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## Jacqueline "Spike" Gillespie oral history interview by Andrew Huse, September 8, 2004

Jacqueline Gillespie (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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Narrator: Jacqueline “Spike” Gillespie  
Current Position: Writer  
Date of Interview: Sept. 8, 2004  
Editor: Mary E. Yeary  
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Interviewer: Andrew Huse  
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Abstractor: Daniel Bertwell  
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### TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Both the interviewer and Ms. Gillespie were “canned” by the *Oracle* and Ms. Gillespie considers it a “badge of honor.”

#### *Parental concern about college*

Ms. Gillespie had a “very very very strict upbringing.” Ms. Gillespie’s parents didn’t want her to go to college. They wanted her to get a job as a secretary, get married, stay home and have children. She rebelled against this and sought an education. Her parents didn’t have any money for college and she started out at a local state college near her home in Southern New Jersey.

Ms. Gillespie spent her summers at the beach in New Jersey and rented an apartment. The family she rented the apartment from had six kids and three of them were either USF students or alumni. They said that she should go there. She applied because she really wanted to get away. It was difficult telling her parents, especially her father, because she had applied against his wishes. Feeling that he would not allow her to go because of monetary concerns, Ms. Gillespie had applied for financial aid. After several days, her father gave his approval.

#### *Arrival at USF*

In many ways, Ms. Gillespie feels that USF was where she was supposed to be. She makes fun of the school from time to time, but she “got an awful lot out of it - some good and some bad.” Her favorite joke to make about USF was applied to the motto, “with an accent on learning.” This made her laugh because of the idea of “college, with an accent on learning.” When she first got there, Ms. Gillespie was a transfer student in the middle of her freshman year. While signing up for classes, she was wearing shorts even though it was only thirty degrees out. Someone came up to her and said, “Don’t sign up for any classes between 10:00 and 2:00” because those were prime tanning hours.

#### *Academic life and memorable professors*

Ms. Gillespie doesn’t actually remember anyone telling her that she needed to declare a major, so she just took whatever classes she wanted to do. There were times when she thought that she should take certain classes towards a career, but she was really just

“floundering around.” Her senior year, she needed to declare a major. She went through her transcripts and the majority of her classes were in English Literature. She had taken some writing classes, but there had been some personal problems with a lot of the professors, which led to confrontations. She is very proud of her English degree and many of the professors are very memorable. She can say that in “every literature class” that she took, Ms. Gillespie “was introduced to something that was brand new” to her. Some of her professors really stand out: Dr. Ruben, Dr. Iorio, Frank Fabry (who was a Shakespeare professor), and Dr. Smith. On her last day, she was on the elevator leaving and Dr. Smith made a point to tell her how much he would miss her. He was one of the people who encouraged her and her writing. She thinks that the best professors may have let her “get away with some stuff,” but they also “embraced” her “enthusiasm.”

#### *Social Life; Working as an RA*

Ms. Gillespie started her college career at the Alpha dormitory. She got there a week before class started. She did a tribute to Devo inside the dorm door. Her roommate arrived and seemed a little taken aback because the roommate was a “nice suburban girl” and Ms. Gillespie was an “aspiring punk rocker.” The roommate was nice, but Ms. Gillespie ended up moving to another floor in Alpha. After Alpha, Ms. Gillespie was a Resident Assistant in Gamma. She was on the first floor and the other people on that floor were the students who spoke English as a second language, students with disabilities, “all the closeted aspiring lesbians,” and the dorm mother. The best entertainment they had was “alcoholism and rampant sex.” She left Gamma and got a job at the Village, which is now the site of Greek housing. The job was not exactly like the RA position. In the Village, advisors would be on call. She was paying her own way at the time, so when she worked for housing she got free living quarters and a meal plan.

#### *Boys staying over in the girls’ dorms*

Ms. Gillespie sat down for an evaluation with the dorm mother and everything went well, but the dorm mother told Ms. Gillespie that her boyfriend could not stay over. In the mornings, Ms. Gillespie would go to the emergency exit and use the key to let out the girls’ boyfriends, “the parade of lovers.”

#### *Drinking*

Ms. Gillespie feels that she might have been approaching “something like alcoholism” by the time she got to USF. The drinking age was eighteen at the time and there “was no shortage of alcohol on campus.” Ms. Gillespie drank quite a bit and eventually she had to quit altogether.

#### *Empty Keg*

The Empty Keg was a lot of fun and Ms. Gillespie was an unofficial member of the Office of Student Programming. They would bring comedians in to the Keg. They had REM come and play at the Empty Keg before they were famous.

#### *Pornography on campus*

They also had movies in the ULH building over the weekend. During this time she got her introduction to film. His job was to collect the money. One weekend every year they

had “porn weekend” on campus, and students would come and watch porno movies. She and her boyfriend were intimate with one another during the showing of one of the movies. One night they were showing a movie at which a number of women from the Women’s Studies Department were present (Ms. Gillespie was also a member of this department). She collected the money and decided to leave the theater because she had seen the movie already. The women’s studies students, believing that Ms. Gillespie was leaving in protest, applauded her as she exited the building.

#### *Living and socializing off-campus*

She left Gamma and got a job at the Village, which is now the site of Greek housing. The job was not exactly like the RA position. In the Village, advisors would always be on-call. She was paying her own way at the time, so when she worked for housing she got free living quarters and a meal plan. Things were ok at the Village, but there were problems with the guy that she was dating and moving to the Village put them in close contact with one another more often than before, which was “horrible.” They actually ended up getting an apartment together off campus after that. She moved off campus around the time of her senior year. She moved into the Gemini House. There were a lot of lesbians living there. From Ms. Gillespie’s perspective, she would say that there were a lot of lesbians on campus. One of the reasons that she spent so much time with gay women is that one of the sisters in the family that had encouraged her to come to USF had come out of the closet. Ms. Gillespie was into punk rock music and new wave music and in many ways “the fringe likes to hang out with the fringe.” Brian Katz, a bartender at the Hub, was a great influence on her life. He eventually went to USF and got a degree, but before he went to the school, he would come for shows at the Empty Keg. They became good friends and since he was in Tampa. Brian could take her around to all the great thrift stores in the area and show her around Tampa.

#### *Impressions of Tampa*

Ms. Gillespie feels that this is a difficult question to answer. She was very naive when she came to Florida. She couldn’t find her way around the city. She says, “whatever was in front of my face, that’s about as far as I could see.” She had to get a job when she first moved down here. She bought a used bicycle for \$25 and had to ride her bike out to the Ramada Inn to wait on tables. She spent most of her time in Tampa as a passenger not a driver, so she didn’t have to pay attention to how to get places, but did end up at some “incredibly seedy, creepy, strange” clubs and bars. Even though she could always find the seedy underside of the city, there was also the part of her that was getting very good grades.

#### *Getting the nickname ‘Spike’ and writing for the Oracle*

The first few summers she went to USF, Ms. Gillespie would go back to New Jersey to work. One summer, her friend’s sister had shaved her hair off. Ms. Gillespie really liked it. She ended up getting a “Florence Henderson, mulletty, scary spiky kind of a thing,” for a haircut. She was walking across campus with her friend Dan and some fraternity members drove by. They saw her with her haircut and started to call her names (using many expletives). One of her friends from the dorm had taken to calling her ‘Spike’ and she sent a letter of outrage to the *Oracle*, signing it Jacqueline ‘Spike’ Gillespie. The

*Oracle* editor called and asked if they could run it as a column. They ran it with the name Spike, and the name stuck. The paper offered her a job. She started by interviewing new wave bands, and then she was sent on an assignment to try out for the Sun Dolls. There was a sort of “Spike fever” on campus the week that series ran. There were pictures of her in the paper. She brought her pom-poms to class a few times. This was a lot of fun and she got a lot of attention. This led to “Bloody Monday,” her regular column.

#### *Bloody Monday Column at the Oracle*

Bloody Monday was probably in the fall of 1984, maybe through the fall of 1986. In a lot of ways, Bloody Monday is the beginning of her writing style. She cannot describe what it was exactly and she cannot describe the way she writes. At the *Oracle*, Bloody Monday was a weekly version of what she had done before in the paper. Initially people responded very strongly to the Bloody Monday column. There were two columns that caused a big stir. One was a column about a kid who went to school and shot everyone, and one about a priest (this happened before the Columbine High School shootings). Ms. Gillespie thinks that because she writes “straight from my gut” people are forced to “respond straight from their gut.” In the priest column, a girl goes to confession and asks if confession is truly confidential. The priest responds in the affirmative and she asks many questions that are aimed at perceived problems in the Catholic Church (questioning the reasons why women cannot be priests, etc.). She basically spends the confessional “just trashing the catholic church.” At the end she confesses that she shot someone who represented something she was opposed to and then she takes out a gun and shoots the priest in the kneecaps. The *Oracle* heard from about sixty people from around the state and everyone was upset with Ms. Gillespie. She wrote a follow up column wondering why everyone was criticizing her and no one was praying for her. She got one letter from a woman that was praying for her, this really moved Ms. Gillespie because the woman had obviously been affected by the issue. Everyone else “took the bait” and proved Ms. Gillespie’s point. She wasn’t writing from a political agenda, she was just writing from her personal perspective.

#### *Falling out with the Oracle*

She had a big fight at the end with Tony Pannachio (she either quit or was fired), and did a dramatic farewell column. A lot of people wrote to the paper supporting her, this made Ms. Gillespie happy. Even the people who didn’t like her, the guys in the fraternity that had yelled at her and had written angry letter, wrote a letter of support. There was also a WUSF DJ didn’t like Ms. Gillespie and attacked her on the air. Many people supported her after the affair with the *Oracle*. Ms. Gillespie had some difficult times in her relationship with Leo Stalnaker, faculty advisor to the *Oracle*. She knows that to some people she can seem difficult to understand. She felt that Mr. Stalnaker did not try to encourage talent at the paper. Ms. Gillespie takes some responsibility because she was very angry with her father at the time and she took it out on the older white men she encountered. Ms. Gillespie didn’t work very well with Leo. One time, Blake Grey had been elected editor and Leo overruled this in favor of Beth Belsom.

*Ms. Gillespie's writing style*

Most people wonder if it is difficult for her to write. She writes without the filter and lets everything come out. She has written the same way throughout. Even her columns from college were very similar to her writing style now. She has one filter now, because her son came and told her to write about him a little less. He made her aware that you can affect people's lives when you write about them. Most of the time she doesn't care what people think.

*Writing for the Dallas Morning News*

She eventually had a falling out with the *Dallas Morning News* that is similar to her falling out with the *Oracle*. Ms. Gillespie believes that when you write openly, "people at first are surprised and perhaps shocked," then refreshed, and then you get a following, and then the editors tend to feel a lack of control, which makes them angry. This happened at the *Dallas Morning News*. She didn't get along with her editor and requested a new editor. The new editor said that no other columnist had gotten as much mail as Ms. Gillespie.

*Currently teaching at a high school*

Ms. Gillespie teaches at an alternative high school. Some of the kids have faced some tough times and she wonders how it would be possible to tell someone that they should not make the same mistakes that she has made. Ms. Gillespie wonders how she can stop people from doing things that she did.

*End of Interview*