in the mean time I had become friends with the gentleman who owned a paint and body shop. I worked with him on repairing cars, and it got me through—I was earning my way through college. That was how I paid my own way through college. I started off working in a deli in Grand Union [supermarket], and moved up to parking cars at Westview Country Club, which is an all-Jewish country club in Miami, wonderful—they took such good care of me—to working at this paint and body shop. I worked there for six months, and then joined the Coast Guard.

\textsuperscript{14} Interviewee explains: “Sultan’s forces attacked the Cossacks and the Sultan’s army was successful.”
\textsuperscript{15} Interviewee clarifies: “A smile on his face.”
\textsuperscript{17} In Repin’s painting, the model for the man writing the letter was Dmytro Yavornytsky, a Ukrainian historian who wrote the first history of the Zaporozhian Cossacks.
I went to Cape May, New Jersey and they just told me to lay low. Just don’t stand out and they won’t pick on you, because at the time there was regimentation and discipline. I’d been in sports all my life and lived with my father. There’s no one more regimented and disciplined than me. (laughs) Except I didn’t realize that that’s the exact kind of person they’re looking for, to put you in charge.

So, the first thing, I was, like, hiding. (SB laughs) We’d get in our clothes and we’re in there trying to—we’d have to make our bunks in this—there’s fifty men in a squad. The first thing I hear is my name. “Ostrenko, get in the office.” So, after being taught how to enter a doorway, you don’t just go walk in. You have to stand beside the door, beat on the wall three times and not say anything and then he’d say, “Square it.” That means you stand in the doorway and ask permission to enter. Then they come up and slam the door. And if they hit you, that means you’re in their office. They told you not to enter their office. (laughs)

This is all going on. But then I come in and I’m standing there at attention, but I’m looking at him. He says, “What are you looking at? Get your head—get your eyes in the boat,” which means, “You don’t look at me. Look at the horizon beyond me.” So after all that harassment, he goes, “Listen. My wife is pregnant. She’s having a tough time being pregnant.” And I’m standing at attention (laughs) (inaudible). What does this have to do with me? And he goes, “I want to put you in charge of these fifty men, and I need somebody that I can trust and rely on, because sometimes I cannot be here, and if anybody gets in trouble, they are sent back a week in training.” This is like ten weeks of hell. So if you go back one week and spend another week in hell, it’s not good.

So, he goes, “I want everybody to—out of these fifty people, I want everybody to pass the scholastic part of this program, I want ’em to pass the physical part of this program, and you’ve got a bunch of losers. You’ve got people in there that can’t do twenty sit-ups. They can’t do twenty pushups. They all have got to run a mile under a certain time. And they’ve got to go through all the academics of Coast Guard manual, and if one of ’em goes back, you go back with ’em. Understood?” (laughs) “Sir, yes, sir.”

So, they put me in charge of these fifty guys. And I asked him afterwards—I asked him, “Why did you pick me?” And he goes, “You’re from the South. You know how to say ‘Yes, sir,’ and ‘No, ma’am.’ You’ve played organized sports, which is a team of people that have to succeed as a group. You’ve played all your life in team sports. You lived on a damn boat, for Christ’s sake. You know more about boats than all the rest of these people do. So, you’re in charge.” And we were the best company in the whole regiment. I wound up being the best—number one recruit out of two hundred people.

So, they asked me where I wanted to go. So, I said, “I don’t know. (inaudible) I don’t know. Let me go back to the seventh Coast Guard district,” which was South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Florida and the Caribbean. I figured, “Hey, if I can get stationed in the Caribbean, that’d be pretty cool.” I went up to Charleston and they pulled the six of us, and I had six stations in a hat. I pulled the Coast Guard cutter [USCGC] Dauntless. I said,
“Where’s that?” They said, “Miami Beach.” (both laugh). I joined the Coast Guard to see the world and wound up in Miami Beach on a 210-foot search and rescue cutter.

That teamwork of sports, my father taught me also, and my mother, she was a basketball player, all the sports. You never—schooling doesn’t teach you. When you’re in a classroom, you’re not allowed to work as a team. Now there’s a little bit more of doing that, group projects and things. So, when you get in the workforce, you don’t know how to work as a group. But that’s why I love organized sports and I loved the military, teaches how to be a team player. 'Cause you’re on board a ship, you have to work as a team in order to survive. We could—our ship caught on fire in the high seas, and we had to work as a team.

SB: Serious fire?

WO: Didn’t turn out to be that, but the ship filled up with smoke. It was an oil fire. It created a lot of smoke. But then, the same thing throughout life, you have to work as a team, a community; somebody’s got to lead it. That’s the only reason why I’m here at MOSI. It’s because the sequence of episodes.

So, like, I was on the ship about six months, we were at sea for five and a half, one crazy episode—when you’re off-duty. I went home. I was married at the time. My wife was at work. I’m at home. And we got a call, “Got to get back to the ship right now. I don’t know what’s going on, but we need everybody right now or the ship is leaving. I’m telling you, you’ve got to get down here in thirty minutes.”

I don’t have a car. So, I jump in my uniform, go out to the street. I’m trying to catch a bus, hitch a ride, and this police car stops and says, “What’s the problem?” I say, “My ship’s leaving. I’ve got to get down to the ship.” He goes, “Hop in,” turns the sirens on. It’s like something out of a movie. He goes running down there. The ship is leaving, is moving away from the dock. The gangway is apart and I leap and make the leap onto the ship.

SB: Oh, my. That is like a movie.

WO: It was crazy. So, I get on there and they go—we have, normally a sixty complement of men on the ship. And we have, like, thirty-five. I said, “Where are we going?” I said, “I don’t know, but you’re the only one—you’re the only gunnery person that we have that knows how to run the fifty caliber machine gun and the M16 [rifle]. So, you got to get two machines—fifty calibers up on the bridge and bring up the ammo [ammunition].” (laughs) I joined the Coast Guard to stay out of this. A fifty-caliber machine gun is a gun of death and destruction. This thing would just blow things up. So, I’m—

SB: Where all did you go?

18 Interviewee adds: “Team building.”
19 Interviewee add: “In order to survive.”
WO: We went steaming due south toward Cuba.

SB: Oh, boy.

WO: And that was all they said.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: So—

SB: This was what year?

WO: Um—\(^{20}\)

SB: I’m sorry. I’m terrible, Wit.

WO: I can tell you—it was the—the U.S. had just confiscated a mother fishing ship off the west coast of Florida.

SB: And it’s well past Bay of Pigs.


SB: I mean, it’s—

WO: Yeah. This is, uh—

SB: That was—

WO: I was in the Coast Guard from seventy [1970] to seventy-four [1974], so it must’ve been seventy [1970].

SB: Okay.

WO: So, Cuba retaliated and said, “Okay. We’re going to throw out, suck up, all American shipping within the—I don’t know, fifty mile limit.” So then, we all started, like, exploding our limits of where people could be. I think we went from seven to twelve mile limit, and the Cuban fishing vessel challenged it and went inside the twelve-mile limit, I think, something like that. So we sucked them up. So the Cubans retaliated and said, “Well, we’re going to pick up all American sailors within a fifty mile limit.”

SB: What does that mean, “suck up”?  

WO: Oh, confiscate, grab; make it come into an American port and not leave.

\(^{20}\) Interviewee adds: “1970.”
SB: Okay. Oh, boy. (laughs) Good experience.

WO: So, we’re to—we have this—this is a search and rescue ship, not a warship. We have fifty calibers, we had a little three inch, uh, cannon on the front, but it’s all for show. The Cubans had sixty foot, high-speed vessels that were heavily armored with ground-to-air and ground-to-ground missiles. They could have taken our boat out, no problem at all.

So, I’m up on watch, and the sun’s going down. It was really beautiful. But we are going as fast as we can. I had to report this—you were supposed to report all ships and planes and everything around you. I said, “Um, there’s a flashing, rapidly-flashing right—light. It’s (...) off the port bow.” “How far out? We don’t see anything on our radar.” And I go, “I’m looking at a flashing white light, a rapidly flashing white light, and I don’t think it’s a UFO [Unidentified Flying Object.” (laughs) At least it’s in the water. And they go, “Let’s look that up.” (laughs) “Oh, that’s a submarine.” I go, “Theirs or ours?”

SB: (laughs) (inaudible)

WO: The Russians, at that time, had subs and all kinds of things (inaudible).

SB: Sure.

WO: And here we are (inaudible). It wouldn’t be—it was probably American submarine. But so, we—so, I went to bed. In the middle of the night the ship is just shaking, we were going so fast. And then, all of a sudden I wake up, because it’s dead quiet. So I go up (inaudible) “They told us to stop at the fifty mile border.” So we’re just sittin’ there waiting for it. And, then, all of a sudden, these F-4s [F-4 Phantom fighter aircraft] out of Homestead Air Force Base come flying over the top of us. (WO makes sound of jets passing over)

SB: Oh, my God.

WO: And it’s, like, “Wow.”

SB: Were you scared?

WO: Yeah. (laughs) (inaudible) I was glad the F-4s were around. They get—all the diplomats got together and chatted, and we went back (inaudible).

SB: Meaning?

WO: (inaudible) and then we went on to probably a dozen search and rescue missions. You’re out at night searching for people in the middle of the Gulf Stream and it’s raining, wind’s blowing; that’s how they got into trouble to begin with. I was one of the ones—we had these things that—we had helicopters that would refuel on the Coast Guard cutter.

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21 Interviewee clarifies: “Twenty degrees.”
This thing is a real narrow—it’s like landing a Coast Guard (...a pen.\textsuperscript{22} And, if you’re an airplane pilot, you’ve got to try and—

SB: Oh. And it’s hard enough on a big aircraft carrier.

WO: Yeah.

SB: Somewhat insane.

WO: As the ship is rolling. So, (inaudible) is down, we have to jump—four of us jump off. We’re on the side of the ship, hanging over the side of the ship in these nets and that, with a hook. So, I got the tail of the helicopters. You go running out and you hook it on—both sides, hook it on, and we strap it down and pull it tight. Well, one time I hooked it on and the whole tail started sliding toward me. So I sort of tackled the end of—(SB laughs) the end of the tail, and pushed it over to the other guy who’s—now he can reach it.

SB: (laughing) Oh, God.

WO: So, I said, “Wait a minute. The ship’s going to roll over to your side, anyway.” Talk about getting seasick.

SB: Oh, no. Had you gotten over it at the time?

WO: No, no.

SB: Still? And you were still—do—?

WO: Nope, when I got my own sailboat—and then, I did the—then, of course, when I got to Tampa. A friend of mine at the science center said, “Hey. You wanna go on a sailboat race?” I go, “Sure.” He says, “Okay. Meet me on Thursday at Clearwater [Florida]; it’s going to be the Clearwater to Key West race. We’ll be back on Monday.” And what a way to be introduced to a sailboat race, raced down to Key West for two days.

SB: And you were okay?

WO: Then I—after that—

SB: Wit, how long were you in the Coast Guard, then?

WO: Four years. (inaudible). Then I stayed in the Coast Guard Reserves. Actually, I was—it wasn’t—then they asked me if I wanted to go to OCS [Officer Candidate School]. (phone rings) I said, “I don’t think so.”

\textsuperscript{22} Interviewee clarifies: “Like landing a Coast Guard helicopter on what looks like a pen.”
SB: (laughs) So, what did you do?

WO: So, the yeoman, the chief yeoman, which was the secretary of the ship, knew that I’d turned it down, and he said, “Why don’t you come work with me? Work for me. I need a yeoman.” I said, “What’ll I have to do?” “Oh, typing and stuff.” He goes, “Don’t worry. Let me tell you where the power of the ship is. In that office, so the two of us will run the ship. We have all the records. We can lose the records. These orders come in for change of duty for people. We have—we’re the—we make—we issue all the paychecks. We have control of everything. You want to join me or not?” And I’m the gunner’s mate. I’ll teach you how to use the fifty caliber, and— (laughs) I said, “Oh, okay. Okay. Okay.”

(SB laughs)

So, I had to go to the headquarters for the seventh Coast Guard district and deliver papers and stuff. And they said, “Hey. You know anybody on board the ship that wants to work in the Search and Rescue Center? We need a yeoman to keep track of all the records while—of all the search and rescue efforts and be a part of the team. And I went, “Hey. I’ll do that.”

So, I was off the ship a week—a week later—and for three years, worked in the—that’s where the admiral is, and the captains. We had a captain over our (...) coordinated all the search and rescue efforts.

SB: And where was it?

WO: First year in Miami, downtown Miami, sort of a nine-to-five job.

SB: How did you feel about that?

WO: I had to come in dress white uniform. It was good because it felt like I was in the middle of the action. I had a college degree, and all the officers did. So, there’s only one officer on duty. I saw what they were doing, and this was before everybody, like, had a computer on their desk. They had a select—I.B.M. Selectric [typewriter]. I was—I mean a calculator—

SB: Were you married at this point?

WO: Yes.

SB: Oh.

WO: Um.

SB: Was this—

WO: And then I got a divorce in the middle of that period. Oh, I see—

23 Interviewee clarifies: “A captain over our team that coordinated all the search and rescue efforts.”
SB: Did you—

WO: My wife—while I was away at basic training—

SB: Uh oh.

WO: She found somebody else.

SB: Did you have children?

WO: No. Then the captain was—I was a good yeoman. I made the coffee for all these people that drink coffee by the gallon, and they all smoked cigarettes. And this was a time when they all smoked inside, except for this one captain, who was a really good guy. And he goes—he talked to me. What do I want to do when I get out of the Coast Guard? I said, “Well, I’m a scientist. I want to get back to taking classes at the University of Miami, possibly, and get into grad school there.” And he said, “Well, why don’t you go now?” And I went. “What? I can do that?” He goes, “Yeah. This office is open seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. You just go find out—go apply.”

So, I went and applied to get into graduate school in the Department of Biology. The head of the department said, “No. We don’t take anybody from Florida Atlantic University.”

SB: Why?

WO: Inferior.

SB: (laughs) What?

WO: And, besides that, your—your GREs [Graduate Record Examination] are—’cause I had—when I graduated from college, everybody was forced to take the GREs to graduate from Florida Atlantic University. I was being drafted, so what did I care? So I made, I think, a 26 percentile on my English and, like, a seventy in my math. And they said, “We’ve got to get—you’ve got to get near—you have to have at least a 70 percentile in—75 percentile in the verbal and the math portion for us to even think about it.”

So I said, “Well, heck.” So, I found out about the master’s degree in community college teaching. You could then major in an area of studies. So, I went down there and got accepted and majored in biology. So, I got to take the graduate course in ecology as my first class. And there was a number of seniors and a bunch of the new graduates, the new graduate school that I didn’t get into, new graduate students. There were thirty of us in there, and I got to go on my first outdoor science class. It was—every Saturday was a field trip. First one was down in the Florida Keys, and we did this whole ecological survey of the Key Largo, in the water—we had to go out to the twelve-foot line and
survey everything. I was in heaven. My writing, scientific writing, was atrocious, because I had never done scientific writing like they demanded.

Then, by the end of the class, the department director did not remember me and asked me “Why don’t you apply for graduate school here? You’re like the top—one of the top three people in the class.” I said, “No. I hadn’t thought of that. I don’t think I—we graduates from Florida Atlantic University wouldn’t want to go the University of Miami.” (laughs) I didn’t say anything. I always wanted to. He became my—he liked my work so much that he became my mentor.

And then, I had a couple of mentors, and I just roared through, and they—it was—they took too many kids. They took eleven kids in that graduating class. And they said, “We got to weed out three or four of these people. Wit’ll—probably won’t make it.” ’Cause we have—they have to do a—we have to do a comprehensive exam in five areas of biology: basic biology, genetics, physiology, ecology, forgot the fifth (inaudible). Nobody had ever passed—only one person in the history of the department had ever passed all five at the first time. And if you don’t, then you have to go back and study and take it again, that section again, the next year. A bunch of us started studying, and I wound up not at the bottom, but I wound up number two in that group.

SB: Oh, that’s great.

WO: And I did so well in genetics. I did—like, I did, like a fifty-eight. But that was the second—that was the highest of any score. And, so, they put me—I got to be a T.A. [teaching assistant] in the genetics laboratory. I did so well that they asked me to—if I wanted a bypass, to forego—I did all this research on these wonderful critters in the Everglades, in the Big Cypress [National Preserve]. It’s a little clam shrimp. They’re a combination of a shrimp and a clam. Nobody ever even found them in the Everglades. They’re supposed to live in Texas and Oklahoma.

SB: And you discovered it?

WO: Yeah, but they were—yeah. And they were a key to the water cycle of the Everglades. They’re totally adapted to the wet and dry seasons of the Everglades. And the drift of—my advisor was so fascinated I wasn’t doing a—ecology had turned into, at that time, sort of a math course with all energy, and it was boring. I wanted to be Jacques Cousteau and do a natural history. I wanted to go explore the Amazon. I was exploring the Everglades.

So, they offered me a bypass. And I said, “What does that mean?” And they said, “Well, you have to take another year worth of courses, and then continue the research for another year, and then write it up and you’ve got your Ph.D. I said, “Well.” I thought about it and I said, “I’ve really started this new course of research on small mammal

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24 Interviewee adds: “Embryology.”
25 Interviewee adds: “As three of us passed all five sections of the first try.”
populations of these islands in the Everglades and around Florida,” which nobody had ever done. I never finished my Ph.D., my major.

Then, I had a full-time job. I dreamt about going to the University of Miami and wind up—wound up going there, thanks to the Coast Guard. And I go—this is like anti-war, anti-Vietnam demonstrations, and I’m going to class in my Coast Guard dress whites. And everybody else, all the girls, are in barefoot and no bras and (laughs) that era. Remember that era?

SB: Yes, I do.

WO: But they all thought I was pretty cool. So, I always—I remember driving down U.S. 1 in Miami past the [Miami] Science Museum. And I was hungry. I was starving and hungry. And this is—I’d graduated from—I mean, I got out of the Coast Guard and I was this full-time graduate student. So, I said, “I’ll bet you the Science Museum has a hot dog stand, or something, for food.” So, I drive in there and buy a hot dog. And I’m going, “I wonder what the heck is in here?” Snuck in, didn’t pay (laughs), went through all the exhibits and I saw my first planetarium show in this little tiny twelve foot domed planetarium. And I just fell in love with what they had there. And I said, “Man, that’d be really great to apply my science background in a science museum.” So, I go back to my laboratory. It was just a dream I parked beside, because I had to finish my master’s first.

An eighteen-year-old board of directors member of the Science Museum, 26 who I knew—I didn’t know he was on the board of the Science Museum. I just knew him as the kid who dropped out of high school because it was too boring, bought a house and started doing his own experiments in his own house. And he played an organ. He was—he did research pit vipers. They’re snakes that seek you out in infrared. And he got an Air Force government contract. This is a—

SB: An eighteen-year-old?

WO: This is—oh, no; when he was seventeen, he was already doing research.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: Because he was doing infrared research and the Air Force wanted to know that because they were doing all these heat-seeking missiles and anti—so, they wanted all the information they could possibly get. So, he came and chatted with me once, when I was working in my lab. And he goes, “Do you know anybody that could be the education director at the Science Museum in Miami?” And I went, “I don’t know. What do they have to do?”

“Well, you know, man, somebody’s got to put these programs together for kids. We get a lot of these summer science camp programs. We take kids to the beach and talk about marine biology. And we have these adult programs and this and that.” And I said, “Well,

26 Interviewee adds: “Tamir Ellis.”
how much do they pay?” He says, “Ten thousand dollars.” And at that time post-graduate doctorates in biology were making twelve thousand. And I didn’t even have—I’m just finishing up my master’s degree.

So, I figured, real quickly, I said, “I’ll take the ten thousand, because it’s easier work than what I’m doing here.” And so, I said, “Well, I’ll do that.” And he was, like, “No way. You would do that?” He said, “What about your Ph.D., your—?” I said, “There’s no future in it.” We always—I went and named everybody in the biology—all the graduate students working on their Ph.D.s, and they’re all sending out hundreds of letters and were not getting any jobs. So, I said, “You’re offering a job that I would like to do. I’d dreamt of going and working at the Science Museum, and I’m not going to take that?” He goes, “You’re in.” There’s this eighteen-year-old kid telling me I’m hired.

SB: Oh, my God. What a story.

WO: And that’s how I got in. This eighteen-year-old—

SB: And how old were you at this point?

WO: Well, let’s see. That was seventy-six. [1976] Help me do the math. Forty-seven [1947]—

SB: Oh, please don’t ask me—

WO: Twenty-nine.

SB: Okay. Still, pretty young—

WO: Yeah.

SB: —to have—

WO: Yeah. So, I was a department director in the—

SB: At Miami.

WO: —at the Science Museum. The director was—he was what they call a short-timer in the military, if you have a short amount of time to get out. So they fired him, and they put three of us in charge of the operations of the Science Center: the administrative assistant,27 the exhibits director,28 and myself. And they’re still two of my best friends.

SB: Isn’t that wonderful?

WO: That was how many years ago? Thirty-two years ago.

27 Interviewee adds: “Consuelo Maingot.”
28 Interviewee add: “Steven Brooke.”
SB: Amazing.

WO: I’ve been in this business.

SB: That’s incredible.

WO: Thirty-three this coming May.

SB: So, did you stay there?

WO: (laughs) My first day on the job, I had a male secretary and the education director had been fired, so he was upset. So, this guy says—I come in, and I’m just sort of—he goes, “Well, this is your desk.” It was right across from his. The two desks butted up against each other. (laughs) And he goes, “And you have to go out and greet the six hundred kids that we have coming in and get them lined up with our docents, who’s going to take them on tour. And you take half—you take one-third of the kids and put ’em into the planetarium. You take one-third of the kids and put ’em into the auditorium. You take the other one-third of the kids and divide them up into groups of ten and our tour guides take ’em on a tour. Go! The buses are coming in.”

I’m going, “This is one heck of a secretary.” I said, “What? You go do it.” He goes, “Nope. It’s your job.” (laughs)

SB: (laughing) That was your first day?

WO: That was my first day. (laughs) (inaudible) with a clipboard and goes, “All these buses are rollin’ in, so—” Luckily, they—

SB: That’s two hundred in a group. That’s two hundred kids in one group.

WO: Yeah. There’s ten—there were ten—

SB: How can a person take two hundred?

WO: There were twelve—

SB: And then, divide them into ten—

WO: Twelve buses came in.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: So, I go—okay, so one of the docents came up to me, and she said, “You don’t know what you’re going to do, right?” (laughs)
She goes, “Well, why don’t we take these two buses. We’ll take them first and we’ll divide ’em up amongst the docents, and then take the next two buses that come in and put”—that’s like 120 apiece—“and, then, there’s always a straggler bus. We’ll figure out—you figure out where to put ’em later. You can just put ’em in the auditorium.” So, then, when they didn’t want to interrupt the programs—planetarium is all dark and turn the stars on and the lights off. (laughs)

Next two buses, I fill up the planetarium, and then, luckily, they came scattered in. I was in—I was like—

SB: What an organization.

WO: Oh, my God. Two hours—my first two hours, I was wiped out.

SB: I mean, in one day.

WO: It was exhausting.

SB: How many kids did you process that year?

WO: Six hundred. Oh, that year? I was lucky it was the end of the year. So, it was only a week of that. So, it was six hundred a day for that week. So, it—

SB: My gosh.

WO: It was—

SB: That’s extraordinary.

WO: —that’s almost four thousand, five thousand kids.

SB: Did you come from there to here?

WO: No. Then—I was there for three and a half years and they were in a director search. So we ran the—the three of us ran the Science Center for—how long? A year-and-a-half, almost two years. They had this search going on, and I had a lot of board members now saying, “Well, why don’t you apply?”

So, I’m thirty years old. This is one of the—this is the biggest science center—science museum—in the state of Florida. It’s got a hundred patrons of the most famous women of Miami. There was a woman, what—I’ll remember her name in a minute. She had an idea during World War II and went to [Franklin D.] Roosevelt and said, “You know, we need to march for dimes. We need to go raise money for children and I need your blessing.” And she started the March of Dimes. So she started, when she—then she started the

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29 Interviewee clarifies: “At the Miami Science Museum.”
patron group of the—you know, they’re called the patrons, a hundred women. She says, “I’m only going to take a hundred women.”

There’s such a waiting list that women got tired of being on the waiting list, so they started the museum guild, and they were a hundred women. So, now—now I’m (laughs)—

SB: Wow.

WO: Working between two powerful women’s groups. They all love me. I trained all the new people, all the women, in science and how to do tours. So, they said, “Why don’t you apply for the job? We want—we’ll work for you. We’ll help you.” So, I applied and they picked this doctor of—a physicist with a doctorate degree. He was a college professor, and he lasted a year.

In the meantime, I’d finished up this great science—summer science program. It was most profitable. It was the largest program of its kind in the nation. I’d built it up in just two years. And I started a whole adult education program and family field trips where we’d take people—they didn’t know the Everglades. They didn’t know Biscayne Bay. They didn’t know Florida. They didn’t know anything about it.

We had this one group of—they were called the Museum Hosts, Hostesses. They—all that they would do, when there was an opening, they would—or a meeting—they would provide coffee. They were host—they were just perfect hosts. And they’d—so to thank them, I took ’em on a—I said, “You ever—50 How about a little cruise on Biscayne Bay? We’ll go down to Elliot Key. We’ll stop at the national park.” [Biscayne National Park] It (…)31 then where it is now. “We’ll have lunch, and then we’ll just come back.”

They’d never been on the bay. These women had lived there all their lives, in their fifties and sixties. So, the captain and I, we go into the channel, and we’re—these women are just sitting in chairs and they’re all talking. So, we’re—we dive over. I dive right onto a Florida lobster. I grab it with my bare hands (inaudible) throw it—bring it into, into the boat. And the other guy has a spear gun, and he shoots this mutton snapper.

So, the captain’s wife, they’re all young. They’re in their thirties and I’m in my thirties. I’d done this, living on a sailboat and sailing those waters, I knew every—all that stuff like the back of my hand. So, she makes ceviche. Man, we had lunch planned but this was like—this was great, (laughs) man. We have—we’re cutting up lemons and limes and pepper and cook all this stuff, mix it up. And these women are going, “What the heck (SB laughs) are these young kids doing?” They really—

SB: Oh, that’s great.

WO: We cooked the protein in lime juice.

30 Interviewee clarifies: “You ever been on the bay?”
31 Interview clarifies: “It didn’t exist.”
Anyway, I got upset because they didn’t—I was being courted now by our neighbor the history museum [Historical Museum of Southern Florida], a little tiny place. And they were building—they had Philip Johnson building a cultural center in downtown Miami [Miami-Dade Cultural Center], a huge plaza, four hundred thousand square foot library, an arts center, and a history museum. And the director (inaudible) start an education program for the history museum and help transition into the new facility. So, when they didn’t pick me, select me, I said, “Hmm. Learn how to build a brand new museum from a hole in the ground. What a great concept. And start an education program at a history—I know nothing about history.”

So, I did. I moved over and the first thing I did, it took me one week to put a summer history program together for the history museum. We had no place to do it. So, I’m going, “Well, let’s see. Where does history take place? Not in this building.” (laughs) I went down to—you ever been to Coconut Grove in Miami?

SB: I have.

WO: There’s Barnacle, which is Commodore [Ralph Middleton] Munroe’s home that he built for he and his wife, and he was a great naval architect; a beautiful site on the bay. So, I went over and talked to them. I said, “Well, hey, listen. I know you guys have ten thousand visitors here. So that means you don’t have a lot of visitors, and I was wondering if you would do—let me bring a summer’s history camp to come here. We’ll just use the grounds and the water. We’ll do some—we’ll make ropes and we’ll design—we’re going to design some sailboats and do all these history things that made the history of Miami.” (clears throat) “And we’ll pay you.” They said, “Okay.”

So, I wound up doing other programs that doubled the visitation of the Barnacle by another—added another ten thousand visitors.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: So, we were off and running. I just applied all these—so, I said, “Okay. Well, that was fun.” So, for adults—yeah, there’s lots of places I haven’t been, like the Breakers Hotel in West Palm Beach. That’s a historic site built by Henry Flagler, a contemporary of [Henry B.] Plant. So, how do we get there? Let’s take the railroad. I haven’t been—never been on a train. So, I put this whole program together and I said, “Gosh, I’m doing this for adults. I’ve got to do this for kids. This’d be cool. The kids have—why should—I’m thirty-three years old, now, and why shouldn’t I do this for these kids?”

So, we took a—I had everybody meet me, all these adults signed up for this class to go for the weekend in Breakers Hotel for dinner, dancing and a tour of Palm Beach and a

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32 Interviewee adds: “45,000 feet.”
33 Interviewee adds: “43,000 feet.”
34 Barnacle is now known as the Barnacle Historic State Park.
Saturday walk on the beach. And if you wanted to go scuba diving with me down to seventy feet off the coast, you could do that, too.

So, we go to the Amtrak station. All the people park their cars. They hop on the—I’ve never met any of these people. I greet ’em all. I check their names off the list and, “Oh, here’s our train.” I’d talk about a history of Amtrak and the history of railroading and we get on, pass all the train stops. We’d stop at Hollywood, Fort Lauderdale; there’s one other, a couple of other stops. Then stop, and—I don’t know who—they said, “We’ll take care of the transportation at the Breakers, so tell ’em I’m coming up on the train. So, I’m not letting on. They said, “Well, how are we going to get from here to the—?” I go, “Transportation is going to be provided.”

Five limousines are waiting for us. (laughs) So, we have all of these people that get off. We hop in their limos and we go the Breakers. And we go for a walk, and we go for—so, that’s a—and I combined—people don’t—are curious about everything. So we did history, science, the economy of railroads—

SB: That’s terrific. You’re—you (inaudible) have knowledge—

WO: —and boats and planes and—

SB: You’re known for your creative thinking.

WO: (laughs) Oh, my God. It was such a tremendous experience.

SB: And I knew your story (inaudible).

WO: We had seven course——they had this—they had these tables that look like our boardroom. It seats twenty people around this big egg-shaped table. That was our dinner table for our whole group—and, of course, like, half of ’em are women, and I had to dance with—they had a—we had a big band. I danced—there was enough time between each course, and they did that on purpose, so we could get up and dance. And that’s the way they did it in the teens [1910s] and twenties [1920s].

SB: So, you made—now, did you build the history museum?

WO: We built the history museum, so I went from—

SB: So you worked with the architect to—?

WO: You know, I didn’t—my boss didn’t let me work with Philip Johnson. (laughs)

SB: Oh, okay.

35 Interviewee adds: “On the train station platform.”
36 Interviewee adds: “Seven course meals.”
WO: They should’ve let me, because there was a big snafu. They thought they’d be real clever: instead of the ugly air handlers up there in the ceilings, they thought they’d put the air conditioning in the floor. So, this is the time when—

SB: Oh. And cool air goes down. (inaudible)

WO: Yeah. Well, we’d blow it up and circulate it around and they—so, they forgot about the fire marshal. So, the whole major megaproject, tens of millions of dollars, probably a hundred million today to build—the fire marshal comes in and sets off his smoke can, and the hot smoke goes up to the ceiling. Then they turn on the smoke evacuation system for the entire huge complex, and the smoke just sits there on the ceiling.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: They stop the project and make ’em put the vents and everything in the ceiling. Millions and millions of—

SB: Oh, what a shame.

WO: —huge cost overruns.

SB: You have to wonder.

WO: We had a lot of more time to build our exhibits, and we opened with—they’d put me in charge of the opening.

SB: Did you help design of it?

WO: Yeah. I helped design—I was the—I was, quote, the Interactivity in History exhibit, which, normally would be—you would take your artifact, put it in a glass case, nobody touch it. So, what did I do? In the Cracker era of the turn of the century, when people lived off the land and, and the sea, I have ’em throwing a cast net in the museum and teaching them how to make nets. All these things are easy to do. You can just let people have a hands-on experience. They had—we have a cannon in the—I had ’em loading the cannon. How do you load and fire a cannon? We had a cannon outside. I knew we’d fire that thing noontime. It was so loud a ton— (laughs)

SB: What year was it opened? Do you remember?

WO: Let’s see. That would have been seventy-six [1976] to eighty [1980]. And I was there for seven years. So, it’d have been eighty [1980] under construction, and it opened in eighty-one [1981].

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37 Interviewee clarifies: “Air conditioning vents.
38 Interviewee clarifies: “Friday, April 13, 1981.”
SB: And, obviously, still there.

WO: (clears throat) Oh, yeah.

SB: What was your footprint on that?

WO: My gosh. Well, I started the education program, which is still going—they’re still doing the same program, except [instead of] me doing them they have a history professor doing—it’s a whole booklet.

SB: Oh, my gosh. Hmm. (male voice in background) Wit’s showing me this—

WO: Okay. Here it is.

SB: Amazing.

WO: Historic tour—twenty years of historic tour. I was doing ’em thirty years ago. (laughs) This is—these are (reading from current catalog) “historic tours with Dr. George, eco-history tours, and programs.” Sound familiar? “Walking tour, overnight travel, coach tour (inaudible) by bus, boat tours and bike tours.” I started all of those. I did a jogging tour.

SB: Oh, that’s just great.

WO: ’Cause I was a marathon runner at the time, and I said, “Well—” ’cause you talk when you go on training runs. And you’d go, “God, where’d you—” you keep on seeing these birds, and you’re identifying the trees and you know the architecture. “Why don’t you do a—?” So I did a—most people came on their bikes while I ran. A couple—three or four of us ran. Miami River boat tour. I did a tour up the Miami River with Jimmy Buffett.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: He was on the boat. I did—and Marjory Stoneman Douglas.

SB: That’s wonderful. Just terrific.

WO: These are all—we did—I did—40 I had three different kinds of sailing programs to teach people how to sail, to get out on the water, to get ’em out there. It’s just bringing history—bringing a community to life. There’s no—I hate this segmentation.

I think if I were ever to have a chance to influence another brand new museum to start, I’m not going to give it a designation. It’ll be the “Museum of the Universe,” or something. I don’t know. So, when you walk up to it, it’ll just be—you’ll hear—you walk

39 Interviewee adds: “Why don’t you do a running tour?”
40 Interviewee clarifies: “I did lots of programs.”
into the first gallery, and you’ll hear the sound of crashing waves. “Oh, it must be an aquarium.” But there’s this great painting of these sailing ships on the high seas and the sunsets over water, these impressions of visual artists. And then, you hear this music inspired by the ocean, just some of the great classic, and probably even a rap song about the ocean. And then—

SB: You stimulate all the senses.

WO: You’d see the science, you’ll see the history of our knowledge of—Alexander the Great was the first person who—he told—he had his team make a glass ball that he stuck his head in. He had some weights, and they lowered him down to the bottom so he could take a look at the ocean floor without an obstructed view.

SB: I had no idea. Very interesting.

WO: So, people’d—there was no masks back then, but they had glass.

SB: And he was that curious.

WO: So, you could see if you just put, like, a glass-bottom bucket down in the water. You could see the stuff in the water. So, he just—he wanted to go all the way down.

So, then, you—so, it’s looking at the stars. Look at how many poems and history of our culture has been dedicated to the stars, only the ones that could see the night sky. The people that lived in the tropical rain forest didn’t see the stars. They had not a thing to do with stars. They had other things that they—they learned the herbs and the vegetation and the wildlife and what was good to eat, not—what was poisonous, and what was medicinal and what was not.

So, all of that—I got that by doing the—I kept on doing—I started this canoe program with a lot of history of Florida.

*end of mP3 file 002; begin mP3 file 003.*

SB: Today is February 3, 2009, and I’m fortunate enough to have a second interview with Wit Ostrenko. Wit, thank you very much for the additional time. We learned a lot about your personal life the last time. We did not even cover MOSI. And Wit is President and CEO [chief executive officer] of MOSI, the Museum of Science and Industry. And—

WO: Well, it was great to go over starting my career in Miami at the Museum of Science. It really allowed me to understand how people can interpret for the general public. Museums have a tendency to focus on artifacts, paintings, historical objects, scientific objects, and often, you can go through a museum and not see a person.

So, what my experience in Museum of Science in Miami was to—I had two hundred volunteers I had to train to work with the public. There was the Museum Guild and the
Museum Patrons, and they were all women. It was wonderful. And, as I said, my background was teaching people science in the field, out of doors. So I got to do that, and we had a big summer science program, probably the largest summer science program of its time in the nation, taking—

SB: Just who did you teach, specifically? Volunteers or teachers?

WO: These were—well, the Guild were volunteers, but the summer science program was strictly for preschoolers through high school. We had so many kids taking marine science that we’d have two busloads of kids that would leave the Science Center and go to the beach, (laughs) and two in the afternoon. These were two-week programs. It was a time when we had a preschool program, and it was very innovative, I thought, for its time, and even today. Preschoolers, meaning three and four year olds and four and five year olds, would participate, and they were in there for a two-week program. But you could go all summer long.

And there was a biology track—a living track, and then a non-living track where you did geology and astronomy. And the living track started off with single-cell organisms and went all the way up to—it was really “Where do babies come from?” There was always a pregnant mother somewhere in the room.

SB: And what ages were they?

WO: These were four and five year olds. So, it was sex education at that level. I mean, anatomy, sperm, eggs, developing fetus, the embryo to—some mother would always donate their belly (SB laughs) to—pregnant belly to show off. But the fascinating one was—

SB: And this was what year, Wit?

WO: Nineteen seventy-six through eighty [1980].

SB: So, this was not controversial, or—?

WO: No.

SB: No. (inaudible).

WO: And that was a real eye-opener for me because I didn’t know any better. It was all in—as a biology major, I knew more about the estrogen and menstrual cycle because of my studies in biology than I (laughs) knew about anything else. But it—I think the real eye-opener was one of our preschool teachers got sick and the junior high math teacher had to take over.

I go, “Wow. (SB laughs) Are you sure you want to do this?” She goes, “No. I can do this.” You got—as a—and then, I watched her teach this class. And she divided up the
class in fifteen-minute increments, because she said, “They can sit still for fifteen minutes, and I usually talk to them about what we’re going to talk about.” And this was—she was teaching them astronomy, preschool astronomy. You talk to an astronomer and they go, “You can’t teach preschoolers astronomy.”

SB: Oh, my gosh. How did you do it?

WO: So, what happened? They would—she would take them to a different planet every day. So, this one I walked in on, they were going to the moon. The first fifteen minutes they’d talk about the moon. “The moon is right up there. It’s really far away. It’s 250,000 miles.” She introduced them to the numbers. So, they didn’t know how far that is, but it’s way far. Takes you a long time—takes you a week to get there.

So, she talked about the moon. “The moon has got a lot of dust-like material on it.” She had, like, talcum powder to show how fine the material was on the moon. And, then, she said, “And you don’t weigh very much on the moon. You don’t weigh the same amount on the moon that you do on earth. So that means you could jump really high.” She meant—this is just—she’s just talking to them. “Here’s”—She’d show ‘em pictures of the moon. And, then, they’d do an activity. She had ’em draw the moon, draw craters, draw the moon, draw a quarter moon, full moon—

SB: That’s neat.

WO: And, then—

SB: (inaudible)

WO: So, that was the second fifteen minutes. And then, the third fifteen minutes she said, “Okay. Now, if we were to get in a rocket ship—and you can’t breathe in outer space, so you’d have to have a helmet and supplemental oxygen.” And you’re going—and she put on pictures of astronauts that had gone to the moon and what they had to wear. “And then, when you get on the moon, there’s no oxygen, because the planet’s too small. It can’t hold the oxygen and atmosphere to the planet.”

So, that’s the third fifteen minutes; that’s sort of preparing them for going to the moon. In the last fifteen minutes, she’d take them to the moon. This is an enclosed room with no windows. So, all these little preschool seats—you’d put ’em down. She had ’em in—each of the kids took their chair, put it up against the wall, and then lay the chair down on its back in a row, against the wall, and then another row. That’s their rocket ship.

And she goes, “Okay. Now, let me see. Susie, you’re the pilot—you’re the captain today.” And she jumped up and started—ran into the rocket ship. She goes— “No,” the other kids are hollering at her (SB laughs), “you can’t—you can’t go. You’re going to die. You’re going to go into outer space without your helmet on. You’ve got to put your helmet on.”
All through imagination, she put her helmet on, and then walked up to the cockpit on the left—I mean, the seat on the left, in the front—and lied down. So, now her feet are in the air, she’s lying down on her back looking up at the ceiling. And, then, all the other kids got to go in, one at a time, put their helmet on and get ready for launch.

So, then, she goes over to the light switch and she starts and says, “Okay. Let’s do the countdown from ten.” These kids, they don’t even—they can’t even count yet. But they could count backwards. (both laugh) Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, blast off! And they all make the sound of a rocket engine. And she’s flicking lights. When you flick the lights in a room that has no windows, it goes pitch black dark, bright light, pitch black dark (makes sound of speeded up alternating these images). (SB laughs) You feel like the whole room is shaking and vibrating and they’re—kids are roaring.

And then, she leaves the lights off and she turns a flashlight on the moon, which she had already put up in the corner of the room and talks about their journey to get over there. And then, “It takes a while,” and then she’d say, “Okay. Let’s prepare to land on the moon and let’s turn the cabin lights on.” She’d turn the lights back on in the room. These kids—the first time she did that, the kids just freaked out, they were so scared.

SB: I can’t imagine.

WO: Well, then, they get out on the moon and she goes, “Okay. Remember, you’re really light. You’re practically floating in air. You can jump really high.” And these kids are, like, “We’re boundless.” (both laugh) Through imagination, these kids would go—and then, she had a little place in the corner where she had some more talcum powder, where they could put their—make their footprint on the moon.

SB: That’s terrific.

WO: So, that’s just fifteen minutes. And then, it would end, and I’d swear, I would be back in my office and I’d have parents—I had a parent call me and go, “You know, there’s something weird about the astronomy class. My daughter swears (SB laughs) she went to Mars, and she’s got this red dust all over her shoes, (both laugh) and I’m wondering what is—did she real—what?” She goes, “Well, that’s what they do. They go travel to a different planet. You should see when they go to Jupiter. They’re—it’s so heavy, they’re plastered on the ground on their backs.”

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: That was my first museum conference I ever went to, was—we didn’t have enough money at the Science Museum in Miami to send me to a conference so I could learn, ’cause this was my—the beginning of my career. I, luckily, got a scholarship to this ALI-ABA [American Law Institute-American Bar Association] conference. It’s museums and legal procedures. The only reason I went was because I got a scholarship. It was in New York City, and I got to go—it was in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
SB: Oh, how great.

WO: It was great. And this woman from ASTC, the Association of Science and Technology Centers, Lee Kimche [McGrath], who founded this organization of science centers around the world, spoke. And I went running up to her, because the next—her next conference was in San Fran—not San Fran, Oakland [California], at the Lawrence Hall of Science. It sits up on top of the Berkeley Hills.

So, I said, “Do you have a scholarship to go to this conference? Because I can’t afford to go there.” And she goes, “No. But can you talk about—can you do a session at the conference? And I can send your board a letter saying I’d like you to come and do a session, and maybe they’ll send you.” So, I said, “Well, we do these canoe programs where I take people out into the—families out into the wilds, and talk about—” Then she goes, “Oh. You’ve got to do a program on that.”

SB: Oh, that’s great.

WO: Then, I said, “Well, we do this preschool astronomy.” And she goes, “Oh, my God. You’ve got to talk about that, too.” (both laugh) I did two sessions and—

SB: How wonderful.

WO: —and that organization—I became the president of that organization twenty years later.

SB: Isn’t that terrific.

WO: I don’t know. Twenty? Yeah, twenty years later—twenty-seven years later.

SB: When you were here.

WO: Yeah. When I was at MOSI.

SB: Incredible.

WO: But that’s how you—that’s how I got to—

SB: Develop.

WO: —do all the great interactive stuff with people, with other people.

SB: Well, when—come to MOSI. Tell us how you came to MOSI.

WO: Okay. Well, I was at—I was finishing up my seventh year at the Historical Association of Southern Florida. We’d just built this Philip Johnson Cultural Center with
the history museum, brand new history museum, and I’d moved from education to—education there. And then I’d—we had lost our fundraiser. So the director of the museum said, “Well, Wit, you can do that.” And, so, he made me do fundraising, which I never had done before.

And then, we built this new facility, and I was worrying about, “Well, don’t we have to, like, figure out who’s going to come to this and how many people are going to come? How are we going to do our budget?” He goes, “Well, you figure that out. How many people are going to come?” We didn’t even know what the title of that position was. I was getting people to come to the history museum, and it’s called the marketing director. (laughter) Nobody had marketing directors back then.

SB: You were forced to learn all the basics.

WO: So, I was—I had all the basics that one could ask for, a membership program, volunteer program, so I knew everything in the field.

I was looking for a science center to run. I almost took the job at the Hudson River Museum, which was a combination of art, history, science on the Hudson River, on a farm. I went to the Miami airport and they said, “Well, your plane has been cancelled.” I go, “Why?” “Because New York City is snowed in.” And I went, “Forget it. I’m not going.” (laughs) I’m not—went up for—

SB: Do you believe in fate?

WO: —for a final yeah, (SB laughs) for a final—

SB: Wow.

WO: So then, one of the things I had to do was we had these artifacts that we’d loan out to museums. We had this dugout canoe, a thousand year old canoe, loaned to the Museum of Science and Industry in Tampa. I did go there once. They said—I started to call the Science Museum and say, “Hey, you want to renew this loan of this canoe or not?” And they go, “Yeah, if you don’t mind, we’d like to keep it for a little while longer. So, what’s going on?” I knew Don Toeller. He was—he’s still here. He’s in his thirtieth year.

SB: In what capacity?

WO: He built all the buildings here and maintains all the buildings, and he’s—actually, he has a degree in interpretive education for parks. He’s—

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41 Interviewee adds: “Randy F. Nimnicht.”
42 Interviewee adds: “Education, fundraising, marketing and management.”
43 Interviewee adds: “A final interview.”
44 Interviewee clarifies: “Acting director at that time.”
45 Interviewee clarifies: “A degree in interpretive education for national parks.”
SB: (inaudible)

WO: —designed exhibits, and he’s still here.

SB: In what capacity?

WO: He’s a vice president of—he’s been the interim director of the museum twice. And he was the interim director when I called them.

SB: I see. Okay.

WO: They’d let somebody go. He goes, “Yeah, we—” I said, “So, what’s going on?” He goes, “Well, we’re looking for a director. They’re not going to consider me.” I said, “Well, why didn’t you call me up and let me know?” (both laugh) He goes, “What? Are you interested in leaving Miami?” I go, “Yeah.” So—

SB: Isn’t that amazing.

WO: So, he goes, “Well, darn. Send me your resume, and I’ll give it to the search committee consultant.” They had an outside firm. It got narrowed down to two of us and I came up for a final interview at Jake Dyal’s46 law firm, in the big boardroom, at—I’ll remember the law firm’s name in a second, but—Shackleford, Farrior [Shackleford, Farrior, Stallings & Evans].

SB: Did he chair the board at that time?

WO: Yeah, he was—yeah. Let me see. No, he was not the chair. It was John Pieper. John Pieper was the chair. He [John] had gotten rid of the director here. He was proud of the fact that he—it seemed like he was always in the position—they’d call him in to get rid of directors and hire a new one. (laughs) But it was at Jake’s office.

SB: And how old was the museum at that point?

WO: It was built in—it started construction in 1978 and it was finished in 1980. This was 1987.

SB: Okay.

WO: It was funny—

SB: So, roughly nine years after the beginning.

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46 Interviewee adds: “Jake Dyal, current chairman of the search committee.”
WO: Yeah. In fact, I didn’t know who my competition was, but it was the person who wound up running the Orlando Science Center.

SB: How interesting.

WO: He was the—

SB: Why, I’m going to confess to you, I truly thought you were the original.

WO: No, there were three—

SB: But you basically put it on the map.

WO: Yeah, there were two [directors] and two interim. So, I—it was really funny. They wanted to come down and see me in action at the history museum. It was great. Robin Krivanek was on the search committee. We were eating lunch on the bay, and—I mean, eating breakfast on the bay and I was going to take ’em for a tour of the Science—of the History Museum. God, it was the only mistake I made.

This red-bellied woodpecker came flying in and landed on a tree. And I just, somehow, slipped out of my mouth came this—I said, “Oh, look, at that yellow-bellied sapsucker.” And she goes, “No, it’s not.” (laughs) And I go, “You know your birds?” (laughs) And she goes, “Yes, I do. I’m— (laughs) I studied bats and got my master’s degree from the University of Florida on bats.” (inaudible) “You know it’s a red-bellied woodpecker, don’t you.” And she goes, “Yeah. I was wondering if you were going to fess up (both laugh) that you knew your stuff or not.”

We went to the—I had a meeting back at the History Museum. So, I said—and the Philip Johnson Center, they had underground parking for unloading stuff. I said, “I have to meet John Knight,” the head of the Knight Ridder newspaper and the Knight Foundation. He was coming in. I’m waiting for him. I said I’d meet him at the entrance. And here comes this big black limo. (laughs) He pulls in, and I look at the search committee and go, “Excuse me. I have to go talk to John Knight.” (both laugh) And I left my wife with them to tour them—I think she was taking them to lunch or something. So, they watch me open the door and help Mr. Knight out, and we had our meeting. He gave us a grant for—it was a publication process, anyway—printing—reprinting historical books that are out of print.

SB: Interesting.

WO: It was neat. So, that’s how I got—they were so impressed with that. (laughs) I was like—and the interview—

SB: Oh, my goodness. Again, a timing thing.

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Interviewee adds: “Sondra Quinn.”
WO: So, that’s how—it’s funny how you—no one ever knows how search committee, really—and how they—

SB: Make decisions.

WO: —make decisions.

SB: Very interesting.

WO: So then, here we are with this sixty-five thousand square foot, open-air museum that got lots of awards for its architectural design and energy saving design. And it really was pretty cool. But this is the original building at—

SB: Which was where?

WO: —at the Museum of Science. It’s the east end of the building.

SB: It’s still in this location.

WO: Yup. It’s called the Whitney Andrews Lang Center for Learning. She passed away, and Bob Lang—

SB: I was going to ask you about that. Because I thought that—

WO: —made a significant, seven-figure gift to name the building after her. She loved it so much.

SB: And that was the original building.

WO: It was the original building. It had—

SB: Could you, for the sake of listeners, describe exactly where we are, which I should have done, really?

WO: Yeah. The property was—at that point it was eleven acres on Fowler Avenue at Fiftieth Street, and it was about four blocks long where the road was that entered in, which is—

SB: That’s why you’re changing it to the (inaudible). (laughs)

WO: Forty-Seventh Street, I think. Let me see.

SB: I’m not sure.
WO: Forty-se—yeah. Anyway, it’s about eighty feet (laughs) on Fowler. It’s a sixty-five thousand square foot building right on Fowler. It’s a parallelogram. It’s—

SB: And right across from—

WO: —two buildings. Right across from USF. Two buildings in one, actually; two separate buildings connected by a clear plastic overhead—

SB: Like a walkway.

WO: It just lets light in.

SB: It’s not a walkway. It’s just the overhang.

WO: No, it’s just a—it just—yeah. You can—when you’re inside, you can see the two buildings separated. Although it was award winning, there were some issues because every day the road grime blew in, in the air from Fowler, and settled on all the exhibits. And all the exhibits and everything had to be cleaned every single day.

SB: So, this structure was already up when you came?

WO: This—right. Yeah. That was a five million dollar project from the Department of— it was the federal program that—projects for underserved areas.

SB: Okay. Interesting.

WO: I thought it was a Department of Energy grant, (laughs) which it wasn’t, because it was so energy-efficient. It was a roof built for a (…) thousand square foot solar panel. ‘Cause this was right after—they got the money, the five million dollars, right after—like an economic development block grant, I think, is what it was. Seventy-six [1976] was the oil embargo and we ran out of energy, and everybody was starting to think about solar and all these other—

SB: I remember that.

WO: —sustainable energy, like we’re doing today.

SB: So, what year are we talking, now? When you did come?

WO: Nineteen eighty-seven. September—oh, my God. No. September 18, 1987. My wife was so impressed. She goes, “They want you to run this big facility with sixty-five thousand square feet and all this land?” I said, “Yeah. But you should see the plans I’m thinking about.” (both laugh) “We gotta build—”

48 Interviewee clarifies: “Urban Development block grant.”
49 Interviewee clarifies: “Fourteen thousand square feet.”
SB: Still thinking, I see.

WO: “We gotta build an IMAX Theatre, and we gotta build more exhibits. We gotta build a bigger building. This is—”

SB: For the sake of listeners, there are plans for so many things all over Wit’s office. It’s amazing. And we’ll get to that. We’ll get to some of your plans.

WO: So—and it was a—but I was a county employee. It was the ex—I was a Director of (…) and History for Hillsborough County. Not Parks, the Director of Museums, History and Science for—

SB: But it fell under Parks.

WO: Yeah. We sort of had this grouping of folks. We had—first thing we had to do, I had to figure out who was going to stay and who going to go. They were doing ninety thousand people a year, which is not a lot for a science center, because we were doing eighty-eight thousand a year at a history museum. History museums don’t draw them as much as science, or aquaria or zoos.

SB: Sure.

WO: Then I found out how difficult it was to get rid of entrenched county employees. (both laugh)

SB: There’s something called tenure. (laughs)

WO: It was a major, major— No—

SB: No?

WO: —they weren’t tenured, but it was kind of like it. It was a process you had to go through to—and there were a lot of people that didn’t belong. They were—it was just a paycheck for them, and we needed people with passion.

SB: I can see that working for you (WO laughs) ’cause you are a passionate person. What was the size of the staff at that time?

WO: It was thirty-three people.

SB: Okay.

50 Interviewee clarifies: “Director of Museums and History.”
WO: So, I was the director, and actually, it was a lateral move for me, financially, to move over. But it was just such an exciting thing to finally have an institution that I could get right-sized for the community, get a board engaged.

Then there was—there were two boards, one appointed by the [Hillsborough] county commission, and another one that was a—it was called the Museum of Science and Industry Foundation, although it was not a true IRS [Internal Revenue Service] category foundation. It was really a not-for-profit, 501(c)3. And, luckily, at the same time, they’d realized that we got to get rid of this county commission-appointed board, because they’re not—they come and go every time there’s a new commissioner. So, they did. So, we got a board. We had three hundred members. Today we have—it was three hundred households, which Robin Krivanek kept in a shoebox—

SB: Oh, how interesting.

WO: —on four by six cards. That’s how all memberships start, don’t they? (laughs)

SB: Absolutely.

WO: There were two computers in this science center. They were on a folding table. They were two Hewlett-Packard computers, and—

SB: This is fascinating.

WO: —if you wanted to use a computer, you had to go sign up and sit down at a table and borrow the computer. No fax machine. No fax machine. That was too high technology. What would you use a fax machine for?

SB: Oh, my—in 1987?

WO: Nineteen eighty-seven.

SB: How interesting. The growth you’ve experienced.

WO: Yeah. I was—now I have a pocket51—

SB: Creative. (laughs)

WO: (laughs) But we still have one of our original Apple II computers, still working today, out in the lobby, doing our—I initiated—I had a visit—a computer exit survey that I brought up from the history museum in Miami. I picked the software, and I said, “We need an—an Apple II computer.” And he’d go, “Well, we have one in storage for the

51 Interviewee adds: “Now I have a pocket personal computer that has more power than both of the Hewlett-Packards.”
exhibit,” and we put it on the floor. So, we’ve been collecting visitor data since 1987 at MOSI.

SB: Fascinating. That’s great.

WO: (laughs) And it’s still working.

SB: How helpful is that to you?

WO: Well, it tells—it’s real helpful when it’s time to write a grant, (SB laughs) and somebody asks you, “What audience do you serve? What underserved audiences do you serve? What are the demographics of your audience? Are they all wealthy, highly educated individuals? Are they all—” And the misnomer is, “Well, it’s a science museum. It’s a science center. It’s a lot of fun, and it’s great for my kids.” So they think only kids go here. Well, ever since it started, there are two adults for every child that comes here. And children’s museums are the same way. They’re fifty/fifty adults and kids. So, this is—it’s really a family oriented, um, kinds of institutions.

We just started doing things. We—I looked at data—

SB: I don’t mean to interrupt you.

WO: No.

SB: Were you given free reign, in terms of creating (inaudible)?

WO: Oh, I don’t know. They didn’t know. They didn’t know. (both laugh) They didn’t tell me, either. So, I just—I knew what to do. So, I just—

SB: No, but—

WO: —took over.

SB: Did you have a plan in mind—

WO: No.

SB: —in the beginning?

WO: No. It—I—

SB: It evolved?
WO: (...) did a lot of sitting around tables and talking, and I said, “You know, we need to talk to the people that have a clue about science, education, the community, the neighborhood, kids, grandparents.” So, we started bringing in these people, and I remember there was this one little empty sort of odd-shaped little room. We just made that the war room. It kind of looks like my office now. (SB laughs)

So, we just wrote down what people said. We invited university people from across the street, and just got a lot of ideas on what we should do next. We started improving the exhibits, and started really pushing the education program.

SB: What were the exhibits like, then?

WO: They were good, hands-on, participatory exhibits on—

SB: With how many?

WO: Oh, gosh. Maybe—

SB: Or is that a fair question?

WO: Yeah. There was probably sixty, seventy. It was a fair amount, fair number. On the big auditorium on the first floor, and then the second floor on one side, was all like—it was an energy exhibit on electromagnetic spectrum. It’s like—sunlight is part of the electromagnetic spectrum. So, it’d talk about—solar energy had a heliostat, which is something that sticks up through the roof, tracks the sun, and puts an image on a—we’re sitting at a round table, so you can imagine the sun projected onto this round table about two feet in diameter. You can see sunspots. If you go, if you mark ’em day-to-day, you can see that the sun is actually rotating and the sunspots move. So, it’s—

SB: Interesting.

WO: It was—so, that’s kind of neat, except it’s very difficult to keep that technology working, so half the time it would be off. (laughs) Half the time it would be on. But it was excellent. We had this walkway of electricity, Van de Graaff generators producing static electricity to make your hair stand up if you touched the ball.

SB: Kids love that.

WO: We had a giant—like, a room—it was a room where you could see lightning. It generated lightning and we had Dr. Thunder’s Boom Room (both laugh) where it was this—these speakers were in this room. They simulated a thunderstorm. Then there was like a geology section, and, then, one of the first things we did was got a grant from the Swiftmud, which is the Southwest Water Florida Water Management District, to talk

Interviewee clarifies: “Don Toeller, Interim Director of MOSI, and myself…”
about water in Florida. So, that was the first, I think, exhibit area that we— that we built
that was hands-on, interactive.

It was fun, because we had a drinking fountain there, and above the drinking fountain,
was this, like, an aquarium full of trash and water. And then, as you drank water, bubbles
came up from that water. It looked like there was— (SB laughs) the water from that was
going into your mouth, to get the idea that the water you have is the water you have. It
doesn’t disappear.

We gain no water and we lose no water on this planet. Water came from comets millions
of—through—over the millions of years. That’s where the water—that’s—it just
collected comet water, which is basically dirty snowballs. So, as soon as they hit, the ice
melted on these comets, and then there was the beginning of life and all these oceans.

SB: (inaudible) you were replicating Tampa Bay—

WO: Yeah. Well, that’s—

SB: —with all the trash in it.

WO: And that was the idea. So, there was a lot of interesting, simple exhibits like that
that got the point across.

SB: Are any of those still here?

WO: No, no. Exhibits, they just get worn out after a while. The big breakthrough, I
think, as we—in (…)54, we had put together a fifteen-year master plan (…)55—a grant
from the State of Florida to plan out the new museum. It was, like, $150,000 which
is—that was the first—there were no corporate gifts. I think they got one gift from
Barnett Bank.

SB: My gosh.

WO: I think we had, by that—the first three years we, I don’t know, tripled—we’d gotten
over a thousand (inaudible).

SB: Were you still county at this time?

WO: Yeah. Mm-hm.

SB: You were still county.

53 Interviewee clarifies: “The first exhibit area that I had a hand in building.”
54 Interviewee clarifies: “In 1987.”
55 Interviewee clarifies: “Prior to my arrival.”

SB: So, what was the size of your board at that point?

WO: It was about thirty people. It went from—Pat Hill was a mover and an idea person and came up with—you know, we gotta have some new technologies like an IMAX theatre. We gotta do some cool stuff at the science center. Gerry Curts is an architect, helped with the planning process. John Pieper, then, was chairman in there. When I first got here, he helped getting us moving in this planning process.

SB: So, the board was an active board.

WO: Uh-huh.

SB: It sounds.

WO: Yeah. We kept everybody active. It was—kept ’em engaged in monthly meetings and committees. So, I asked them—one of my questions I asked in my interview process, I said, “How many six figure givers do you have on your board?” (both laugh) There was total silence. “What is this giving thing? I don’t understand this word giving.” There were no board gifts. So, we got this $150,000 grant, and we hired Cambridge Seven Associates out of Boston to come down and help us with a master plan to figure out what are we going to do to this acreage. We just acquired thirty-two additional acres, on top of the eleven that we had. So, it almost quadrupled the—

SB: It was a great idea.

WO:—size of the site. So, what are we going to do with all this land, over forty acres of land? We worked everything through, and we actually put together a fifteen year, three phase program, which we actually finished—that was (…) in 1990, and we actually finished that plan in 2005 with the building of Kids in Charge! Children’s Science Center.

SB: So, you were ahead of schedule, if I do my math (inaudible).

WO: Yeah, we—no, it was—1990 to 2005 is fifteen years.

SB: Oh, oh, ninety [1990]. Okay.

WO: Yeah.

56 Interviewee clarifies: “Chairman, 1988.”
57 Interviewee clarifies: “7 acres originally acquired in 1975; 2 acres Dept. of Transportation site next, in 1985; 36 acres backwoods followed in 1987; 27 southwest corner to Fowler Ave. in 1994; 3.1 acres comes in 2000.”
58 Interviewee clarifies: “That was started in 1990.”
SB: I thought you said ninety-five. [1995]

WO: It was just unbelievable. We had no idea where the money was coming from. It wasn’t coming from the board. So, I think it was—

SB: So, corporations stepped up?

WO: Well, here’s the story.

SB: Grants?

WO: So, I said—

SB: (inaudible) (laughs)

WO: “Where are we going to get the money?” And everybody—nobody knew. So, I had an inkling of where to go get money from the State of Florida, because the facilities in Broward County had gotten a lot of funds from PECO, Public Education Capital Outlay dollars, that builds universities, community colleges, and schools. And they have these joint programs. So, I didn’t tip my hat. I (both laugh) started inquiring, and I talked to the superintendent of schools about doing a joint project with them, a computer technology center that we could build at MOSI to take all of the kids through a certain—one grade, maybe, through this laboratory, for a number of—like, a week, like they were doing with Nature’s Classroom.59 I knew—

SB: To supplement their curriculum.

WO: —sixth graders were going out there [Nature’s Classroom]. And we’d apply for a PECO grant to buy all this technology. I remember it came to eight hundred thousand dollars. So, we had this master plan with beautiful looking buildings, and we didn’t know how much that was going to cost. But we were only going to build—one phase one was the IMAX theatre, and this roughly hundred thousand square foot science center to go along with that. And it looked like somewhere around thirty million [dollars].

So, I go to the state, and I find this person that’s in charge of these joint programs. And he’s stuck back in some corner of the brand new Department of Education building in Tallahassee. It’s like going into the stacks of the library at college. (laughs) He’s, like, way in a corner. Like, they—he’s got such a small budget and such a small program that—

So, he looked at this thing and went, “God. This is great. You’re in Tampa, right in the middle of the state. You’re equal access from Pensacola to Key West. You’re only asking for eight hundred thousand dollars. You know, you can ask for half the money of the

59 Nature’s Classroom is an outdoor environmental education program in Hillsborough County.
project costs. What’s the project cost?” And I said, “Thirty million.” He goes, “Well, why
don’t you ask for fifteen?”

SB: Wow.

WO: So, I said, “Okay.” (SB laughs)

SB: That’s a no-brainer, I guess.

WO: So, we change it to fifteen. I come back, and—“But,” he says, “You’ve got to
get—you can’t use private dollars as a match, because you know how untrustworthy the
private sector is. They’ll just make a pledge, and they’ll—you’ll never see it.” They got
burned a few times, or they would—or they’d get land donated and that was their match,
so they didn’t have enough money to operate after they’d build something. So it was
awful. So, he said, “No. You’ve got to get a municipality to match the money. That way
(inaudible) watch over the project, locally.

So, I go to the county commission, and they go, “Oh, you’d never get that money.” I got
more no’s about this project. No, you can’t. Where are we going to get fifteen million
dollars from? So, I go, “Well, I tell you what. If—” And they’re never going to give you
the fifteen million, anyway. So, I said, “Well, if I go get fifteen million, would you match
it?” And they go, “Yeah, sure.” (laughs)

SB: Oh, gosh.

WO: So, I went to my board, and I said, “Anybody know Betty Castor?” She’s Secretary
of Education for the State of Florida. Glenn Burdick, who was the Dean of the College of
Engineering, goes, “Yeah, I know Betty.” “Oh, good, since you’re our next chairman of
the board.” (laughs)

So, let’s go to Tallahassee. So, we took our master plan and our proposals and
everything, and went up there. And we’d already started raising money from the private
sector, which is the next part of the story.

So, we go—we get an appointment—he gets an appointment. I don’t know Betty Castor.
We walk in there, and they’re like old buddies. They’ve been—they knew each other
forever. It was, like, “Oh, this is looking good.” (SB laughs) And then Betty says, “Well,
you know, I was on the county commission when they [MOSI] were looking for—to put
the land either downtown or out here at the university [USF]. The museum’s board voted,
and (laughs) that’s another story. (SB laughs)

Dr. Gladys Kashdin, a humanities professor at USF, was on the board. She’s having
dinner at her house, entertaining her dean, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at
USF. And she gets a phone call saying, “Listen, we don’t have a quorum on the board.
We’ve got to vote on whether we’re going to move downtown or out by the university.
You’ve got to come down and be the—and make quorum.” So, she looks at her dinner
party and goes, “Excuse me, I have to leave and go vote on something, (SB laughs) and I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere. Have some more wine.”

She rushes down and says, “Okay. What’s the deal?” Well, they’re offering—the city’s offering three acres downtown, and the univ—or wherever, this other—the other—county’s offering eleven acres out on Fowler [Avenue]. “I vote eleven acres out on Fowler. It’s going to grow with the university. It’s going (makes sounds).” They voted (laughs) to move out. She says, “Bye. I’ve got to go back.” And she had all the records of—all the early records of—of—

SB: Was she a swing vote? Or—

WO: No. She just convinced ’em. She just convinced them.

SB: She convinced them.

WO: Yeah. She was—well, if she hadn’t gone—it was all her doing, and in fact, I’m looking at her collage paintings of the Hillsborough River in our boardroom. So, today, she’s donated half her estate to MOSI, and we named—

SB: She’s an amazing person.

WO: We named the welcome center the Dr. Gladys Kashdin Welcome Center.

SB: I’m glad you expressed that. She’s an amazing (inaudible).

WO: (laughs) So, Betty says, she said—then she tells it—there’s so many people that started MOSI in their own individual way. So, Betty Castor said, “Well, you know, it looks good to me, fifteen million, you know. I’ll put it in the budget. But you’ve got to go lobby in the legislature. I can’t—that’s all I can do. Glenn, you’ve got to go work the crowd. And, Wit, you’ve got to go get your Miami people that you know to vote for it, too.”

So, I remember talking to one of the—I think, the head of appropriations in the men’s bathroom. (both laugh) It was the only time I could catch him. And he said, “Yeah, yeah. It looks—sounds good to me, but you know, I don’t have time to look at it right now.” So, we’re walking down the hallway and Glenn goes, “Oh, there’s the president of the senate.” And it was a woman. 60 I can’t remember her name, now. I’ve got to remember her name.

SB: And I can’t help.

WO: Anyway, she—they stop and they’re old friends, too, because Glenn has been lobbying in Tallahassee—as a dean of your college, that’s all you do. So, in five minutes,

two minutes, one and a half minutes, she goes, “Well, that sounds like a great project. How much do you need the first year?” And Glenn goes—(both laugh) he’d figured out what ten percent of fifteen—he goes, “A million and a half.” She goes, “Oh, is that all you need the first year? Oh, sure. That’s okay. Good. You got it.” Done. It was done.

SB: Oh, wow. That’s a great story.

WO: So, now, I go back to Hillsborough County and go, “We got the money.” She says, “You got fifteen million dollars?” “Yep.” Then nobody asked me, while we were—it was going to be over three years, ’cause we couldn’t build the thing any faster than that, anyway.

SB: Sure.

WO: Oh, no. You’ve got to—you have to do a feasibility study. I go, “Well, it’s only a thirty million dollar project. It’s going to be great. People are going to love it.” “No, you have to do a feasibility—” they were trying to say no, as good bureaucrats would. And I was—I’m a bureaucrat now. I’m a working county employee. But they always considered me just—

SB: So, you’re county. So—

WO: “We don’t know who Wit is, but—” No, not now. But no, but then I was a county employee. So, I just played dumb like I did in Tallahassee, and I said, “Well, what do I have to do?” And they said, “Well, you have to do a feasibility study.” So, we did. [MOSI] hired Arthur Andersen. How’s that for a name? And they had a guy who specialized in hospitals. So, when they did a feasibility study—you know, if you don’t know—they ask you, “So, okay, where’s your plans?” So, I whip out our financial plans for running and operating a science center at that level. And they go, “Oh, well, this is too high and that’s too low.” And they reworked—massaged all the numbers. It came out to the same, anyway. (laughs)

So, then we submitted our feasibility study. “Oh. Well, you know, if you—if you want—we have to do this with bond money. And if you want bond money, your ratio is not high enough.” So, we got it to the right level, and then they figured out the bond documents, how that was going to work. And then we go in, and I remember somebody—I think it was [County Commissioner] Jan Platt, who’s, like, the biggest MOSI supporter—she goes, “But this is not a tested feasibility study.” We already spent sixty thousand dollars doing the first feasibility study.

So she goes—and, so, everybody goes, “Oh, yeah. You’ve got to test this feasibility study.” (both laugh) So, once—I said, “What does that mean?” So, it costs us another sixty thousand. So, they asked me, “Okay, so what are three comparable science

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61 Interviewee clarifies: “Revenue to debt ratio.”
museums in the country that we can go and ask to see if these numbers hold up?” So, I gave them the three that I thought were good. They change it and they go, “I guess we were a little—we underestimated a little bit.” So, they actually came out better.

Then we were in there for the final vote, and somebody says, “Where’s the art in public places piece going to go?” (laughs) We don’t have an answer for this. So, they’re voting on a (...) bond issue to match the state’s fifteen million, and they want to know where the— What public art? You can’t use bond money to do public art.64

SB: Could you explain that again, for the listener?

WO: Public Arts program is 1 percent of taxpayer money that goes into a public project. It goes to a competitive art bid for an art piece to go along with the building. And it’s really a great program.

SB: I interviewed Robin Nigh, who heads this for the city. Is this a county?

WO: County.

SB: Okay. So, it’s one percent (inaudible).

WO: But you can’t use bond money. It’s one percent of the local money. It’s not 1 percent of the state money. That’s 1.0 percent of what—fifteen million is 1.5. So, that’s like $150,000.00. We don’t have—we just spent $120,000 on doing a feasibility study. There is no more money left. So, the arts council is there, and said, “Well, we need our—you’ve got to figure it out.” So, we just—I just said, “We’ll raise the money.” They said, “Really?” I said, “Yeah.” “Okay.”

SB: And—

WO: They voted—so, Pam Iorio was—voted—she was on the commission, and Jan and a bunch of others. It was a unanimous vote. (laughs)

SB: (inaudible) great.

WO: So—but—there was—

SB: I mean, you were working miracles the whole way—

WO: And, then—

62 Interviewee clarifies: “At the Board of County Commissioners public meeting.”
63 Interviewee clarifies: “$19,000,000.00 bond issue.”
64 Interviewee adds: “It’s against state statutes.”
65 Interviewee adds: “For new construction.”
SB: —basically.

WO: So, we had a—but we knew that wasn’t going to be enough. So, we were raising private dollars, and MOSI had never raised any private dollars, any capital campaign dollars. Last thing I was doing in Miami was raising endowment dollars, and that’s the toughest thing in the world to raise. But I had raised five million in endowment dollars, so I figured I could raise some money.

SB: So, is that—you’re talking—the next phase was raising endowment here?

WO: Well, right at the same time, no. Right at the same time the thirty million wasn’t going to be enough to build what we needed to build.

SB: Was that for building, operating? Does that include—

WO: Building.

SB: —operating?

WO: Yeah, uh, no. We were just—and they made us pay the bond back, which was going to be something like a million a year. I had no idea if we were—

SB: (inaudible) (laughs)

WO: —if we were going to be able to drive a net of 1.3 million from operations to pay that bond back. That’s what—how the [Florida] Aquarium got into trouble. You can’t do that.

SB: It’s really a leap of faith, isn’t it?

WO: Yeah.

SB: Wow.

WO: So, I knew we couldn’t do that. But I wasn’t going to tell anybody. It’s like, “We’ll figure it out.” So, we started raising money privately, and it was tough. Five hundred dollar checks, thousand dollar checks, and I—

SB: Now, what year is—?

WO: —I went to—this is still 1991 or ninety-two [1992]. I don’t even think USF had done their—it was right at the time where USF did their first capital campaign of, I don’t know, a hundred million, something like that?

It’s funny. I came from Miami. It was just—
SB: Were you—

WO: —awful trying to raise money in Miami when I was in the museum there. But the University of Miami broke it all loose by doing a $250,000,000.00 campaign. And they wound up raising $400,000,000.00.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: So, the money was there.

SB: Really different communities.

WO: But, you know, it was—and then they came here and I looked at the giving in this community, and it was fifteen years behind Miami. And I go, “Oh, my gosh. We’ve got to start all over again. There’s no giving history here.” So, we—

SB: Were you overlapping with the university then (inaudible)?

WO: It seems like yeah. We were always—the performing arts center [Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center] had just opened up in 1987. So, they were still fundraising. And everybody was saying, “What a white elephant.” And it was, like, bad—every time I’d try to talk about MOSI, they would say, “Well, you’re not going to be like the performing arts center, are you?” I mean, it was, like, “Oh, my God.” I was, like “Here’s this beautiful facility, and they’re—they don’t see what they’ve got.” And I’m trying to sell this (both laugh) giant science center.

SB: (inaudible)

WO: So—I know. And then all these board discussions. Finally, we had—Ruth Coleman invited us all out to her house in Avila [housing community]. Her husband, who was on the board, and who I got to know, had just passed away. So, she invited us out, and I remember Ruth standing on—I stood on these steps on this—on her—going up to her second floor, and addressed all the board members in a group and said, “You know, we need to raise some money.” And Ruth just pushed me off the steps and said, “I’m putting up!” (both laugh).” I think it was something like a quarter of a million dollars.

SB: Ah, that’s great.

WO: Robin Krivanek got her off the steps and said, “And I’m matching it with twenty thousand shares of—” something. I didn’t know what it was worth.

SB: Whoa.

66 Interviewee adds: “Dr. Frank Coleman.”

67 Interviewee adds: “Supervisor of Elections.”
WO: (laughs) And it was worth, like—I don’t know, like $270,000,000—I mean, $270,000.00. So we were, like, over 500,000 with two gifts, and I’m going—

SB: Isn’t that something.

WO: “Way to go, gals.” (both laugh)

SB: That’s great.

WO: Ruth is like that. She gave a big endowment gift to the University of South Florida—

SB: She’s amazing.

WO: —and she made it—she split it between MOSI and the University of South Florida, and two unusual things; one was a charitable lead trust and the other one was a charitable remainder trust. So it was, like, two examples that the public could use—

**end of mP3 file 003; begin mP3 file.**

WO: So, Ruth was the magic behind the Science Center board generating six hundred thousand dollars just from the board. Subsequent capital campaign, the one we’re in right now, we raised $2.2 million from the board. So, that’s how—you’ve just got to get started and, then, it works. I remember Ruth Coleman—we had these [board] term limits. All the professionals tell you you’ve got to have term limits for a board. You’ve got to be two—

SB: Two or three years.

WO: —two three-year terms or three two-year terms, then you’ve got to get off the board. For what reason, I don’t know. ’Cause they don’t have the guts enough to tell somebody that’s not a good board member that (SB laughs) you have to be off—you have to leave the board.

SB: That’s one of the reasons, yeah.

WO: So, it’s a fake thing. It’s made up. So, Ruth changed that whole thing around, and she—the nominating committee had me contact the people that had to get off the board. And I sat and told Ruth, I said, “Ruth, your six years is up and you have to leave the board, but we’d like to keep you engaged and involved. And you have to be off the board for a year, and then we can get you back. And the tears are rolling down her face. And I went, “Never mind. Let me go back to the (SB laughs) executive committee and say this is stupid. (laughs) I have no idea why you have to get off the board.”
So, I told the executive committee this story, and three people raised their hand on the executive committee and say, “Our six years is up next year.” And I went—and I think it was Al Schiff said, “Okay. This is dumb. (laughs) We were about to—”

SB: Good for him.

WO: “If we’ve got people that are ready, willing and able to serve, and continue to serve, we ought to let ’em serve. And if we don’t want ’em to serve, we’ll ask ’em to leave. And, if—the ones that don’t want to serve aren’t going to show up for meetings, and they will just be automatically thanked at the end of their term and they’ll leave.” So, that’s what we do. We’ve been doing that for—

SB: That is great.

WO: —for fifteen years now.

SB: Would you like to take the opportunity to both thank and acknowledge long-term people? Do you want to mention—

WO: No, I’d—

SB: —any?

WO: Pat Hill is still on our—well, we have—we created the national board. So, when people decided they want ’em to leave, or leave the area—David Darnell, who was the head of corporate Florida banking for Bank of America, he got promoted to St. Louis. So, I made it up. I said, “How’d you like to be on our national board?” And he goes, “Oh, that’d be great. That way I can keep up—” ’cause he was going to be the next chairman of MOSI. Al Schiff is one of the—he’s been here for at least probably eighteen years.

SB: And he chaired the board, too.

WO: He chaired the board. So, it started off with—Jake Dyal had chaired the board before I got here, then John Pieper, Gerry Curts, and then Jake came back (laughs) and did it again. Hal Cusick was in the middle there. And then, Jake dug a hole in the ground under construction, and then Al Schiff properly said he had to fill the hole up. And then Dick Dobkin helped cut the ribbon to—he was the next one to cut the ribbon to the opening of the building that we’re in today.

SB: You have some good people.

WO: And then, Atlee Harmon. And all these people are still on the board except for Hal. Hal’s on our national—he’s a chairman emeritus. So, Atlee Harmon from KPMG, Dick was from Ernst & Young, and, then—yeah, and then that’s—
SB: Did you expand the board, then, as people (inaudible)?

WO: Yeah. As we—no, people still came and went. It was—every year we had to add more people to the board. But as we looked for more expertise, as we looked for more women, as we looked for Hispanics, as we looked for African-Americans, the board expanded that way. We wound up with fifty-five board members, which [is] what we have today. And it seems to work fine for us.

The nominating committee says, “Well, all these people cannot be active.” And, then, we go over each one. Well, how about So-and-so? (SB laughs) What does he—what is he doing? I say, “Well, he chaired the committee on this and he made a donation of this, and his wife is engaged with our Einstein on Wine.” And we go—they go, “Okay, okay. Well, what about her?” (laughs) There’s—everybody— “But they don’t come to meetings.” We don’t want ’em to come to the board meeting. The board meeting is—if we have something critical that they have to be there for a vote, we don’t have those kinds of votes all the time. Ours is a working board. They work to get things done.

SB: That’s super.

WO: Like, we’re building an energy center now. There’s no—

SB: Tell us about that.

WO: There’s no—we have, on our seventy-five acres, we’re going to—we’re in a, you know, oil crisis. Oil went to—gasoline was at almost five dollars a gallon, and so, people really are serious about doing sustainable and alternative renewable energy. But they don’t know what that is. What’s a methane plant? Can’t I put a solar photovoltaic cell on my house and have free electricity? Well, you know, it’s not that simple. So, we’re going to build an exhibition center on energy, all different kinds. How did we get started on this energy thing to begin with? Do we—did we all— (laughs) In the beginning, there was no—we didn’t even have fire. We hunted and gathered and ate raw meat. Then there was fire. Then there was what? Made boats on flowing rivers—

SB: I think the wheel was a big, big deal for me.

WO: Yeah, but that was human energy. Then we figured out horses and cattle pulling carts. So, that—it’s all that whole history of till today, the situation we’re in, that we’re at beck and call by somebody yanking these prices around all over the place.

SB: For sure.

WO: But what’s the future hold? And that’s what MOSI is there to say. “Well, if we could do this—” There’s enough sunlight that falls on the planet to produce all the energy we need. So, how do we harness that energy? The sun produces wind, creates wind. So, even wind energy is part of that. So, we’re going to, in the exhibitions, talk about, make it
interactive. Where does most energy come from? How do we get it? How do we use it? And what are these alternative and renewable things?

SB: Is the goal to get people to think about these?

WO: Not only to think about 'em, but to use them. And how new companies coming to town to say, “Listen. How do I become more green and sustainable with my own company? Oh, you mean MOSI’s got an energy center where I can learn about all these different things and just pick from these different energies and use them at my business and my home?”

So, we’re going to build a wood gasification plant. We’re going to take yard waste, yard waste from your house. Sun falls on your trees, tree limbs fall—

SB: (inaudible)

WO: —down, and so you just—they pick it up from your front of your house. And there’s two hundred thousand tons of yard waste a year. And if we have a hurricane or tropical storms, there’s even more. That stuff is processed. They pay somebody to process this stuff. And then, some of it’s used for potting soil.

SB: Who’s the “they,” Wit?

WO: It’s Department of Solid Waste. And then, they hire somebody to get rid of this stuff. So, they have what’s called these wood-overs in—I trimmed two oak trees at my house, and I had six tons of oak wood. They beat that up and pulverize it into these pieces, and then—

SB: They would come to your house—

WO: No.

SB: —and pick it up.

WO: It’s private. I had to pay tree trimmers to come and saw it up. And, then, they had—because I’m a taxpayer, you don’t have to pay to have it (...) the dump. If you were not, then you’d have to pay nineteen dollars a ton for them to take it.

SB: But you’re going to have the plants here.

WO: So, we’re going to have—we’re going to take these wood-overs, and we’re going to gasify them. We’re going to heat them up into their organic liquids and volatile organic compounds. And then, we’re going to burn that. It burns clean. You’re not burning wood directly. And it boils water, produces steam, turns a generator, and we can produce six

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68 Interviewee clarifies: “Dropped off at the dump.”
times the amount of electricity that MOSI uses. We spend seven hundred thousand dollars a year on electricity. So, we’ll have free electricity. We’ll be seven hundred thousand dollars to the good, and then any extra we sell back to the grid and make even more money.

SB: That’s fabulous.

WO: In fact, as of today, this is the Senate meeting in Washington, D.C., right now, to put together the—a stimulus bill, (inaudible) stimulus package, eight hundred billion and more dollars. We’re submitting a fifty million dollar grant to build this energy center. [U.S. President Barack] Obama’s platform was built on alternative and renewable energy. He hired Dr. Steven Chu from Stanford, Nobel Prize winner on alternative and renewable energy. What do you think they’re looking—what kind of projects do you think they’re looking for? This.

SB: This.

WO: This is a—

SB: For sure.

WO: —a million people a year will learn about alternative and sustainable energy. Companies and people will come down and see working models, and it’s only going to cost fifty million dollars. It’s not even—and we’re going to put people’s—it’s got employment. It’s got jobs. It’s cutting edge. It’s the only one in the world, one stop energy center.

SB: The only one in the world?

WO: Yeah. There’s no—there’s nobody else doing that.

SB: That’s incredible.

WO: And we’re going to do—we’re going to combine agriculture with it, too, because one of the systems that we want to show is this—you know, you’re living in India, say; (laughs) a lot of places in the world that do not have an electrical grid. But India has cell phone towers. But they run off of a diesel engine that sits by the cell phone tower, in amongst where all these people live. People have cell phones—

SB: All over.

WO: —but they don’t need—but they need ’em to communicate. People need to communicate more than they need to use energy. They’re just keeping warm. They’re growing their crops. They’re tending their—they eat—they’re vegetarians.

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69 Obama selected Chu to be Secretary of Energy.
SB: They’re so poor.

WO: And they’re poor. So, we can give them this technology. Say, “If you grow—” We have to figure out a plant that grows naturally in India that produces—something like a soybean. Probably soybeans grow there. You can—and this machine will take the soybeans, you put ’em in the hopper, it crushes the soybeans and out come—from one end comes these protein carbohydrate cakes, which you can then turn into soy milk. Soy—it’s loaded with protein and vitamins.

And the other end, all this oil that comes out, soybean oil, gets cracked. It breaks down all these big long carbon chains into these different elements. And then, it’s cooked and distilled. And these different gas liquid fuels come off of this graduated cylinder. And so, the stuff that comes off the top there are things like benzene, which is really expensive. They can sell that and make money off of their soybeans. (laughs) And the stuff that comes off the bottom they can use as cooking fuel, instead of cutting trees down or burning cow dung—

SB: Is—I mean, if—

WO: And then, this power can pull water out of the ground. Instead of carrying jugs on your head from—

SB: But the obvious question is it sounds so efficient. Why has this not happened before? Why—the technology—

WO: I don’t know. They’re carrying—

SB: It has to be—

WO:—they’re trucking in diesel. They’re carrying in diesel in quart containers to put into the (laughs)—into this engine sitting out in the middle of nowhere to produce electricity. So, what we’re doing—you’ve got to—this is going to—I don’t know if you can grasp with this.

SB: I’ll try.

WO: This is just too cool. Dr. Anita Goel, G-o-e-l, she’s an East Indian American, born in (…)\textsuperscript{70}, a little town in Mississippi. Her father is an Indian surgeon, the only surgeon in this small town. She grows up—you know, railroad tracks through the middle of town: half the people on one side are black, the other half are white. She doesn’t know where she fits, so she crosses over. (laughs) Tan, very tan.

SB: (laughs) Okay.

\textsuperscript{70} Interviewee clarifies: “Born in Boston, and grew up in Mississippi.”
WO: So, she falls in love with nature, goes—very smart, goes to Stanford, studies physics under Dr. Steven Chu.

SB: Under Chu.

WO: She goes on to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] and gets a Ph.D. in nanotechnology and electrical engineering, and simultaneously, goes to Harvard and gets her medical degree—simultaneously, same time.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: (laughs) Is this woman smart—

SB: You’re right. I can’t comprehend—

WO: —or what?

SB: —her brain. (laughs) Great.

WO: So then, she’s designed—now, she has five—four or five patents that can use nanotechnology, meaning at the molecular level. She can—it looks like a cell phone. You take a cell phone, put it in your hand, you can open up this little tray and spit in it, close it up and the nanotechnology will look for a strand of DNA that it doesn’t rec—that is not yours. And it’ll go, “Oh. You have a rhinovirus.”

SB: Oh, wow.

WO: In fifteen minutes. Oh, what is that? Oh, that’s—

SB: She’s got a patent—

WO: —that’s a cold.

SB: —she has a patent on this?

WO: Yeah. She’s got five different patents.

SB: But nobody’s developing this?

WO: And I said—

SB: How do you know about her?

71 Interviewee explains: “Atomic or very small.”
WO: Why wouldn’t Merck do that? That’s another story.

SB: Oh. Okay.

WO: Or you can put your finger on the end of it and it’ll prick your finger, the end of your finger, and it’ll take a sample of blood.

SB: And read out—

WO: “Oh, you have—” And it’ll—you can find out if you have any foreign—it can distinguish between Hepatitis A, B, or C. It can distinguish between whether you have a cold or the flu. And then, it can distinguish whether—what kind of flu do you have. Do you have avian flu, or—? So, this is—Google is very interested in this, because they’re working on this thing to prevent—to do—prevent pandemics, you know, the—

SB: Uh huh. Google is? Fascinating.

WO: Hey. They’re Google Earth. They just will introduce Google Water, now. And so, they’re interested in this communication of the world. So, her device, in India, which doesn’t have an electrical grid, but they’ve got their cell tower being powered by their crop, they can communicate with the world, and if somebody gets sick, they can just—they don’t know what it is. They can—she can—and, then you call it in. And, then, they go, “Oh, my God. We’ve got to stop this. This is going—that could turn into a pandemic. Fly in the antibiotics and take care of it.”

SB: That is phenomenal.

WO: So, this—

SB: Are they—

WO: What we’re doing here is important to all of these different technologies.

SB: Problems, too.

WO: The Pacific Islands don’t have any electricity. Do they really need it? Maybe not, but if they want it, they can take this simple machine—like in Haiti. I heard this story from one of our board members. The women have to go long distance with water jugs to go get clean water, and then they come back. It takes them a couple of hours, sometimes.

So, this church group went down and built them a well. Somebody plugged the well up, threw rocks down the well. What? The women plugged it up. It was two hours they had away from their husbands. (laughs) So, you can’t work with just technology. You’ve got to work with the cultures of the people.

SB: Of course.
WO: You can’t shove this technology down people’s throats. You’ve got to help them out.


WO: You know—it—so, science is really about what does the science mean, to me.

SB: The application.

WO: And that’s what we built our exhibits on.

SB: Tell us about some of the other exhibits. What are your favorites? And I know—

WO: I guess—

SB: Well, how many—you told us how many you had then. How many do you have now?

WO: Well, we have seventy in our Kids in Charge!, another two hundred—

SB: Could you explain Kids in Charge!?

WO: Yeah. Kids in Charge! was the final, phase three, of our fifteen year master plan. It’s the—Kids in Charge! is a children’s science center. It’s different than a general children’s museum, which would cover all topics—history, culture, society, policemen (laughs), that kind of—firemen. This is just about science, technology, engineering and mathematics. We call it stem, S-T-E-M. It’s the largest children’s science center in North America. It would be—

SB: I’m amazed.

WO: —the western hemisphere, except Mexico City has a larger children’s science center. (laughs)

SB: Oh, my gosh. Okay, (inaudible). Could you tell us what largest means? Does it mean the number of acres you cover? Does it mean the quantity of people you see?

WO: (inaudible) Let me just tell you about MOSI. You know, like, today, after twenty-one years, it’s now the sixth largest science center in the U.S., after Chicago, Boston, St. Paul, Houston, Seattle. I think that’s it.

SB: Okay. Number of people being—

WO: Number—we have a million a year. That makes us fifth in the country after Houston, which is the highest. You’d think Chicago would be, but it’s not. Then, L.A.
[Los Angeles] is free, and then St. Louis is also free. They do all—all over a million. Boston is a little over a million. (…)

SB: Amazing.

WO: (…), Dallas—

SB: You should be very proud.

WO: Atlanta—you know, a bunch of cities. And that’s—and then, seventy-five acres is pretty unusual. I mean, the Franklin [Franklin Institute Science Museum] is in the middle of downtown Philly [Philadelphia]. They’ve got five acres or something.

There’s some others that have more land. Well, the Daytona Museum of Art and Science has like three hundred acres of land in St. Augustine and in Daytona. They manage a huge park. So, other people have more land, but they (…) 72 resources to build anything (laughs) on it. So, I guess the—

SB: (inaudible)

WO: I’m sorry. You asked me—

SB: Well—

WO: —what my favorite exhibit—

SB: —and to explain Kids in Charge!.

WO: Oh. Kids in Charge! is a separate building, and it’s (…) 73 square feet. And the original MOSI building was 65,000 square feet. And then, the facility that we built is 190,000 square feet. So, we’re at, total, 318,000 square feet.

SB: Okay. Wow. So, Kids in Charge! is they’re totally in charge (snap sound) and interactive—


SB: —with exhibits.

WO: Built for kids. ’Cause, you know, normally we would build an exhibit and say, “Well, you know, it’s for anybody.” But they can’t sit on the bicycle and reach the pedals, the pedals of the bicycle that turn on the electric generator, because it’s not built for kids. They can’t ride the high-wire bike. You’ve got to be at least thirty-six, forty

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72 Interviewee clarifies: “But they have scarce resources.”
73 Interviewee clarifies: “43,000 square feet.”
inches tall. So, this place is for kids, and it’s totally, completely accessible, thanks to your husband and—

SB: Dave Harbert.

WO: —Dave Harbert, who tested out Kids in Charge!, even the bed of nails. (both laugh) I had to build an extra step. The steps were too high to get up onto the bed of nails, so they could get up these steps but they were half the size. So, I did that and they said, “Oh, that’s fine. I can get up now.”

SB: But you have to explain what a bed of nails is (inaudible) someone out there who’s—

WO: A bed of nails is where you have two hundred nails that’s underneath this plastic table. And this plastic table has two hundred holes. So, you lie on this plastic table, put your head on a pillow, and then you push a button. And all these two hundred nails come underneath you (SB laughs) and lift you up in the air.

SB: Without any harm.

WO: Without hurting you, right, because if it was one nail, the nail would go right into you. (laughs)

SB: Uh huh.

WO: And there’s a mathematical formula: pressure is equal to the area divided by the number of points. So, if you distribute all that weight—

SB: And (inaudible) flabbergast most people who see that.

WO: Yeah. It was like, “Oh, my God. I love it.” And then, you touch each one and they’re sharp as the end of a pin.

SB: Is that one of the more popular ones?

WO: It is. The hurricane exhibit still is very popular. One of my favorites is—we put together this committee of science and humanists together—scientists and humanists together in the same committee. They don’t see eye-to-eye (laughter) very often. No scientists see eye-to-eye with each other, but—and probably no humanist does, either. But we wanted to figure out what is this science and society, or what does this science in society mean to people? And you’ve got to look at it from a humanistic point of view, or as E.O. Wilson would say, the consilience. It’s the unity of [all] knowledge about something, like energy we were talking about. It affects everybody.

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74 Interviewee adds: “Monroe Berkman.”
So, we started picking these great idea people from around the U.S., got a foundation grant to bring in these people and have a community discussion. We brought in John Todd. He was an oceanographer at Woods Hole in Massachusetts, and he lived on Cape Cod. All his friends and neighbors were getting ill in the neighborhood, and some of them were getting significant cancer and people were dying. And he went, “This is—the statistics are way off the chart. There’s something wrong in our community.” And he tested it out, and it was the water. The water was polluted, full of carcinogens and bad stuff.

So, he said—so, he started working on how to look for a new way of purifying water. And he came—and water, pure, good, clean water is the most important thing. We’re going to be paying more for clean water than we are electricity in the future.

SB: I believe that.

WO: And it’s—so, what he came up with is what he called a living machine. It basically takes wastewater from—and he designed a—after he talked to us about this whole—the system approach—he does the wastewater for Ben & Jerry’s ice cream. They said—they shut Ben & Jerry off, ’cause they kept on throwing all these milk fat products down in the sewer for the water treatment plant to process. And they said, “You’re gumming our whole chemical treatment plant.”

So, they asked John Todd, and they said, “Do you think your living machine would take care of this stuff?” So, this is what the living machine is. It has a—all the stuff goes into this tank that has anaerobic bacteria, bacteria that are real primitive and that work without oxygen. They chew up—they eat up everything, plastic. They’d eat up all kinds—pesticides. Doesn’t kill, doesn’t hurt, [or] phase them a bit. They’re primitive, and they eat up oil. They eat up—so, after it sits in there for a day, it moves into this aerobic bacteria chamber.75

These are five thousand gallons—at MOSI, they’re each five thousand gallons of water. We produce about four thousand gallons of wastewater out of MOSI a day. So, it goes in that chamber first; the next day it moves over into the next chamber. And the next day it goes into these aboveground tanks, which has this emergent vegetation coming out of the top. It’s a floating net that sits on top of these ten tanks, filled with water. And they’re bubbling and they’ve got fish in them, and snails and mollusks, clams, that have—they can pump hundreds of gallons of water a day per clam through their system. And they’re filtering out the nutrients. They’re cleansing our wastewater from the toilets, and washrooms, the café, the—

SB: My gosh.

WO: And it’s 95 percent clean water after it gets through these tanks. Then it goes into our butterfly garden. And there’s this moat inside the butterfly garden. It’s designed by

75 Interviewee adds: “For a day.”
Antoine Predock, our architect from Albuquerque, New Mexico who did—he’s one of the international architects that designed the main science center. It’s first chlorinated to kill any pathogens and then de-chlorinated, and then ultraviolet—UV rayed—to kill any pathogens, any E. coli [Escherichia coli] or viruses, bad viruses. And then, it goes into this marsh.

And, so, the flowers in there are sucking up this water from the bathrooms and producing flowers, and we grow butterflies. So the public can enjoy a flower garden and butterflies from—which is now clean water. So, now we’re dumping clean water down the sewage system and the—because it’s just so much bureaucracy to recycle. We could actually totally recycle that same water throughout MOSI, just over and over again through that living machine. So—

SB: It’s fascinating.

WO: So, it looks like a garden.

SB: Who—

WO: We call it Butterfly and Bio-Works Garden [Bio-Works Butterfly Garden] by SWFWMD and Bank of America. They thought it was just the coolest idea.

SB: It is cool. (WO laughs) I mean, who—

WO: So, what—

SB: Did the architect—

WO:—all they do—

SB: —dream this up?

WO: No. I did.

SB: You did. Yeah, I thought so.

WO: John Todd and I did.

SB: Wow.

WO: And so, you know where we got our bacteria for the anaerobic tank? In our backwoods in wetlands, you just dig down into the soil, and you just pull up buckets of this mud into a bucket. And you go and you dump it in that tank. It’s loaded with

76 Interviewee adds: “And butterflies.”

77 Interviewee clarifies: “Producing nectar.”
anaerobic bacteria. And then the aerobic bacteria, we just got—we just skimmed the surface of the wetland, the soil level, and that’s where all the anaerobic—aerobic, with oxygen, bacteria. We put that in the other tank. We got the snails from the backwoods, the fish from the backwoods, the mollusks from the backwoods. So, we didn’t have to import anything from China.

SB: Amazing. (laughs)

WO: You know, it’s just—it’s all of—basically, you take the stuff in a swamp. The swamp is not polluted. It’s clean water. It’s clear. It’s brown because of the tannins from the leaves and everything. But it process—all the birds are pooping back there, all the otters and turtles and snakes. They’re all pooping back there all the time, raccoons and cats—

SB: But you’re saying it’s clean?

WO: Yeah, it’s clean. It’s gone. Bacteria, fungi, it—nature takes care of all that waste. It’s just we have to, somehow—

SB: Pollute it. (laughs)

WO: —figure out—we’re—

SB: We pollute it and then you—

WO: We take it and concentrate all the sewage—

SB: —figure out how to clean it.

WO: —and then put it all in one place, and then—we used to dump raw sewage into Tampa Bay, and—

SB: Oh, I remember.

WO: —then we used to dump it in the Gulf of Mexico. And it didn’t even—nobody would care. Then we realized that all the fish were dying, no shrimp were left, no—you know, so—and we still dump (…)78 million gallons of clean, treated fresh water into the Bay—clean water; this is good drinking water—just dump it out.

SB: Which—

WO: But we could—it’s called grey water, but it’s clean, absolutely clean water. I could drink the water.

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78 Interviewee clarifies: “Eighty million gallons.”
SB: It sounds really inefficient (inaudible).

WO: So, that’s the neatest—where you’re growing butterflies who are sipping nectar from a flower, which is the same water molecules that came from someone flushing the toilet inside MOSI.


WO: You can’t destroy a water molecule. You’ve got to really put a lot of energy into—

SB: You can’t destroy energy.

WO: Yeah. Into—

SB: Is that correct?

WO: Yeah. Well, it’s—yeah. A water molecule is a particularly stable. You can split ’em into hydrogen and oxygen. You put ’em together, there’s an explosion. It’s what they fuel the rockets at Kennedy—it’s hydrogen rockets.

SB: Wow. I mean, I could just listen to this—

WO: (laughs) That’s a neat one.

SB: —all day. This was incredibly entertaining, Wit.

WO: So, that was the first of its kind. So, people would come and study that and—

SB: Do kids—do people—can they see all of this transpire?

WO: Yeah. It’s all—yeah. It’s all labeled, and you can see—you can’t see the underground tanks, but there’s nothing going on. It looks goopy and you know.

SB: So, how many different areas are there here—

WO: Well, we have the—

SB: —that people can experience?

WO: We can experience the whole backwoods. There’s trails in the backwoods, a beautiful sinkhole that, when I first came here, it was up to my chest and filled with water. The land was just terrible. It was a dumping grounds for people who could drive onto the site and just dump refrigerators and boats and mattresses and all kinds of stuff. We’ve cleaned it up.
SB: You called it a beautiful sinkhole.

WO: Yes.

SB: That’s very interesting to me. I wouldn’t necessarily call it beautiful, not— I —

WO: Well, as an aquatic ecologist and an outdoors person, that is.

SB: You’re saying that’s a good example of what?

WO: And it’s—well, it’s got lots of—it’s like—when it’s filled with water it looks like a pond, and ponds are beautiful. It’s surrounded by vegetation. The backwoods is filled with beautiful, long leaf pines, which is very rare—we cut ’em all down —and oak trees and we have a bay head. It’s all sweet bay, loblolly bay. There’s a time of year when they flower, white flowers, and the petals fall down on the water and it’s absolutely gorgeous. There’s so many rare plants back there, and otters and great horned owls and—

SB: I mean, I still get lost in this venue. I have to tell you. But I have been in the IMAX, and—

WO: Mm-hm. The IMAX Dome Theatre, the—

SB: Tell us about that.

WO: That’s a—yeah. We decided to go with a dome theatre, because people prefer this half a hemisphere, half a sphere—sorry, a hemisphere. Eighty feet across, ten thousand watts of sound, so it’s the best sound system in Tampa. You feel like you’re in the film. Everest was our most popular IMAX film, and is at most IMAX venues. But the IMAX theatre takes people to places in the world that we could never take them to. We can’t take ’em to the top of [Mount] Everest. We can’t take ’em to the bottom of the ocean to see the deep ocean vents. Right now we’re showing Kilimanjaro. We take you—it’s an expedition that went to the top, two young kids and a grandmother and a couple of—to go to the top of [Mount] Kilimanjaro, to stand near these huge glaciers on the top of Kilimanjaro, in the mid—on the equator.

SB: It’s really a surround sound—

WO: Yeah.

SB: —and surround—

WO: Surrounding images and surrounding—

79 Interviewee clarifies: “Development cut them all down.”

WO: —surround you in. And we do popular films as well. One of my other favorite is things that are events. Like this past weekend, we had two Super Bowl events. Took over—it was fifteen hundred people on Friday, and then five thousand people on Saturday. Nelly was here, the rap star and all of the—

SB: I did read about that.

WO: We—

SB: Yeah.

WO: We were full. They couldn’t take any more. What they call the first rounders, the NFL [National Football League] players that play for teams, they couldn’t even get in.

WO: So, that—I didn’t go. I didn’t even bother. (laughs) I stayed away, far away, from that.

SB: No, but you’re known for Einstein on Wine.

WO: Einstein on Wine. It’s their thirteenth year. It was the first—I always liked wine tasting in my house. I said, “Why don’t we do it MOSI, invite all our friends (laughs) instead of just a handful?” We have twenty restaurants and a hundred wine vintners. Now it seems like everybody’s got a wine tasting at their—as a fund raiser.

SB: Will you tell us about Bodies? This is the second.

WO: There’s special traveling exhibitions that we bring into the science center [to] help keep the science center changing all the time. The IMAX films change, the changing exhibits change, and even the permanent exhibits change every ten years. And it’s scattered throughout. We have had great success with Dinosaurs, but that sort of waned. Then we brought in Titanic and we did three hundred thousand people. And that was after eight hundred thousand people had seen a Titanic exhibit in St. Petersburg. And then, I tried for eight years to get this German, Dr. Gunther von Hagens, who invented the plastination process in Germany fifteen years ago. Twenty-six million people have seen his exhibition.

SB: All over the world?

WO: Yeah. It’s the most highly visited exhibition of all time. So, I called him up and I said, “Dr. von Hagens, we’d like to have your exhibition at our science center in Tampa, Florida.” And he goes, “Was ist das, this Tampa?” (SB laughs) He didn’t know—he didn’t—I think he knew, and he was—

SB: He doesn’t know any football, obviously.
WO:—just pulling my leg. But he goes—I said, “It’s”— He said, “This is not New York. It’s not L.A. It’s not San Francisco. It’s”— I said, “It’s next to Orlando.” (both laugh) And he goes, “You Americans couldn’t handle this exhibition, so I’m not taking it to America.” That was eight years ago.

So, in the meantime, the California Science Center worked for three years to get him to bring the exhibition to L.A., and then that broke it loose in America. In the meantime, it was—I still—Tampa was not in that top thirteen—what are we, the eighteenth largest city? So, there’s lots of other places it was going to go before it ever came here.

So, I took this Bodies: The Exhibition tour, which we’re—another company, a competing company, that—there was a Chinese dissectors. And the best anatomists and dissectors in the world are in China. So, they have these processed bodies—copying, really, Body Worlds, but these were all poor Chinese. One and a half million people die every year in China. People can’t afford to bury their dead, so they’d leave it on, you know, the steps of the police station. They just give up the body for the—so the government will take care of it. And then, they—it goes over—gets into a university somehow, and then this plastination team processed it. That was very controversial.

We had the exhibit being set up, and it was coming and the Anatomical Board, which rules on body flow in and out of Florida, didn’t even know about it. And I didn’t know about them. The ABC Action News reporter—

SB: Oh, I didn’t know this.

WO:—looked it up and said, “Who controls bodies—?” So she calls them up and says, “Do you know that MOSI’s doing this exhibit on human bodies in—in Tampa?” They said, “Well, we’ve got to—you’ve got to do this and you’ve got to do that.” And we said, “Mm, I don’t think we do. There’s nothing in the state statutes that say you have the right.” So, they called Charlie Crist, who was the [state] attorney general, and Charlie was running for governor and he says something like, “Oh, yeah. They—yeah. You have to rule on this. This is a conservative state, and we don’t go running around showing human bodies.” (laughs)

Well, the Anatomical Board met. By this time, now it’s making news around the world. In fact, we had to go up for this hearing but they never—the Anatomical Board never asked us any questions. They just talked amongst themselves. They’re all anatomists from medical schools, and it—the chairman of the committee was actually for letting this happen. And the director of the Anatomical Board was not, (laughs) because of religious reasons.

SB: How interesting.
WO: It was a four to two vote. So, we’re driving back in the van with the president of Premier Corporation [Premier Exhibitions, Inc.] who brought the exhibit to us, their attorney, the PR [public relations] guy, the anatomist from University of Michigan who certified all these things were correct and anatomically perfect. Somebody said, “Wit, are you ready to open?” This was on a Wednesday. And I said, “I’ve already opened it to the schoolteachers on Monday—no, the press on Monday.” And they had a field day.

I was grilled to the—I mean, the editorial board person from the Tampa Tribune just raked it over, because, “Don’t you understand that these Chinese people are—they’re inhumane.” And I said, “Well, you know, that we’ve—it’s legally processed in China. It was legally processed here. I can’t help it that they were poor. We do the same thing when unclaimed bodies in the U.S. go to medical schools and medical—twenty-two year old kids dissect these human bodies. And they don’t do a very good job.” In fact a cardiol—So, that was Monday, (laughs) and Tuesday the teachers came. And then Wednesday, the medical community was coming.

So, we’re driving back, and I say—I called our chief operating office, Vicki Ahrens. I said, “Are we ready to open tomorrow for the public? I know you got a brand new ticketing system.” And she goes, “You’re not going to open tomorrow, are you?” (both laugh) I go, “Yeah. They just ruled that—so I’m prepared to go to jail if they want to arrest me. Don’t bail me out. I want to stay in there until—(SB laughs) until this is over.” So, she goes, “Okay. We’ll open.” I said, “Okay. We’re opening tomorrow.” And everybody went, “Oh, my God. You are?” in the van.

So, the attorney’s on the Blackberry writing a press release. It’s like 4:30 [PM]. We’ve got to get this thing out by five o’clock, and he’s—they’re arguing about the wording. And I “Just say MOSI decides to open the exhibit and push the button.” (laughs) So, we did and made the five o’clock news, six o’clock news—

SB: Oh, I so remember.

WO: —and 256 television newscasts around the world, including Perth, Australia and London [England]. And it was—but what it did was it set—a group of people said, “You cannot see this exhibition. Not in America.” If you don’t want to see it, don’t go. But don’t tell me I can’t see it. It was such a—people were saying, “God, are we ever so glad you stood up and just—you know, I don’t even want to see it, but I was glad you stood up.” (laughs) It was an issue of freedom and—

SB: It really was.

WO: But then the debate became about health and health issues, like smoking and non-smoking and cancer—

SB: It created so much—
WO: So, 660,000 people and over—

SB: —talk and engagement.

WO: —a million people a year talking about health and legal issues and everything. It was just galvanizing.

SB: Just—yeah.

WO: So, then, we got—three years later, now, we’re opening up *Body Worlds*, which is actually a bigger exhibit, better—more artistic, more creative, by the originator of the plastination process. It’s so much better (laughs) than the other one, but—

SB: And it opened when?

WO: January twenty-second.

SB: Okay. And is it—

WO: It’s doing great, but not as—it doesn’t have the controversy. And we’re in a recession. So, we’re doing exactly what we predicted it would do, about a thousand people a day. So, we’ll probably—

SB: I mean, I couldn’t find a parking space.

*end of mp3 file 004/Begin mp3 file 005*

SB: Today is March 13, 2009, and this is the interviewer, Suzette Berkman. I’m here with Wit Ostrenko, who is President of MOSI. We’re currently (clears throat) working on our third session, and I would assume the reason we’re taking three sessions is because there’s so much happening here at MOSI. Wit, thank you so much—

WO: Thank you, Suzette.

SB: —for additional time.

WO: You bring out the best in me.

SB: Wow. I don’t think it takes a whole lot, actually. You just are a dynamo, and that’s pretty well documented. But let’s document it some more, please.

WO: Okay.

SB: Tell me what’s going on at MOSI.
WO: Well, today we’re—a wonderful combination. We have a million [people] coming in through the front door paying tuition, buying memberships and participating in our exhibits, in our IMAX, in our new planetarium, in our Kids in Charge!, and the sequences of traveling exhibitions that are coming to town. And today, we have Body Worlds [and] the Story of the Heart.

SB: Could—let’s elaborate on each of those.

WO: Okay. I think the traveling exhibitions are really important to the science center. Our museums are famous for that, because they do—if you don’t have an art collection, particularly in Florida, you have things that change to bring people back. The same with the science center. In fact, this is our largest exhibition we’ve ever done.

SB: Large in what way?

WO: We had a ten thousand square foot exhibition space that we could put temporary exhibits in, but Body Worlds was the most seen exhibition on the planet to date. In the last fifteen years, twenty-six million people have seen this exhibition, or one just like it—they have five exhibits—this one, Body Worlds: The Story of the Heart, versus Body Worlds 1, 2 and 3.

SB: Oh.

WO: So, we knew it was big, and bigger than the first Bodies exhibit we did. And this is by Dr. Gunther von Hagens [of] the Institute of Plastination in Heidelberg, Germany. He’s the origin—he originated the plastination process. It’s kind of the ultimate—we’ve been mummifying people throughout our human existence on this planet. This is just sort of the ultimate mummification. It’s a perfect plastination of the human body (inaudible) last we don’t know how long, I mean, thousands of years.

SB: When was this created? When did he do this?

WO: This exhibit’s almost brand new. He has 8,900 people who have donated their bodies to this process to be put on public display, or to be given to medical students around the world.

SB: Do you know when he invented—

WO: It was—

SB: —this process?

WO: —about twenty years ago. And he started touring, and I tried to get it from Europe to the United States. And I remember calling him up and I got him on the phone and I said, “I’d like you to bring your exhibition—we’d like to have you in Tampa, Florida.” And he goes, “Was ist das, this Tampa?” (SB laughs) I said (laughs)—I was just shocked.
I didn’t know what to say. I was, like, “Oh, yeah, of course. It’s in the U.S.A. It’s in Florida. It’s right—an hour from Disney world.” And he goes, “Disney World. (SB laughs) It’s not New York. It’s not L.A. It’s not Chicago. Why would I want to come to Tampa? In fact, you Americans couldn’t handle this exhibition.” I said, “Oh, of course we can.”

So, what we did was—he said no, and in fact, it took three years after that discussion for him to finally bring the exhibition to the California Science Center in L.A. They put three people on the task to get that exhibit out of Europe and to the U.S. And now, he’s practically doubled his attendance since he started doing that.

SB: Is there more than one show traveling?

WO: There’s five. And, then, of course, their competitor is Bodies: The Exhibition. This is the one we first had. We had 660,000 people go through that. It’s kind of—this is our second—so, this is our second run, and we’re shooting for 300,000 visitors in five months.

It’s much better. The dissection work is beautiful. His artistic posing of these bodies is just unimaginable. If you can picture an Olympic athlete, female, on a balance beam with their—standing on one foot, the other foot higher than your head, arms outstretched, chest back, just beautifully curved. It’s just that moment is suspended. Or a pair of ice skaters, figure skaters, a male holding up a female above his head, and she’s in just a beautiful, expressive pose, just floating in air. To figure the engineering of that out—and then, they’re standing on a round pedestal that’s slowly rotating, so you can see—you can just stand in one place and—

SB: How many bodies are there?

WO: There’s twenty in this exhibition and over two hundred body parts. In fact, I was just on radio this morning talking about our program to help people quit smoking. Tobacco causes fifteen different kinds of cancers. Thirty percent of people die from cancers dealing with smoking or tobacco. Seventy percent of smokers say they want to quit but only 4 to 7 percent actually do. So, the important part of this exhibition is that comparison of a smoker’s lung to a non-smoker’s lung. A non-smoker’s lung is like two beautiful white pillows, soft and spongy, and you can actually blow them up like a balloon. Not in this exhibition, but we do sheep’s lungs to show you that fact. And, then, you look at the smoker’s lung, which is black as tar and the heart is shriveled, the lungs are shriveled, and it looks like you couldn’t—it was not an organ for breathing.

SB: Is that reversible?

WO: No. Not unless—given enough time, it is somewhat reversible. So, yeah. You can quit today and improve the quality of your lungs. Your body is great at cleaning itself up on the inside.
SB: That’s great. So, hopefully, this exhibit will deter—

WO: If it gets you to quit—if it can go from 4 to 7 percent quitting to 8 to 9 percent, we’ll have saved thousands of lives.

SB: I assume tobacco companies are not sponsoring. (laughs)

WO: No. This is a preventable disease, so we’ve got to do those things that will help. All other diseases are—at least if you detect them early, you can usually take care of them, including things like my favorite thing right now. I had two of my best friends die from aneurysms in their lower descending aorta. It’s 83 percent fatal if it ruptures. So, why wouldn’t we be—why shouldn’t that be part of our physical examination? I get my coronary arteries checked through a CAT scan, and I said, “Can you check out my descending aorta? I lost one of my best friends, who was fifty-four, and I lost another one who was seventy-three,” Dick Bowers, and—

SB: (inaudible)

WO: —cause they didn’t—my father, it was detected when he went—he goes to the V.A. Hospital for an annual physical, because he was a World War II veteran. They’d check him out stem to stern and said, “Oh, you know, you get to spend another night in the hospital.” They were afraid to let him home because the ballooning of his aorta was so big. And all they do is put a stent in. So, he’s—

SB: Did they do that then?

WO: —could have celebrated—this was—no. This was ten years ago. So, he’s going to celebrate his ninetieth birthday, where my two best friends didn’t know and died.

SB: (inaudible)

WO: So, that’s what we hope the science center, not only through its traveling exhibitions, but through its permanent exhibitions—that—believe me, it’ll be in our next expansion of the Amazing You exhibition.\(^\text{80}\)

So, people come—a million people are attracted to our planetarium. This is a brand new planetarium with the latest Goto projector. It’s only thirty foot in diameter. It’s not like the New York or the Chicago planetariums where it’s a big, giant show. This is more of a personal presentation by our astronomers. You get to have a conversation with them and that—

SB: But do you have regular shows?

\(^{80}\) Interviewee clarifies: “How to ask for an image of aorta coronary and carotid arteries”
WO: Regular shows every day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. A lot of people get their start in liking science or science centers by going to a planetarium show.

SB: That’s very true.

WO: There’s always something happening in the night sky that you need to know about.

SB: When your director, Steve Nipper, I think, does personal—

WO: Telescope—

SB: —telescope—

WO: —viewings.

SB: —sessions, which is great.

WO: And that’s—you know, that’s another part of our audience is a million people coming in through the front door, but we have another million contact hours with people like Steve. All the—almost every day of the year, afterschool programs for children. What do you do with your elementary school kid, middle schooler, when parents are working? Well, the science center has an afterschool program for them. And it’s not just a babysitting service. It’s a—

SB: They actually run something.

WO: It’s actually—they’re not sitting down reading textbooks. They’re out launching rockets, playing outside. They’re doing something with—learning why they have two eyes and doing games with closing one eye and trying to catch a ball [to] talk about depth perception and 3-D [three dimensional] vision. And a lot of our museum’s summer program reaches about ten thousand individuals. They sign up for weeklong sessions, two year olds with parents. When you’re four you can come by yourself—four to five year olds in our preschool program, they can just do a one-hour class or a two hour program in the morning—and then through high school students. My son, when he turned twelve, wanted to get his scuba diving certificate and he got it through MOSI. So we have something for each age group—

SB: So how do you do that?

WO: —what do they want to do.

SB: Do you have a tank, or—

WO: No. The building is just a building on our seventy-five acres, but what we consider our playground is the rest of the world. We just go to—we have a—we use another
service that can teach this program. We borrow somebody’s pool and then take people out; then they have to—you have to do deep-water dives to get yourself checked out. So, we go out in the Gulf [of Mexico] or in a spring to get people down. So, we get certified. He [my son] also built—in my office, you will see that six inch telescope, reflecting telescope. He built a four-inch telescope when he was, I think, fifteen.

SB: That’s just great.

WO: He built his own computer at the science center. He said, “Dad, can I—you know, I need a computer. I want a computer. I want to—” I said, “I don’t have the money to buy—go out and buy you a computer. They were—at that time, they were about $2200.00, $2500.00. So, I said, “Well, we’ll take the class on how to build a computer at MOSI. And then, you put all the parts that you want together. You compare prices, figure if a Intel chip is better or more expensive than an AMD chip and which is better for what you want in your computer to do. Do you want it to play games? Do you want it to store pictures? What do you want?”

So, he researched everything and he got it down to about $1400.00. And, then, through—through the museum we were able to buy everyone’s components all at one time. So, that’s the learning at the science center. There’s a million contact hours of that kind of activity, from taking—you’re in a classroom all year long. We don’t want to keep you in another classroom.

Our field trip programs are really packed. We have vans that take kids—

SB: And this is all year long, not just summer?

WO: This is mostly in the summer time, ’cause we take ’em—we do have a spring program for a week and a Christmas program for a week. And then, in the summer time there are weeklong programs. There’s overnight stays in the Ocala National Forest, or we take them to the Vulcan mines. (SB laughs) Vulcan mines sounds like it’s on another planet.

SB: (laughing) What are they?

WO: Basically, it’s just a rock-mining place, but it’s the Vulcan company.

SB: Uh-huh.

WO: They let us go out there and look for fossils, and we have these—in fact, I’ll just—it’s fun to tell it through my own—

SB: Experience.

Interviewee clarifies: “Ten weeklong programs.”
WO:—children, because that’s what other people experience. My son and I signed up for this fossil class. It’s two days, one day out at the Vulcan mines collecting things, and then the next day back in the lab at MOSI to clean those fossils up, identify them, label them. Instead of taking them home and throw them into a cigar box and go, “Oh, I forgot what that was,” you do it—you learn how to do the curatorial work.

So, we were finding these—they call them echinoids. They’re these 2,500,000 year old—if you know what a sea biscuit or a sea urchin is?

SB: Sure.

WO: These are fossilized. They’re small. They’re about the size of a quarter. And they’re nicely rounded, like a little fat biscuit. And you’re covered with all kinds of other calcium carbonate, limestone, on top of them.

I remember, we were—Derick and I are diligently, with toothbrushes—he’s cleaning his—some big vertebrae from some animal. He was trying to identify what that was. We thought—figured out it was a bison, a Florida bison.

SB: How did he figure that out?

WO: Through—we have the largest collection of books on fossils in Florida in our public library.

SB: Your public library?

WO: Yeah. We have a public library at MOSI. It’s the first one in the country in a museum.

SB: How many volumes?

WO: Seventeen thousand.

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: And also, you can check out a telescope or a computer or a microscope or—

SB: That is terrific.

WO:—teaching aids with your library card. You can check out—it was a—I remember it was the first place in Hillsborough County where you could check out a DVD. All—they have the entire collection of the first DVDs that were made of movies were of the old favorites in black and white and the library bought a whole collection of ’em.
Blockbuster\textsuperscript{82} didn’t have ’em, none of those other—Showtime\textsuperscript{83} didn’t have ’em. Now it’s the rage.

In fact, the highest circulating single item in the entire Florida system was—with your library card, you could check out computer software. Instead of going to the computer store and going, “Oh, do I really want to buy this software on how to make wine? I don’t know. It’s like seventy-nine dollars.” So, you just come to MOSI, you check it out for a week, see if you like it. And if you really can’t do without it, then you go to the store and buy one and return it to the library for somebody else to check out.

SB: So, I’m just a little confused cause you refer to the Florida system, which would refer to the public library.

WO: Right. So, this is—

SB: And then you refer to your library. (inaudible)

WO: The library is a Hillsborough County public library.

SB: Okay. Wow.

WO: So when we were building the building, we could excite all these people—a million people—we could get ’em turned on to these subjects of space and the human body and disasters, on astronomy and Kilimanjaro, whatever our IMAX film is. They want to know more. It’s not enough. They want to—they keep asking us questions, and we go, “Why don’t you get it out of our library? They have librarians there to answer all your questions and research things. It’s full with computers. You can go on the Internet right there. With your library card, you can check out anything from the entire system.”

In fact, we’re the ones that started opening libraries on Sunday, because we said, “Well, if you’re going to have a library here you have to be open on Sunday, because that’s when we have most of our visitors.” People are—working families are busy on Saturday.

SB: Sure. Sure.

WO: The only time they have—they can go to the library is on Sunday. And so, we opened Sundays up.

SB: To have it convenient—I mean, you’re inspired and you’re enthused about a particular thing that you’re researching here. To be able to just go to the book then and there, that’s just terrific.

\textsuperscript{82} Blockbuster Inc. is an American chain of DVD, Blu-ray, and video game rental stores.

\textsuperscript{83} Showtime is a subscription television brand.
WO: Or you can check out—it’s loaded with videos on the subject matter. The videos are stacked right in there with the books.

SB: Do you have a librarian? How—

WO: Yes. They have—

SB: How do they access the—

WO: It’s fully employed by the Hillsborough County [Library] System, seven days a week. So—

SB: That’s just great.

WO: And then, they opened up the—your library card is now good for the surrounding counties, ’cause that was a big request. And since this was a big repository of science, we have people from Pasco County and Polk County and Pinellas wanting to come.

SB: How does it compare to the public library in terms of volumes? (inaudible)

WO: Oh, it’s small. It’s—oh, in science? It’s probably about the same. And, now it’s—they’re going through yet another transition because we have the first public elementary school in a museum on—inside MOSI. (SB laughs) So, we had to re—in order for them to have a library—MaryEllen Elia did that within thirty days, from saying, “We want to—we need another school in this region,” because we had a charter school, middle charter school, which was the first middle charter school in a museum anywhere in the country. They got so good—they were scoring, on their FCAT tests, across the board. They were, out of 1177 middle schools, they were ranking—they ranked no less—no greater than eleventh. They ranked third one year. They were ranked in the top one hundred charter schools in America.

SB: It just makes so much sense.

WO: Well, they got so—

SB: It really does.

WO: So, they thought they were so good, they moved offsite. Yeah.

SB: So, where are they?

WO: They would be sandwiched between flea market and a bypass canal.

SB: Oh, no. Why did they do that, I wonder.

84 Interviewee clarifies: “MOSI Partnership School.”
WO: I don’t know. Ego. Just to get—got to have your own, you know? So, now, this elementary school [MOSI Partnership School], K [kindergarten] through five, they’re from the lowest socioeconomic income strata of our community. They have—the elementary school down the street had about thirty-five portables. They were overcrowded, and so we took three hundred of them. And the kindergarten teachers—parents figured out that they didn’t want their kindergarten kid going to this huge school. So, they heard about the MOSI Partnership School opening up. So, they just instantly came over and signed them up. So, they wound up with, like, four kindergarten classes instead of the planned two.

SB: Yes.

WO: So, even those deprived parents figured out that they could get their kids out of that lifestyle that they were living in. And it’s right next to our Head Start program, which is the first Head Start permanently associated with any kind of a museum in the country.

SB: Gosh. It makes so much sense.

WO: So, they go from the Head Start right into the public school. And I remember, the first day they needed an assembly area. The three hundred kids had to be in one place so the principal could address all of them. So, he said, “Why don’t you just use the IMAX theater?” (both laugh) So, here are these kids living in poverty and all of a sudden they’re walking into this thing—it looks like something from outer space. It was so cute to watch these kindergarten kids climbing these stairs getting a seat. And so—

SB: There’s no question (inaudible)—

WO: These were—you know, they grade schools with either an F, or a B, or an A, or an A+. These are F-kids. So, I was, like, “Oh, my God. When these grades come out I’ll, I don’t know.” Because they’re transient—you know, they can’t—[they have] parents that can’t pay the rent. One month they move to somewhere else and enroll their kids in a different school. They got a B. (laughs) I go, “Where do you go from here?” The principal says, “We’re getting an A.” (laughs)

SB: Oh, isn’t that great, and obviously—

WO: Can you imagine? It doesn’t—

SB: —affected their lives.

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85 Interviewee adds: “Lewis Elementary School.”
86 Interviewee adds: “Cheryl Deckledorfer.”
87 Interviewee clarifies: “57 percent turnover rate.”
88 Interviewee adds: “And they did in 2009.”
WO: It does make a difference. So—

SB: Tremendous. Tremendous.

WO: That’s our—

SB: Where do you go from there?

WO: That’s our vision. That’s our core value—that’s our core ideology at MOSI, is “To make a difference in people’s lives.” We don’t care how, or what subject. Our business that we are in, is making—“making a difference in people’s lives by making this science stuff real,” for them, for you. So, there’s a—so, that’s why we get a million contacts.

On field trips, I teach people how to sail on my sailboat. I take ’em out in—I teach women how to crew on a racing boat. If you go on a—if you’re a woman and you go on a racing boat, it’s like, “Hey, can you fix me a sandwich?” (laughs) “No, I don’t want to fix you a sandwich. I want to drive the boat.” And so, I teach them—I just sit on the boat, and I rotate everybody around to all the positions.

SB: And this happens in the summer, mostly?

WO: No, all year long.

SB: All year long?

WO: I also do sunset sails. I usually give that away to our own—Einstein on Wine.

SB: Tell us about that a little bit.

WO: Einstein on Wine?

SB: Yeah.

WO: Einstein on Wine is our—I had this idea that adults want to do something different instead of go to a sit-down dinner, and I said, “Why don’t we do a cocktail party at MOSI or a—” You know, I really—I did a—when I was in graduate school, we didn’t want to do a wine tasting. We were graduate students. What are we going to—we don’t drink wine. We drink—how about rum? (SB laughs) We did a rum tasting. So, somebody heard me say wine tasting, and so he said, “Well, let’s do that.”

So, we had a—we started, actually, an organization of young people, early—businessmen and -women to start a program at the science center, and they took on starting Einstein—they named it Einstein on Wine. It was just a—the first year, it was such a

89 Interviewee adds: “This is the official Core Ideology passed by the MOSI Board.”
success. I remember we ran out of glasses. (SB laughs) We had all these wineglasses made with MOSI on it and Einstein on it, and a fun logo.

I remember the mayor—Mayor [Dick] Greco came in, and all I—(laughs) he wasn’t signed up. We didn’t know he was coming. So, I ran into the science store and got these yellow plastic cups that said “Museum of Science and Industry, (SB laughs) Tampa, FL,” on ’em. And I’m giving it to (both laugh) him. Finally, I found a couple of extra wine glasses lying around. And he goes, “No, I’m not going to give up my yellow cup.” So, it was a success from the very beginning—

SB: But, you draw—

WO: (inaudible)

SB: —thousands of people, I know.

WO: Yup. And it’s just been a—it’s one hundred wine vintners bringing in three or four different kinds of wine apiece.

SB: Does it raise a lot of money?

WO: It does. It’s in the (...) figures, (...)\(^90\) figures, right now.

SB: Wonderful. You just had it recently, I know.

WO: We just did. We do it the Saturday before Super Bowl, unless the Super Bowl’s in town. (laughs)

SB: Which it was.

WO: And it—what do you do the Saturday night before Super Bowl? So, why not have an event.

SB: Is that your largest fundraiser?

WO: We actually have another one called our National Hispanic Scientist of the Year [Award Gala].

SB: (inaudible)

WO: I’m not sure if we’ve talked about that or not. (laughs)

SB: I don’t think—I don’t believe we did.

\(^{90}\) Interviewee clarifies: “It’s in the five figures, high five figures.”
WO: Well, that’s thanks to Al Schiff and Maruchi Azorin Blanco. Maruchi asked me if we could buy a table at the mayor’s Hispanic luncheon. And I said, “Maruchi, I—” She’s a board—she was a board member, early young board member at the time. And I said, “We (laughs) don’t have any money to buy tables at other people’s functions. We do the opposite. (laughs) We get people to buy tables at ours.” And she goes, “Well, I wanted to have MOSI present at this Hispanic event to show that MOSI does care about Hispanic issues and Hispanic people.” So, I go, “Well, let me think about it.”

So, I talk to Al Schiff, and he goes, “Well, why don’t we find a Hispanic doctor, and recognize them for their service in some medically—some science-oriented technology, or something or other.” So, I said, “Oh, great idea. Thanks.” I went back to Maruchi and she goes, “No, I don’t think we want to do that.” (both laugh) So, a couple days later she goes, “You know, that was great idea, except it shouldn’t be at the mayor’s Hispanic luncheon. It should be a MOSI program. Do you know that Hispanic kids, both boys and girls, drop out of school at a 32 percent rate nationally?”

SB: No, I didn’t.

WO: “And it’s the same in Hillsborough County. We need to make—and the problem is they don’t have any mentors. Their mother or father, uncle, aunt, grandparents didn’t graduate from high school. They have a business, their own business. They have churches top on the list, and family’s number one. What does that have to do with education? We can’t—you don’t need to go to school to run the body shop, paint and body shop, or the catering business, or the—it doesn’t help. The business can’t wait till you’re eighteen, twenty-two. Sixteen, we need you now.”

So, we put this program together, and we had this IMAX film on dolphins. Fabulous. There was two characters in it, a Ph.D female oceanographer and a Hispanic Ph.D who studies whales and dolphins. So, “Well, why don’t we recognize him? He’s been seen all over the world on this IMAX film. It’s a great IMAX film. We can show the IMAX film, show these Hispanic kids, and let him be a mentor. Let him talk.” And he was so perfect. He never even owned a collar shirt. He was born in Mexico City, got his Ph.D somewhere in the States.

(laughs) So, the way this works is the first night, the first day that he comes into town, we usually have the—the mayor has a cocktail reception for him and gives him the key to the city. We have it down in Ybor [City]. And then the next day, he’d be doing media events on Hispanic media shows. And they’re becoming a real celebrity in town, (SB laughs) in the Hispanic community. That night, the University of Tampa does a dinner for him, and invites professors and people from downtown and everything. They had a beautiful—on top of—they had a beautiful view of the center at UT.

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91 Interviewee adds: “Dr. Kathleen Dudzinki.”
92 Interviewee adds: “Dr. Alejandro Acevedo-Gutierrez.”
93 Interviewee adds: “After a seminar for advanced high school science students and University of Tampa students.”
Then, that day, we usually bring in around 1300 migrant farm worker kids and kids from Hispanic schools. There’s a number of ‘em that are well into the 60, 70 percent Hispanic in the community. So, I remember he was talking in English and Spanish simultaneously, ’cause these are mixed schools. A lot of kids don’t speak Spanish. But it’s the first time—the kids say, “I didn’t know you could do science in Spanish.” They never heard science in Spanish.

SB: My gosh.

WO: They didn’t hear it from their parents. They didn’t have an engineer at home.

SB: How interesting.

WO: But he was talking about dolphins and whales, and he had the kids up at the front of the room showing—they were going (laughs) across the stage acting as baleen feeders, which sift the stuff out of the water. Then there was the deep diving ones, like the sperm whale, which went down to a thousand feet to go hunt giant squids. And he had these kids (laughs) simulating these two different swimming and diving skills.

So, we’re now into our—

SB: This is how many years?

WO: Now, we’re coming up with our—

SB: Quite a few (inaudible).

WO: —ninth. We’ve had—

SB: Now, do you—

WO: —an astronaut.94 We’ve had the first surgeon general who was a female.95

SB: Do you tie it to an IMAX film—

WO: No.

SB: —each time?

WO: No. No, we—like the surgeon general, she’s a pediatrician, but running—was the surgeon of the U.S.

SB: And now it’s very well attended. We’ve attended it, and it’s great.

94 Interviewee adds: “Frank Caldero.”
95 Dr. Antonia Coello Novello
WO: It’s a black tie affair at night, and it’s like an Academy Award. (SB laughs) They’re just blown away, because they’ve never been treated like this. We had Mario Molina, who’s a Nobel Prize winner for discovering the cause for the hole in the ozone layer from chlorofluorocarbons, and then went on to the Toronto Accord and got chlorofluorocarbons eliminated from the planet. He was a hero.

SB: So, I’m—well, we didn’t talk about the IMAX movie. We didn’t—we haven’t really talked about any of the exhibits, other than the (inaudible) exhibit. Would you like to highlight any of those?

WO: Okay. I think the (inaudible) exhibits—we’re focusing right now on the human body based on the success of Bodies and Body Worlds. And we’re developing The Amazing You, which is all about the rest of the story that Body Worlds doesn’t tell you—

SB: So, that will be—

WO: —how everything works.

SB: That will be permanent?

WO: That’s a permanent exhibit. And we took a different approach. We took a lifetime approach. Instead of doing systems of the body—you know, nervous system, sensory system—now we’re taking from conception and childbirth as the first area you go into. (imitates an announcer) “In the beginning.” (SB laughs)

And then, it’s a lot of—the whole attitude of each of these sections is to talk about—give you something to understand about the importance of that life stage and what’s going on and what do you need to know to keep yourself healthy during that life stage. So, we’re talking a lot to mothers and to fathers about embryos and make sure you don’t smoke, drink, any medications—you know, all those things that can affect the embryological development. This was my favorite course in biology.

SB: Oh, great.

WO: The first organ you see is the heart—

SB: Really?

WO: —pulsating, beating. It’s red, and we have beautiful videos of it. Then—it’s just the fascination of going from a single-celled egg—

SB: The miracle.

WO: —combining with another pair—another single strand of DNA, bunches of single strands of DNA, and coming together to form you and me. So, we want to talk about that
miracle and what affects that miracle to not occur, or to occur, and this takes—then there’s birth, and this birth is not just—there’s births of twins versus singles. There’s caesarian section. There’s live—just birth of—what we call, quote, “whatever normal is nowadays.” Because we also have an exhibit on premature babies that are so—their lungs are so delicate and they aren’t even fully developed and how they’re kept. What is it like for the rest of us men to carry twenty pounds, to twenty-five pounds, around? And there’s a mother’s pregnancy suit that you can wear.

And then there’s—we have an—this is where we talk about ethics. We have an ethics professor from USF, and we use actors to talk about two different sides of an issue. There’s never one right or wrong. Some—one of ’em’s about stem cells. So, one researcher talks about the need to work with stem cells and the other one says, you know, “Listen. There’s got to be another way to work with stem cells, other than—”

SB: Is this a video?

WO: Yeah.

SB: Is this a show?

WO: Yeah. And then, they both come back and say, “What do you think?” (SB laughs) And, then, we have a full collection of embryos that are preserved from the world’s largest collection of embryos that are in Washington, D.C.

And then, after that, we move into childhood. You’re walking. You’re beginning to accum—start a language. (laughs) It’s really fun. You know how many words a five year old knows? Ten thousand. Ten thousand words. And they never had to read a book, learn an alphabet, take a test. How did they learn to speak?

SB: Are the exhibits designed for a certain age level?

WO: No.

SB: Or could little—

WO: Cause all of this is—

SB: —little kids see it?

WO: Little kids. That’s what—

SB: Adults, of course.

WO: Mostly people come in family units: Grandma, Dad, the kids and the neighborhood kids, cousins, Aunt Mildred. That’s a classic unit. [We] rarely have a single individual come to the science center, unless it’s for a lecture or a particular program.
SB: And this is in progress?

WO: We’ve built three-sevenths of the exhibit. There’s seven sections, so we go from childhood, conception, birth, to childhood, to adolescence. That’s completed. Then we go from middle—where we’re designing right now and we’ll have built in eighteen months or February 2010—young adults, middle adults, older adults and end of life issues. Where do you go talk about—who do you talk to about end of life issues, about legacy, about caring for as those last moments and days and—no one knows what to do.

Hospice is helping us with directing that activity. And believe it or not, funeral homes want to talk about end of life issues, because usually, they just ask them to take care of everything. And it’s a shame that people don’t know quite what to do.

SB: What a valuable service, truly.

WO: So—

SB: (inaudible)

WO: So, we’re able to talk about—we want people to understand how to take care of their own body first so that they can take care of others. No matter how old you are—a kind of famous quote that I’m always saying and people go, “Oh, (inaudible). It’s ridiculous.” And the older you get, the longer you’ll live. (laughs)

Insurance companies say, “That’s absolutely right.” That’s why you can get an insurance policy at seventy. You can get it—if you’re seventy and still healthy, you’re going to live to—they know exactly. They’re gonna—you’ll likely live to ninety-three (laughs) if you’re a female, or if you’re a male you’ll live to ninety-two and a half.

(SB laughs)

And that’s what most people do. They’ll be able to—they’ll get through life in high quality. And then—and to be an advocate for your own health instead of handing it over to your physician, to question your physician, to be able to enter a dialogue with your physician in the seven minutes that you have. People will spend more time in our exhibition in Body Worlds and the Amazing You than they will talking to their personal doctor.

SB: That’s a very good point. So, you really have more opportunity to—to educate.

WO: And to—yeah, they’re—it’s not their job. Doctors don’t care to educate you. They’re just there to help you when you need it. So, there’s that preventative side. How do you—how do you prevent from getting ill? How do you detect things that are going wrong early enough so that you don’t have to suffer from that? You can get it taken
care of immediately so you know that—you women are the worst. That’s why you’ve exceeded men, now, in dying from heart attacks. Most of the fact that you’re living longer is that you just know how to live through pain and, “I’ll take care of it tomorrow. I’ll take care of everybody else first.”

SB: Wait a minute. More women are working, too, which means more stress.

WO: You’re a special breed, too. (both laugh) We love you for it.

SB: I’m not going to argue. (laughs)

WO: But you’re—men, somehow their heart—rate of dying from heart attacks is going down. Women, they’re—are going up. Then, when you’re in an episode, what do you do?

SB: So, you do discuss that, too?

WO: Yeah.

SB: Wow.

WO: And I’ll tell—I’m telling my personal story. Why did I get up in the middle of night and take an antacid and didn’t even know that I was having a heart attack? How ridiculous is that? What are you supposed to do first? You’re supposed to call 911 first. If you—when in doubt, call 911, ’cause they’ve got the anti-clotting stuff with them. You don’t get in the car and drive. How many people have you heard, “Well, you died behind the wheel driving yourself to the—”

SB: Yeah. I mean, I have a personal story myself—

WO: —and killed somebody else.

SB: —but you’re right. 911 gets you into the emergency room (inaudible) the ambulance, because if you drive you may not get in.

WO: So, then—

SB: It’s important.

WO: —there’s prevention, detection, surviving the episode you’re in and recognizing it. And then, that recidivism, even from—you know, cancer today is—you’re going to survive but then you’re always going to be looking for that next episode or that. So—

SB: Well—

WO: So that’s what that exhibition’s all about.
SB: —that’s, I mean—

WO: And, then there’s—

SB: —that’s amazing.

WO: We have another one—I’m sorry. Go ahead.

SB: No. Go ahead. No, I’m listening.

WO: We have another one called Disasterville. We’re trying to come up with a storyline and—how do you talk—we live on a planet that’s in total chaos from a geologic point of view. You are not going to be able to do anything if a volcano goes off in your neighborhood except get out of the way. So, you’ve got to know if you’re in a volcanic area. If you’re visiting Hawaii, do not climb up to the caldera [Kilauea Caldera, Volcano National Park] (both laugh) and look over the edge. Or, if you go to—

SB: So, how many different (inaudible)?

WO: We do volcanoes. We do earthquakes. When you’re in L.A. you’re (inaudible), or San Francisco or Tokyo or the Middle East, you’re likely to experience one. What do you do? Get out of the building you’re in, or where in the building—if you can’t get out, where do you go in the building?

SB: So, is this in the planning stage?

WO: No, that’s all built.

SB: Wow.

WO: It’s all—we do hurricanes, people (inaudible)—

SB: You have a chamber. (inaudible)

WO: Yeah. The most famous thing that was built back in 1980 was this hurricane chamber. It’s like a mine shaft ventilating motor, which can really pump a lot of air. And we blow seventy-five miles an hour wind on people inside this chamber where you get to sit on the walls. And you can feel the power.

SB: There are wind (inaudible) I’d like to add. You (inaudible)?

WO: And there’s windows you can—

SB: For claustrophobic people like me.
WO: —you can watch the people (SB laughs) on the inside, you know, getting blown away.

SB: Right.

WO: It’s—

SB: Fun.

WO: —you’d—people who can tell you that the power of wind doubles for every ten miles an hour that it increases. So, wind at sixty miles an hour is twice as powerful at fifty. It’s an exponential curve.

SB: I didn’t know that.

WO: So, when they say, “Oh, it’s just the minimal hurricane. I’ve been in thunderstorms on the bay that was at least forty or fifty [miles per hour wind speed]. It’s only seventy-five.” Well, that’s—(laughs) that’s now four times the strength, or five times the strength that you ever experienced.

And then, we do things like lightning. More people die in Florida from lightning than from shark attacks. What do you do? I mean, we all know people who’ve been hit by lightning, struck by lightning, and maybe even killed by lightning. What do you do? Stand under a tree? (both laugh)

SB: No.

WO: No. What do you do if you see a tornado coming (inaudible)? What do you do? So, that’s what this exhibit is all about.

And then, we do hail. I said, “What are we talking about hail for? We don’t have hail in Florida.” And Linda Hall from Publix goes, “Well, that’s funny, because we just replaced four hundred employees’ homes’ roofs that got totally destroyed by hail here in Lakeland.” And I went, “Wow.” Caught softball sized hail; solid chunk of ice falling from forty thousand feet is not going to get stopped by your roof. It just goes right through.

SB: Right. (laughs)

WO: Beats it to pieces, including your car and everything else. So, I went, “Wow.”

And then, wildfires. Every year we have hundreds of wildfires here in Florida. You always hear about the ones in California or somewhere, burning up Yosemite [National Park]. So, we tell you the things you need to do, and if you live in a wooded area of pines or saw palmettos, they’re going to go up like torches, either by lightning strikes or somebody throwing a cigarette.
Floods. What are you going to do? People—in hurricanes, most people die from—not from the wind, but they die from flooding. People in New Orleans, they got trapped in their house, went up into their attic and they got trapped in their attic. And they died in their attic, because they couldn’t punch a hole through the roof to get out. It’s relentless, ten feet. What would happen if we got a ten foot storm surge in Tampa? Downtown would be—

SB: It would be underwater.

WO: Yeah. And it could easily go to twenty. Then what? That’s higher than most people’s first floors. So, we just—you need to be—so, we teach about preparedness. What do you do in preparation for one of these events? Well, there’s not a lot you can do for some of ’em, but some of ’em you can.

And then, what happens when you’re in a hurricane? Those people that got caught in Andrew down in Homestead [Florida], that got into their bathtubs and put a mattress over their head because their whole roof was falling down. Their whole house was falling down around them, taken away. And then, how do you survive afterwards? What do you? That means you lost all your historic photographs of your family, your paintings, your jewelry, your—everything is gone. So, you’ve got to think all these things through, all your documents that you thought were safe in your house. How do you think—

SB: Do you deal with all those issues?

WO: —these things through. Mm-hm.

SB: That’s amazing.

WO: And it’s—

SB: What a valuable service.

WO: And, it’s impactful because we take you into these—we put you in a real hurricane with stuff flying around and get your own photograph, or put you in a wildfire and put you in a tornado.

And, then, we did something for, just, total fun. We did—everybody says, “Oh, MOSI’s such a great place for kids.” So, we said, “Yeah. Well, it’s a great place for adults, too.” We got sick and tired of saying that, so we built a children’s science center. It’s just totally hands-on, interactive, experiential learning, and that’s where the bed of nails is. So, we’ve got—

SB: And that’s called Kids in Charge!? 
WO: Kids in Charge! We put the kids in charge. You parents (SB laughs) just stay out of the way, sit down and relax. We’re going to—this is our place. And it is. It’s wildly successful. It’s just—

SB: I can only imagine.

WO: (laughs) At our opening night, everybody was—all the adults were encouraged to bring their kids. And then, the biggest thing that people were saying to me was, “Can we have a night to ourselves (SB laughs) without these damned kids (laughs) running around all over here and playing on everything? We want to experience this for ourselves.” So, a good, interactive, experiential exhibit is really good for all ages, because—

SB: How many exhibits are in there? In the Kids—

WO: Eighty, out of the three—

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO:—three hundred and ninety we have. And that’s where the brand new planetarium is, which you can take all the seats out and have dinner under the stars. We’ll have to do that.

SB: That’s great.

WO: It opened July 4, 2008, and we had a Fourth of July party.

SB: Is that where the IMAX is?

WO: No. It’s in—

SB: It’s a totally different—

WO: Kids in Charge!

SB: Oh, okay.

WO: Totally separate. Totally different.

SB: That IMAX is pretty impressive, too. It’s the only—

WO: The IMAX is a dome theater, and there’s ninety dome theaters in the world. And MOSI and others are leading an effort to bring all those dome theaters together to look at producing films just for the dome theater, ’cause it specializes. It’s like 3-D. You’re surrounded by the images on every side, surrounded by sound from all—

SB: It is amazing.
WO: So, you need to shoot films specifically for it. Things that are underwater—when you’re, like, *Under the Sea* that we’re showing right now, you are under the sea; you’re surrounded by all this water and things that are going on.

SB: What’s the difference between that one and those at Disney [World]? Those are, what, 180 degrees?

WO: Um, Disney—

SB: In EPCOT.

WO: EPCOT. Yeah, you’re—it’s a ride and you ride past them. So, it’s like a one minute experience.

SB: Yeah. They’re very brief. (inaudible)

WO: Yeah. Those are the same dome that we have. But we show a forty-minute—or, now, ninety-minute films, feature length films. We’re beginning to look at other ways of doing things in the theater. It’s where we do, now, our Internet telebroadcasting from one science center to another (inaudible) can put up on the big screen.

SB: Which other science centers?

WO: Oh, we’ve done the one in Raleigh [North Carolina]. We worked with NC State University when (…). Anyway, the dean of the College of Engineering at NC State hooked up his team up there and broadcast in to our students. And we were all watching this (inaudible).

SB: What ages were they?

WO: Middle school students. These were—part of our Hispanic Scientist of the Year.

SB: That’s great.

WO: So, the IMAX is—it does three hundred thousand people a year.

SB: Incredible.

WO: Yeah. With a million total, you know, and everybody comes to—

SB: It blows my mind.

WO:—do all these things. You can’t do MOSI in one day.

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96 Interviewee clarifies: “Dr. Louis Martin-Vega.”
SB: Well, that’s impossible.

WO: We have backwoods walks, now, and—

SB: Now, unless—I mean, there’s so many other things to talk about, Wit. I mean, truly, we could go on for thirty years, probably, talking. But I know you want to talk about the future.

WO: Okay.

SB: Because you are so excited. It’s very contagious (inaudible).

WO: The board did a great thing in collecting a lot of land. We started out on less than ten acres, and then now we’re at seventy-five acres. And we’re only occupying about twenty acres right now of parking and buildings, 318,000 square feet. And one of the issues—we’re in sort of an energy—I don’t know what they call it. It’s just energy chaos right now.

SB: For sure.

WO: The power companies have us over a barrel. We can’t shop around. We can’t look for an energy alternative, ’cause there isn’t any. It’s a monopoly. And they’re going to raise our rates. They’ve already raised their fuel rates, and now there’s—fuel’s going up and down like crazy. We were paying $1.50 for gas and then we were paying $4.50 for gas, and now we’re paying $2.00 for gas.

So, we’re going to tell the story of energy. Why do we need this? How did we go—how’d we come, as a species, not needing any energy? We had nothing. We had no lights, no fire. Somehow we survived, reproduced, grew old. Somebody invented fire. Then we invented, really, a need for fire. (laughs) Then we built houses and put that fire inside fireplaces, and then we somehow invented steam engines and gas trains and started moving around faster than we—

SB: That’s an interesting phrase, “we invented need.” I never—

WO: (inaudible)

SB: —thought of it that way, but we did.

WO: We don’t need energy. (laughs)

SB: Yeah. That’s interesting.
WO: And today, we have our cell phones, our calculators, our—this tape recorder we’re using right now. We’ve got lights on in here, for what reason I have no idea. And it’s an air conditioned space. We should be outside doing this.

SB: To see that board.

WO: (laughs) So, we’re going to do this exhibition on where we’ve come from in energy, where we are today, but then also looking at the future and saying, “Can’t we do without this Middle Eastern oil?” And we can. We can—there’s lots of different ways of doing that. What about hydroelectric? What about wind power? What about solar energy, solar photovoltaic, solar thermal?

SB: You have something very specific in mind for MOSI.

WO: It’s an energy center at MOSI. It’s got two major parts. One is the exhibition center and, then, there are these working models of real, sustainable alternative or renewable energy.

Like we—on our original building, it was built with a thirteen thousand square foot solar panel in mind, and we got out-competed by Exxon in the energy pavilion in EPCOT. Nobody knows it’s there. So, ours is going to be prominent, and it’ll supply almost 40 percent of the power needs of MOSI.

SB: Forty percent?

WO: Just one of ours. And then, we’re going to do the solar—

SB: And when is this going to happen?

WO: —thermal. In eighteen, twenty-four months. It all depends on funding. We’re starting now. We’re going to look at agriculture. Agriculture will produce non-food fuels. Like, we started growing corn to produce ethanol, and now in our gas tanks we’re burning 10 percent ethanol. But we drove the price of food up around the world. So starving people were starving so we could have ethanol in our tanks.

So, we learned from that lesson. Now it’s all about growing crops that are non-food crops to produce energy. And we’re going to grow crops at MOSI. We’re going to show how that works in these generators that produce electricity, by taking these crops and doing various things, either—

SB: And visitors can see all of this.

WO: They can see all that. And people that are interested in—what if you were bringing a business to Tampa and you wanted to not be on the grid? How many solar panels do I have to have, or can I have a windmill, or if I can have a combination of—usually the wind is blowing and there’s no sun, ’cause it’s stormy out, or (laughs) when the sun is
out, the windmill doesn’t work. So, we have—we show you some really cool, exotic things that are going to be (inaudible)—

SB: Could you read some of those?

WO: Yeah. The windmill is actually—this one we’re going to do is designed by a German inventor studying butterflies and dragonflies. So, instead of those big, long propeller-like looking windmills that chop up bats and birds, this one has short blades but they’re fat and like butterfly wings. So, one wing—you can pitch the wing so that the wind come off of one blade flies and hits another blade. So, you get twice the power for the same amount of wind. And if the wind is blowing too much, they’re like propellers on an airplane where you can feather the prop so that the blades go into the wind, even in a hurricane.

SB: Is this unique?

WO: Oh, yeah. ’Cause they’re building— they’re starting to build these in Germany and they have—there are none in the U.S. I’m looking at some exotic stuff, like we have a solid waste landfill across the street where we built an elementary school with the University of South Florida and the public school system. We didn’t talk about that. But in the parking lot is a solid waste landfill with a white pipe sticking up in the air venting out methane gas.

There’s solid waste landfills all over this country. So, we’re going to pipe—take that methane gas, bring it over to our exhibit and run, like, a household generator off of methane, which is a simple, one carbon atom. We’ll talk about (inaudible) smell methane. That’s what cows flatulate.

SB: I’ve read about that. Uh-huh.

WO: It’s what we flatulate. (both laugh) Then we’re also going to do some hydrogen fuel cell—we keep hearing about these things, but what does one look like? Can I have one? Can I buy one? What do you do with it? Hybrid cars—we’ll be looking at those kinds of things.

Then we have some really weird ones, like these ocean thermal energy conversions called OTEC. Off of Hawaii, they’ve been producing energy from the difference in temperature on the surface of the water and that twenty degrees\textsuperscript{97} down. All you need is a temperature spread like that and you can produce energy, enough to power Hawaii.

We have—and, then, our biggest one is going to be this wood gasification plant where we take yard waste—where do all those twigs and logs and stuff you cut out of your yard—where does that go? It goes—

\textsuperscript{97} Interviewee adds: “Cooler, deeper.”
SB: I could bring you my yard waste?

WO: You could. You could. But we’re going to let—we’re going to do a deal with the City of Tampa and Hillsborough County and get about (...)\textsuperscript{98} tons of yard waste every year. And it’ll produce six times the amount of electricity that MOSI needs to power everything for a year.

SB: So, you’ll sell it back?

WO: We’ll sell it back, ’cause our electric bill is seven hundred thousand dollars, so why not do an exhibit on how to—

SB: Sure. Talk about efficiency.

WO:—talk about energy, and then we get rid of our electric bill.

SB: That’s great.

WO: So, there’ll be a nice array. And then, the future of energy is going to be in some pretty exotic stuff, like we were working with Dr. Anita Goel, G-o-e-l. She was named one of the top thirty scientists in America under the age of thirty. She works on nanotechnology, and she developed a technology to determine human pathogens using nanotechnology. Well, the same technology is really dealing with DNA. It pricks your—it looks like a cell phone. You stick your finger on the end of it and push a button, and it pricks your finger, sucks in some blood, and looks for foreign DNA. Once it finds it, it replicates it, then sequences it, and then searches its database that’s in the cell phone and says, “You have a rhinovirus.” But then, the common name is a common cold.

SB: This is now or in—

WO: Yes.

SB:—in the future?

WO: No. She’s got it now to the point it’s the size of a laptop.\textsuperscript{99} It happens in fifteen minutes.

SB: And what will your association be?

WO: So, she’s going to take that same technology and apply it to crops so she can determine—in these crops to fuel it’s going to be one monoculture, and it’s going to get—a virus’ll get in there, or bacteria, and it’ll wipe out the whole thing. So she’ll be able—she’s going to do a monitoring of that.

\textsuperscript{98} Interviewee clarifies: “One hundred thousand.”

\textsuperscript{99} Interviewee clarifies: “And takes an hour. With his cell phone, it happens in fifteen minutes.”
But, then, the real energy efficiency that’ll take place at the nanoscale—right now, an automobile is 20 percent to 25 percent efficient at turning the gasoline’s power into power to drive your car. So, that’s not very efficient. Seventy percent is wasted. Nano machines, nano energy, is at 99.99 percent efficient. So your cell phone, you won’t have to ever charge it again. It’ll have the nano—it’ll be producing its own nano energy to run itself. (SB laughs)

So, we’re going to have her working at MOSI on our Bioworks and Butterfly Garden, which has all these tanks underground that grow bacteria. It’ll all be bacteria for—working for us, or algae\textsuperscript{106} that’s working for us. You can get bacteria to produce hydrogen gas for your hydrogen fuel cells. You don’t have to split water to get hydrogen. That’s very costly and energy. So, here’s a brilliant scientist—so that completes—science centers are good at interpreting what research scientists do for the public. So, we’ll have the whole thing on our site dealing with energy, future of energy, and from a nano bio energy, highlighting this beautiful, wonderful scientist, young scientist, and her company will be as big as Microsoft one day.

SB: Amazing.

WO: She’ll replace all lab—Quest Laboratory will be gone, ’cause you’ll be able to have—you’ll have this device in your house, in your doctor’s office, in the hospital. You don’t have to draw blood anymore. You just prick your finger, or put some saliva into this thing.

SB: And where is she from?

WO: She’s born in Massachusetts, grew up in a little town in Mississippi. Her father was the local surgeon. She’s got great connections with India. India’s—they gave her five-hundred acres just south of the Dalai Lama compound and the Tata automobile company [Tata Motors] that’s building this $2500.00 car. She wants to give her device to all of the villages in the world that don’t have health care or can’t have a laboratory to identify the disease that’s wiping them out.

So, Tata said, “Well, you need to (...)\textsuperscript{101} our land, if you’ll have MOSI build a science center and an energy center and an agricultural center just like you have in Tampa at our Tata site.”

SB: How did you discover her, Wit?

WO: She was—we decided one day that—my daughter was taking world history, and she came home with this handout sheet of India. It was just a line indicating the border of

\textsuperscript{106} Interviewee adds: “Algae has 10 to 50 percent of its weight in lipids/oil.”

\textsuperscript{101} Interviewee clarifies: “You need to use our land…”
India, you know: five cities, two squiggly lines, the major rivers of India, and a ten word vocabulary list. That was her knowledge of—that was what she knew about India.

*end of mP3 file 005/begin mP3 file 006*

SB: So, please elaborate a little more on that.

WO: So, Dr. Anita Goel came down to talk to the—do the annual address, the keynote address, of the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce. And the Indo-American Chamber of Commerce folks are the ones that put up (…)\(^{102}\) to have a free India IMAX film for schoolchildren to learn about India instead of this piece (laughs) of plain paper with a line on it saying, “This is India.”

So, she was in our boardroom and we had a bunch of heavy hitters. She needed—at that time, needed seventy million dollars to develop her technology to start reducing it down to the laptop computer size. All the people we had in there, she didn’t like any of ’em, because she has a real altruistic side to her to distribute this—they wanted to know how much money she was going to make off of these villages in Africa that had this device and what percentage of the business that that was going to be, cause that was—they saw that as a drain on the company. So, she didn’t take any of their money.

SB: Interesting.

WO: But I had a chance to make a presentation about what a science center does. We talk about scientists, so we would tell her story on how she became a Stanford Physics physicist and, then, how she went to Harvard and M.I.T. and got an M.D./Ph.D. degree in nanoelectrical engineering and she’s got her medical degree, all at the same time. (laughs)

SB: I’m still not clear how you found her.

WO: I didn’t. I had this—I made this presentation in front of this investor group talking to her about what a science center does. And we talk about new science and explain it to the public. And we do that in a number of different ways, on the website, on our exhibits, our programs, building an energy center like we’re doing today. Then she contacted me and said, “I want to work with you.” So, I said, “Okay.” So, it’s been a—

SB: But you had read about her?

WO: No. No.

SB: But how does it relate to your daughter? You said she knew nothing about India. So, you—

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\(^{102}\) Interviewee clarifies: “One hundred twenty thousand dollars.”
WO: So, I said, “My daughter can’t go around learning India on a blank white sheet of paper. She’s got to see this IMAX film.” And, then, I asked the Indo-American community in Tampa Bay to support—to give MOSI money to show this free IMAX film to all the schoolchildren for free in Tampa Bay area. And they raised the money. So we did that.

So, this Indo-American Chamber group invited her down to talk to them and invited me to that and—

SB: Okay. Now, I understand.

WO: So, we got to know each other very well, and she’s now one of our national board members and she’s on the board of overseers of the Museum of Science in Boston. And she didn’t want to work with Boston. Boston’s the second largest science center in America. She says, “I like your attitude. You think globally. India loves the concept that you’re coming up with.” They want to fund two science centers. One in—

SB: What an amazing concept.

WO: So, we’re—that’s our—we’re going to help her—

SB: And what a compliment—

WO: —globally.

SB: —to you, Wit. Really.

WO: And we just came from Washington, D.C. and we talked to Senator [John] Kerry. Kerry has asked her several times to testify in front of Congress on nanotechnology, nanoenergy. We met with Senator Kennedy’s team, Representative [Edward J.] Markey from Massachusetts, who’s—it was so funny. We had to talk to him going through the tunnel to get from their offices to Congress. And we were talking and talking, and he’s running in to go for a vote, and we walk right in and I had this hand in my chest, and the security guard said, “You can’t come in here. (laughs) You’re not a congressman.” (both laugh) I [said], “Oh, oh. Oh, okay.” I almost made it in.

So, I went to the Department of Energy, where she’s gotten several grants from the Department Energy, and introduced us—me—to them. So, they have—this could be—finally, I wasn’t getting through to the Department of Energy, and I said, “What we’ll be doing here is your showcase on what you do at the Department of Energy. What you’re concerned about is what we’re putting on line here at the science center.”

And they went, “Wow. (SB laughs) Nobody knows what we do up here. We got Nobel Prize winners, we were involved in the supercomputer development; we were involved in all these things.” And they’re known for their Manhattan Project. That’s how they got
started. They built a nuclear bomb. You know, it’s like—that’s not a good thing to be known for.

SB: Mm-mm. No. But so many people talk about putting that type of project together again for energy. And in essence, that’s kind of what you’re doing. And I’d love for you to get that stimulus money.

WO: Her Stanford Physics mentor at Stanford when she got her physics degree is Dr. Steven Chu, who is now the Energy Secretary for the U.S. and a Nobel Prize winner for alternative and renewable sustainable energies. This is what this energy center is all about.

SB: Wow. (laughs)

WO: So, how’s that for a connection?

SB: How is that!

WO: You never know who you’re going to go be connected to.

SB: It’s beyond exciting. It’s just exhilarating.

WO: And then, what the other part of this is, we’re building an agricultural center, because why did I just pay $3.50 for a bell pepper at the store? What is all that about?

SB: Supply and demand.

WO: Where does all this food come from? It comes from our agricultural industry in Florida, which is probably, today—because tourism is down this year, our agriculture may be the number one industry in the State of Florida. And nobody knows—you know, we have the dairy farmers association [Dairy Farmers, Inc.] supporting us to show kids where milk comes from. If you ask any kid, milk comes in a round or square container from Publix or Winn-Dixie (SB laughs) or Albertson’s, sometimes 7-Eleven.

SB: So, what area of life aren’t you covering? (laughs)

WO: Well, there’s no separation between—that’s it. We cover life. We cover our perception of the universe. And that’s really cool. I just learned yesterday, in our planetarium, that the—somebody asked what the difference between astrology and astronomy is. And he said, “Well, we don’t try to put down astrology, but we do show them how they’re a little bit off because of precession.” And I went, “What’s precession?”

If you spin a top, a wooden top, on a table, it stood straight up. Right? The axis—it just doesn’t move, and then it starts getting tired and it starts wobbling. Right? The axis starts moving around in a circle. That’s precession. So, the first astrologers that got together
and said, “It’s all got to do with what stars are up at a certain time in the night sky.” And so, I was born an Aries, April eleventh. “But,” he said, “if you look back when these astrologers set that time as Aries, today April 11 is really in the next sign, because of the precession in the last two thousand years. We’re all one sign off.”

SB: Very interesting.

WO: So, how can astrology work today like it did when they first set it up? So, I went, “Oh. That’s pretty cool. I have to find out whether (SB laughs) they—I don’t even know what’s after Aries.”

SB: Taurus.

WO: So, I’m really—was born a Taurus. (laughs)

SB: You’re more an Aries. Wit, I don’t know. (laughs)

WO: So, that’s what—so that’s where science can—you can be a—you can play with astrology if you want, but you ought to understand how the universe really works, and maybe you can be a better astrologer if you knew that.

SB: Mm-hm. That’s really very interesting.

WO: So that’s what—

SB: So, you’re learning something new here every day. (laughs)

WO: So, milk comes from a cow, in Florida. You know—and what is Florida noted for? If you ask kids—

SB: Cattle.

WO: Yeah.

SB: It really is.

WO: They probably would have said citrus first.

SB: You wait.

WO: But cattle’s huge.

SB: You’re right. You’re right. They would say citrus, of course.

WO: Honey is huge.
SB: But it’s —

WO: Strawberries, of course. Do you know strawberry’s a perennial? It grows all year long. You can have strawberries all year long, but—so, why don’t we grow strawberries all year long? Why do we just have like one—

SB: I don’t know.

WO: We could have Florida strawberries all year long.

SB: The climate—they must like cold weather.

WO: Well, what do we do about that?

SB: (laughs) I don’t know. You tell me.

WO: It’s all science, technology, engineering. You know, it’s like—so what do you—?

SB: Grow them in the greenhouses.

WO: Well, why don’t we just put ’em in the shade? Why don’t we just put a shade cloth over ’em in the summertime? Will they continue to grow? Yes.

SB: Would they?

WO: Will they continue to produce fruit? Yes.

SB: How would you cool them, though?

WO: No. We just shade ’em.

SB: You don’t think they like cold weather?

WO: No. (inaudible)—in here, it’s only because Georgia’s planting strawberries (both laugh) and when the Georgia—it’s only because it’s grown in North Carolina and Maryland, and finally in Canada. And those strawberry people aren’t going to let Florida grow strawberries all year long. But why do I have to pay for all that shipping?

We’re going green. You’ve got to buy your produce locally. We’re looking at starting a community farm where people’ll buy a membership just like Sweetwater [Organic Community Farm]. Sweetwater wants to help us build a community farm so people can come in and—

SB: You mean Sweetbay?
WO: Sweetwater. Sweetwater Gardens. You ought to go see it. They’re on Hillsborough [Avenue].

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: So, you take a plot of sandy soil. We’ve got to show people how to take Florida soil and enrich it with manure (SB laughs) and fertilizer and real organic earth. And you can grow vegetables all year long in Florida. And these people, they have three hundred members, and they’re sold out. You can’t even get—you can’t even become a member of their co-op [cooperative] because they’re—so we’re going to do that at MOSI.

SB: Okay. I only wish the listener could see all of these facial expressions, (WO laughs) could feel the energy generated in this office. And, by the way, we are sitting at MOSI. And I don’t know if you can hear via this tape all the excitement going on, the kids screaming and playing and laughing. It is so vibrant. It is so worthwhile. I am incredibly impressed, really—

WO: Right here in—

SB: —not just with MOSI—

WO: —Tampa, Florida.

SB: —but with you.

WO: Oh, thank you.

SB: You’ve made all of this happen.

WO: It’s fun.

SB: It’s just incredible. And I think from the dialogue, the questions you’ve raised, people can sense that it will continue to be a very vibrant and exciting place with continual questions, answers, dialogue. It’s all about questioning and—

WO: Yeah. What’s—

SB: —finding answers.

WO: —what’s the old adage? You can hand the person a fish and feed ’em for a day, or you can teach ’em how to fish and provide ’em food for a lifetime. That’s what a science and technology and engineering and mathematics facility does. But that’s such a terrible name. So that’s why we try to call it a—museum has a bad name. Science has a bad name.

SB: And it’s static.
WO: You know, most people don’t do well in science in school. Mathematics? Oh, my God. (SB laughs) That ended in third grade when they learned long division. So, MOSI is a fun, energizing—

SB: It is happening.

WO: —it’s great for everybody. It’s something. It’s about life. It’s about living on this planet and, maybe, beyond.

SB: Why, we’ve covered so much, Wit, but, sort of—is there anything we have not covered?

WO: Well, you know, we left out a few things like the tilapia farm that we’re going to grow (inaudible)—

SB: Oh, my gosh.

WO: You know, if you can grow a pound of tilapia by feeding it a pound and a half of duckweed? (SB laughs) Do you know what duckweed is? It grows on the—

SB: I have no idea.

WO: It’s that green slime that grows on the top of water in swamps. It’s the tiniest—one of the tiniest vascular plants, and you can—I actually ate some. You can stick your finger in this pond and suck on it—

SB: Dare I ask what it tastes like?

WO: —and chew it up. Do you like salad?

SB: Sure.

WO: Tastes like salad.

SB: Okay.

WO: It’s got 36 percent protein.

SB: (laughs) Oh, my gosh.

WO: A vegetable.

SB: That’s incredible.

WO: So, you can be a vegetarian and eat things like collards and buckwheat—
SB: And be healthy.

WO: and—you can use it—sprinkle it some duckweed on your salad, and the tilapia love it. So, we’re going to be working on another program to help impoverished countries grow their own fish in their own ponds by growing duckweed, which purifies dirty water. And that’s what most impoverished countries have, is nutrient-rich filthy water. So, they can clean up their water supply, grow tilapia. And you can also have one at your house. We can grow you forty to one hundred pounds of tilapia in your own little—you don’t have to do anything but—

SB: Outside?


SB: I am impressed. Incredible.

WO: So, that’s what we’re trying to do is feed people for a lifetime with knowledge and culture and understanding and appreciation and—

SB: I think you said it earlier. You’re trying to make a difference, and obviously, you are. I’m sure every child who comes—

WO: And sustaining. (laughs)

SB: —into this building will never forget their experience. And, hopefully—

WO: It’s always—

SB: I meant to ask you—

WO: —it takes only one experience.

SB: —your two children, how old are they?

WO: Derick [Frederick Witold Ostrenko] is twenty-two, and he went to—has a degree in digital art and design, sort of combining art and science. He’ll be—he’s a new [Leonardo] da Vinci. He’s at the Rhode Island School of Design. It’s one of the top—

SB: I think you may have shared that.

WO: —schools in the country. And he’s working on some great—

SB: I truly thought—
WO: —creative things.

SB: —he would have to be a scientist.

WO: No. He’s—it’s a—no. He’s not good at math.

SB: And then, your daughter a scientist?

WO: My daughter, she wants to become a physician, a doctor. She wants to help people. She wants to run an emergency room.

SB: Wow. (inaudible) (laughs)

WO: (inaudible) she doesn’t want to work on one [thing]—doing one, like, you know, putting stents in people day after day after day after day. She’s not interested in the money. She’s interested in helping people in all kinds of things, all kinds of ways. So, she’s a—

SB: That would have to be the case.

WO: Tonight, she’s pole vaulting.

SB: Oh, my goodness.

WO: She went to State as a freshman, and fifteen [years old], she just cleared eight [feet] six [inches], and then she cleared nine feet. That’ll put her into State, and—

SB: How wonderful.

WO: —she’s at another meet tonight. So, hopefully, she’ll clear nine at an official meet.

SB: I wish them luck.

WO: And she’s a volleyball player.

SB: Oh, my gosh. Well—

WO: Ambassador of her school.

SB: I mean, I asked that question, sort of—really, you have a legacy not just with your children, but with probably every child in Hillsborough County.

WO: Yeah. The alumni—we have a—Sam Lazzara is a—it’s not Sam. Was it Sam? I think it’s Sam. (both laugh) I forgot his name now. He’s on our—I put him on our national board.
The first time I met him, he was taking our chemistry class as a six year old, and he went on to take all our summer science camp classes. Loved chemistry as a middle schooler, but he was too advanced. So, we made him an assistant teacher to the chemistry classes. And then in high school, he was teaching chemistry at MOSI to the summer science kids. And then, he went to the University of Florida, got his chemical engineering degree, went on to M.I.T. and got his Ph.D. in chemical engineering, working on human kidneys and how it acts as a machine to regulate nitrous oxide—nitric oxide, NO—in our blood, which regulates blood pressure in our body. And I didn’t know that kidneys were involved in that. So, he goes—he says, “Well, I owe it all to getting my start at MOSI, and you guys kept on letting me do more and more stuff.”

SB: That’s phenomenal.

WO: So, that’s—we’re not trying to create scientists, but it doesn’t hurt.

SB: It sounds like you’re trying to create inquisitive minds.

WO: Yeah.

SB: And that can be applied to anything, of course, but I just, you know, thank you, personally—

WO: No, thank you.

SB: —for all that you do—

WO: Thanks for dragging all this stuff out of me.

SB: Well, it is a genuine legacy. I can’t thank you enough, and I hope people to enjoy listening to you. I know I have.

WO: Thank you.

SB: Many thanks.

_end of interview_