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Lesley "Les" Miller oral history interview by Andrew Huse, December 3, 2003

Lesley Miller (Interviewee)

Andrew T. Huse (Interviewer)

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USF Florida Studies Center
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Narrator: Lesley "Les" Miller, Jr. (M)
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Interviewer: Andrew Huse (H)
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TRANSCRIPTION

H: Today we will be interviewing Florida Senator Les Miller, who came to USF originally in 1970 and then in 1975. We'll get to that. Currently, he is Florida senator, and seems to be the senate minority leader starting in 2004. First of all, I want to thank you for being with us here today, Senator Miller.

M: Thank you for having me, I appreciate it.

H: First, I guess we'll just start at your first incarnation at USF in 1970. Tell us a little bit about that.

M: It wasn't quite like it is right now, that's for sure. We used to have sand storms on this campus when I first came here. I graduated from high school here in Tampa in 1969 and went to Bethune Cookman in Daytona Beach. [I] stayed there for a year. [I] lost my scholarship there. [It was a] small school. [I] depended on a lot of them to get here, and it didn't work out for me there. I had a real good university in 1970. The lottery system was out of the draft. I figured that my first lottery number when I was ineligible for the draft was eight. So I thought, I'll go to USF and I can finish there and not have a problem. The lottery number went from eight to four. Having lost hours coming from a private school here, I knew they were going to draft me, so I volunteered with the Air

Force. That was my first time here, in 1970. It was a very small campus, I think we had 9,000 students at that time. A lot of buildings weren't here. I'm serious when I say we had sandstorms when the wind would blow. Fowler was a two-lane road. It was quite different.

H: Did you have a declared major when you first came in 1970?

M: When I came here in 1970, I was a voice major. I wanted a full voice scholarship, and I figured that was what I wanted to do. I majored in music and voice for the little bit of time that I was here. When I came back in 1975 I realized that I was not going to be a superstar on stage anywhere. I changed to political science.

H: What convinced you that you wouldn't be a superstar?

M: Having lived close to Chicago when I was in the Air Force, a shooting Air Force base in Illinois, you realize that New York and Chicago and Los Angeles at that time was where the major superstars would be. Even though I thought I could sing, probably very well, you've got to have that backing and promotion and managers and things along those lines. I knew that wasn't going to happen with me. Being in the military up there, you just didn't have that opportunity to pursue it. I realized, at that time, having a family, it just wasn't going to work. I figured that I would finish off in something else. That was the reason I dropped out of that idea.

H: You returned to USF in 1975 with maybe some more realistic ideas about what you were going to do?

M: I came here in 1975, basically wanting to get a college education. No one in my family at that time had gotten a college education. I had a sister, who's now deceased, had started

and had dropped out also. My philosophy was that, my father and mother always told me, we want you to be better than we were. The only way you can do that is to get an good education. I knew I had the GI Bill. That was my intent, to come back and to utilize the GI Bill to get an education. The first semester I was here, I almost dropped out and went back to the military. It was just that tough. Having spent four years in the Air Force, you came back to classes here. The university had changed so much. It had gone from 9,000 students to over, at that time, 22,000 students. The classrooms were sometime 150 kids in the class. There I was, an older student, married with two children, and trying to work at the same time I was going to school. I had to support my family. I remember the first class I had, the first test I took, I got back a big whopping F. It was tough. It was tough on the adjustment. I remember going home saying, I'm going back in the Air Force. I'm not going to do this. One of the reasons I stayed here was because of my late wife. My wife then at the time is now deceased. Also there was a professor there by the name of Arthur Levy who was a tough professor. I was the only African American in the class. We had it real nice back then. Probably there were less than, I think, 600 African Americans on the campus on that time. I got that F, and he knew that I was upset about it. He called me to his office and asked me what was going on. I told him I was going to drop out. I'm going back into the Air Force. He said, no, you're not going to do that. You're going to stay in and you're going to work. I was like, I can't do it. I'm going back to something I was used to. I could stay in the Air Force sixteen more years and I'll retire. He said, no, you're not going to do that. The next test I got a D. I'm on my way up. It took a lot of work. One of the things that Arthur Levy, I ended up

taking four classes from him as a political science major. [He] told me that I had test anxiety and hadn't done this in four years. He gave me advice and sent me to see a lady by the name of Dr. Juel Smith, who still works here. They both told me that I needed to calm down when I was taking my test. To stop studying so hard the night before the test. Everything worked out. I decided, well, maybe I could make this thing work with USF and not go back in the military.

H: Was that your major then? Political science?

M: Political science was my major. I've always been interested in politics. My dad was forty-nine years old when I was born. My mom was thirty-six. I think maybe I was an oops, here it comes. He worked at a chemical plant; a phosphate plant. He was union man. He was always involved in politics, as far as working in campaigns as a union person. Back in that day and time, there was no inkling idea in this state that any African American would ever serve in an office. He was a high school graduate, as much as you can get back then, being African American, born in 1902. I got involved with him. He was working in campaigns. We would go on corners and stand up for presidential candidates and governors and political candidates, and I got it. At least I've got it in my blood. Once I realized I was not going to be a superstar singer, I wanted to get into politics. Basically [I was] also thinking, maybe one day I'll go to law school. [It was] far-fetched, way down the road. That's why I came back and majored in political science.

H: You mentioned you were the only African American in your class. There were so few African Americans on the campus at that time. What was that like?

M: I went to an all-black public school system. There was seventy of us. The year they started allowing African Americans to go into the public school system was when I was a senior in senior high school. I had an all-black school. I left and went to Cookman, which was predominately black. Even back in 1970, it wasn't even that much. I had a few classes and I left. When I came back, you realize, whoa, it's a lot different here. It was difficult, because in some of those classes there were no African Americans. There were very few African-American political science majors here period. You could probably count them on your hand and have two or three fingers left over. There were many classes I went to that there were no African Americans in the class. After classes, the African-American students would always go into the University Center and there was a little corner we would sit in there and talk and have fun relating to each other. [We would] go to the University Center to play cards and stuff like that. It was difficult, especially being an African in the political science major. I imagine some of the engineering students felt the same way. Remember, there were 22,000 students here at that time, and 800 blacks. Many times you walk into your classroom, you're the only one in there. It was difficult in the classroom because you really didn't know who to relate to because you were by yourself. Then, as time went on, you found friends in those classrooms. You found study partners, which for me, I was able to find some. I was the older one in the group, and it helped me quite a bit. You always got those classes, then went back and got with the African-American students just to relate and fraternize a little bit. It was difficult. No doubt about that.

H: Not only were you black in a predominately white school, but you were older when a lot

of people were just out of high school. They wanted to have fun partying, all these things.

M: It was different. I remember, I was older, and at that time, I was married. I just got out of service with two children. I was not only a student here, I was getting my GI Bill, also working off campus almost full time at a building supply store. I had to take care of a household.

H: They sold construction supplies?

M: Yeah, it was, I can't think of the name of the company now, it was similar to Home Depot. They sold lumber, they sold anything you wanted to do to remodel your home. That's what they did. I went there because I had a problem with getting my GI Bill when I got out of the service right away. Getting my allocations, my money, to pay for schooling and, of course, take care of my family. You mentioned earlier that you had talked to Councilman Sam Gibbons. He was one of the ones that helped me, after I got out to get my money from the government to my school because that's a promise. I had to work. I went there with intentions of trying to work part-time and hopefully supplement my salary that I was getting with my GI Bill. Not getting it, I had to go full-time. It was going to school full-time and then working full-time. It was quite different. I was never approaching something that was good with hands that had build anything. I had to go in there and learn that business of people asking you questions about 2x4 or 4x4 and what in the world is that all about? I learned. It all worked out.

H: In some ways, you were kind of going to school all day long. You were learning on the job, you were learning here.

M: Then having two young kids at home and a wife that was there. It was tough. Working here as a student, working there as an employee, then having to go home and be a husband and a father and study at the same time and try to make ends meet. It was a difficult situation.

H: When you first came back in 1975, what kind of image did you have of the Student Government?

M: I came back in 1975. I really, really wasn't that close to Student Government. I was trying to focus on getting myself entrenched as a student. What I wanted to do here at USF and that was get an education. Also, I realized that I had to have a social life outside of that. The first thing I focused on was joining a fraternity. Trying to maintain the grades and join a fraternity. I did. I joined Kappa Alpha Si. That way I got more involved in what was happening. One of my fraternity brothers was president of the Black Student Union. I got involved in the Black Student Union, then ended up becoming president of the Black Student Union. Therefore, I had to work with Student Government because they were giving us our A & S (Activity and Service) fees. I saw something in Student Government that I looked at and said, why shouldn't things happen. It wasn't an organization that kept to the point that was trying to benefit students. There was constant bickering between Student Government and administration. I said, that's not the way it's supposed to be. Pies being thrown in the president's face by Student Government. I'm saying, why is it like that? Why the constantly bickering. I didn't really get involved in it at that particular point in time. I just saw there was friction. I knew something had to happen eventually. I never focused on, I'll be involved in

Student Government to the point of getting involved to try to make those things change.

H: Let's talk about your time at the fraternity. You first became involved, what drew you? What kind of activities did you participate in?

M: When I went to Cookman in 1969, I became interested in Kappa Alpha Si there. In Tampa, I knew some gentlemen who were members of Kappa Alpha Si, and they were well-respected people in the community. [It was] something that I thought I wanted to join; the fraternity, I had just never had the opportunity. I couldn't because of real factors; I didn't have the time. That was when I was there to do it. I couldn't do it my freshman year [because] I left. When I came back here, one of my best friends from high school was a member of the fraternity here. I talked to him about joining, and he was like, it's a different ball game here. Maybe you could join Gamma Su Kappa. There was another fraternity I was pursuing, but no, I did not want to join that one. I want to be a member of Kappa Alpha Si. Then they interviewed me. At that time they had pledging. You don't do that anymore. Now they send them to the pledge organization. We pledged for eleven weeks. They talk about hell, it was hell. I'm trying to figure out why in the world did I do that now. On that line, it was quite interesting because there was an older group of us that was on there. It was seven of us. We had two basketball players. One gentleman on that line, I was in the Air Force with him. We came back, we started talking, [and] he was stationed as a student at the same base I was at as a permanent party. We had three basketball players, I'm sorry. Most of them were older. They were on campus, they were juniors and seniors. They weren't freshman. I was able to relate to them even though. After we became members of the fraternity, it was very, very

enjoyable; meeting people and knowing gentlemen that I didn't know on campus. It helped in entrenching myself within the campus, activity-wise, even though I was still married at that time and at that time my GI money hadn't come in yet so I was still looking for part-time work. I wasn't full-time at the lumber store anymore. I had time to spend time with them with student activities or parties. There were service things we did on campus, off campus. I got a chance to go into the school and meet our alumni brothers at their meetings and things along those lines. We studied together. That was important. We had to have a social life along with campus life. That's one of the things that the fraternity gave me while I was here. The difference about black fraternities and sometimes white fraternities; most of the time, when you leave the campus, you go to the alumni organization. You're active hopefully all your life. That was something I was looking forward to. Here, it was the camaraderie, it was the fraternization, it was having good times and knowing that you also had to do some serious work also.

H: Do you care to comment anymore about the eleven weeks of hell?

M: You don't do that now. To the point of hazing now, there have been losses. We were hazed, there was no doubt about it. The big brothers were tough. During the whole time, there was one thing that got us out of trouble with our big brothers. That was the fact, that of the seven of us on there, I could sing. The big brothers liked that. Learn the songs, and sing them. My line brothers always pushed me out there. Sing, or we're gonna be in trouble tonight. I had to learn a lot of songs. There were some days that the singing really kept us out of some deep trouble. That was an enjoyable part, I guess. Learning the songs and singing and helping my line brothers stay out of trouble. It was a

tough eleven weeks. It was something that we wanted to do. Today we wouldn't do that, thank goodness. It was an enjoyable time, and I got to know six other guys very personally. We really enjoyed each other. There were times we would fight and argue, but we had one thing working, and all of us wanted to be members of the Kappa Alpha Si fraternity. We stuck together. That was the thing that they always told you, when you're pledging like that, you're a chain, together. You're a link in that chain. [If] one link messes up, [it] messes up an entire chain. Even though it seems silly of what we went through, looking back on it, it was a point. Did we have to be hazed? No. It made a point of fraternity and sororities, you're brothers and sisters. You have to learn to love each other. That's what that's all about.

H: What kind of songs would you sing?

M: Kappa Alpha Si was known as the fraternity that could sing. There were songs about our sweet heart song that I had to learn of course at Kappa Alpha Si. There were other little songs that had been through Kappa Alpha Si since it was first formed in 1911. They'd teach you those songs. There were some songs that we made up. I never will forget, there was one song that a line from Florida came in. They taught us a song. They taught the song so they made me do the lead part. The guys would fall in. We'd learn the song. Once we were over, it would fizzle over to another campus. Every time I went to another campus the other guys knew that I could sing it. You just had to learn a lot of things. It was a lot of fun.

H: Do you remember any of those songs? Would you sing one for us?

M: No, I'm not going to sing a song. I remember them, but I'm not going to sing.

H: Then you started getting involved in the Black Student Union. This must have further opened up your social horizons at the time? Tell us about that.

M: It did. Getting involved in the Black Student Union, the job there as president was to make sure that the campus life and the enhancement of the black students on campus was met. We had to work with Student Government because we get our money from Student Government. It was my thought process not to fight with Student Government at that time, but try to work with them and make sure that the dollars that we get out was adequately given to the Black Student Union to meet the needs of the students. I got an opportunity to work with those students who were interested in the Black Student Union. I got an opportunity to work with some of the administration of Student Government. I wasn't the president there real long because of the mere fact that I got involved with Student Government after that. What happened, was when my GI bill money started coming in, I left the job there for more of a part-time job closer to campus. While I was still the Black Student Union president, a job opened up as the senate clerk at Student Government. I could type a little bit; that was my job in the Air Force. I applied for the job, interviewed with the vice president of Student Government, at that time, Steve Nichols. He hired me. That was my first step into Student Government as being the senate clerk. At the same time as center clerk, I was president of the Black Student Union. There were some students there that didn't really like that. They said, well, how can he be senate clerk and also be president of the Black Student Union. In the end, it all worked out. That was my first step into Student Government, when I became the senate clerk.

H: Tell us about some of the things you observed there as a senate clerk.

M: The student senate back then was not quite like the Florida Senate. There were some similarities. It was more so fighting of, what can we do to make the administration mad and that kind of thing. Of course, the student senate had to, also, put together a budget. At that time was two point one million dollars. You had to realize that the University of South Florida was 22,000 students, larger than some cities in the [state] of Florida at that time. The budget of two point one million dollars was a budget that was larger than some cities in the state of Florida. You have to think about that. They had to allocate those A & S fees. That was probably the most difficult and most contentious times with Student Government, as to who will get those dollars and where it will go. You have the same bickering as we have in the Senate. Where will it go? How much will the Black Student Union get? How much will this organization get? How much will that organization get? Sometimes it got real tense at some of those meetings. My job was to sit there and record the minutes of those meetings, keep a file of them in the office, just maintain the records of the student senate. That was something that I didn't particularly care for that much. I dealt with that as a job I had to do. They challenged me a couple of times on my recordkeeping. One of the things they didn't realize was, the job they asked me to do there, I had experience with administration in the Air Force: maintaining records and keeping files and things. I set up a completely different system for them over there. They didn't understand it. They didn't like it. When they came to ask me something, it was always there. It was an experience. To sit there and see them bickering and arguing and then they'd fight with the Student Government president, and they'd fight with the

administration. That's when I said to myself, there's got to be a better way. There's got to be a better way to run Student Government. This is not the way to do it. Student Government had offices and they had housing for students. They had legal services for students. [They] had many programs; health programs for students. That was all well and good. Always trying to find the administration and toilet paper in the dorms. Those were major, major issues. The housing office.

H: What the heck are the dorms, what you said?

M: That was an issue when I was here. Having enough toilet paper in the dormitories. There seemed to be a problem with housing getting toilet paper in the dormitories. That was a major issue when I was here in 1975. When I got here and was involved with Student Government, I couldn't figure out why there was a problem getting toilet paper in the dorms. You can probably imagine some people use more than others and that was a major problem. Those were some of the things that they had to face. The constant bickering, I just basically said to myself, this is not the way to do it. I guess that's what got me, besides being the clerk, more involved in Student Government. You asked me some more questions on how I ran for Student Government president I guess?

H: It sounds like you brought more organization to the student senate than people were accustomed to and that was unusual. What point did you finally decide to run for Student Government president?

M: I was talking to some of the students that were involved in Student Government [and] some of the employees that were involved in Student Government. There was, like I said, constant arguing, constant bickering going on. I said to one of them, Student

Government can't continue to fight with the administration. You've got to work together to get things done. You have to realize that the senate puts together the budget, the president of Student Government can veto it so that, whatever the case may be, would fix it, and that budget at that time had to go to the president of the university. That president had to approve it. If you're fighting on one of the major issues, it's just like it is in the state government or anything, the budget is the major issue. The Federal Government, eventually the process, the president is about the budget. In the state of Florida, the only thing the legislature has to do is pass a budget. We don't have to pass anything else as long as we have a budget. Constitutionally, that's what we have to do. Here on the campus, that was a major issue with two point one million dollars. There was always bickering. I told them, there's a better way to do this. That particular student at that time said, why don't you run for Student Government president. I said, you've got to be kidding me, no way. He said, what do you mean? I said, first and foremost, I'm black. Second and foremost, I'm black. Third foremost, I'm black. I can't get elected. I was talking to a white student. He said, yes you can. I said, no I can't; it won't happen on this campus. We only have 800 black students on campus, and the rest of them are white. They're not going to elect a black Student Government president on the University of South Florida campus. It's never been done as far as I know in the state of Florida. At that time, I think there were seven universities. It's not going to happen. I dropped it at that point. He didn't drop it. He went around and talked to some other students. Some black students, some white students. They came back to me and said, why don't you think about it. What I did, was organize a meeting to talk about you running for Student

Government president. One of the student's apartments here on campus. We want you to come and let's talk about it. I said, if you want to waste your time in doing that, I'll show up. I showed up, and there must have been sixty or seventy students at that apartment that night. They all wanted to hear what I had to say. I basically started saying, there are issues on this campus. We're talking about extending library hours, that's important. We're talking about two point one million dollars in A & S fees, well that's important. We talk about better dorm life, well that's important. I wanted to talk about it. They said that night, you have to run for Student Government president. I said I've got to think about it. I've got to go home and talk to my wife. I've got to look at what happens here. I've got to think about it. I went home and I thought about it. I came back and told them, if you are willing to work and try and get me elected, I'm willing to try and see what happens. In the back of my mind, I said, it's not going to happen. It's just not going to happen. They went to work. They put together a committee to help me with the issues on campus. They put together a committee to come up with slogans and the whole works. Just like any campaign you've got to raise money and the whole game of things. My fraternity got involved. A lot of other black fraternities and sororities got involved. I was campaigning against a guy who had been in Student Government for a long time. I think he served as student senator if I remember right. He probably at one time was president. The other gentleman who was in the race was heavily involved with the inter-fraternity council. There were no black fraternities and sororities involved in the fraternity council. He was a member of Pi Kappa Alpha. I figured my chances just were not good. It wasn't going to happen. They wanted it to happen. They came up with a

slogan, "It's Miller Time." Okay, here we are on a campus that had a big to-do about serving beer on campus. We utilized the slogan, It's Miller Time. Let's go from there. We had another fraternity brother that was an artist. He drew the first campaign sign of the Miller beer logo. He did an excellent job. He silk-screened it. When I saw it, I went, we got a problem here. I said, we can't utilize the Miller beer symbol because it's probably got a trademark on it. He said, look at it real close. I looked at it and said, what do you mean? He said, I left the line out of the bottom. It's not like the Miller beer. I went, okay, well let's see what happens. We started campaigning. We started working. I started learning the issues the best I could. All of a sudden the Miller signs started going up [and] these silk-screen Miller Time t-shirts. I had it in the back of my mind, this is going to be difficult. I started then thinking, if I can't do it, at least let me have a good showing, to the point of, if I get them to run off after me. We campaigned hard. It got, sometimes, real nasty in the campaigns. We campaigned hard. We went to the forums. We talked to the students all over the place. The more and more we campaigned the more and more people came onto our campaign. It brought together black students, it brought together white students, it brought together gay students, it brought together a blind student that was involved with us. Male, female, it brought together a lot of students to work on the campaign. That was the thing that was impressive to me. At last I would think, I've got a shot. We've got a shot at winning. Then we had the election. We went to a run-off. I missed winning that first primary outright by, I think it was three or four percentage points. I was shocked. We had a run-off with a gentleman who had been heavily involved in Student Government. I figured then, it's going to be real tough.

I'm going to see if I can really pour it on. Those people behind me continued to work. We won. We won. This campus was crazy. The black students were absolutely out of their minds. Everyone went out to celebrate. I remember that night. The screaming, the hollering that we had done it. That we had pulled it off. I stood there pinching myself saying, this is unbelievable. What am I going to do now. It happened.

H: That must have been a big surprise for you then.

M: It was a big surprise. It was a big surprise for me, it was a big surprise to this campus. I believe that the University of South Florida all of a sudden started to be recognized as
[interrupted by the tape stopping]

H: It kind of changed USF's reputation?

M: It changed the reputation of USF drastically. We started to be the university that bridged diversity. The black guy from the ghetto of Tampa was the student body president. An older student that had served in the military. The important part to me was that we brought together so many students in that campaign. That was the thing that I really, really impressed about. They got together and it didn't make a difference where they came from, what economic background they had, what color their skin was. It was a mission, and that mission was to get Les Miller elected student body president. The ironic part, was that my name is Lesley, L-E-S-L-E-Y. My dad's name was Lesley. He was a senior, I was a junior, right now there's a Lesley IV, and a III. When we started the campaign, one of the people that was involved in the campaign said, Lesley won't work. It won't work. It can't get us elected. We're going to call you Les Miller. My dad was called Les Miller so my mom and everybody called my dad Les Miller, and I was Lesley.

I said, that's what they call my dad. They said, Lesley won't work. Les Miller is what we're going to use. It's been that way since 1977. People call me Les. [If] anyone calls me Lesley now, I know we're going way back. That was the thing that happened here. We came together in the University of South Florida and then proceeded as a university that bridged diversity. Was that good for the university? Yes. Also, [it] was a statement that in some parts of the city and the state, didn't sit well. There was still, even today, though not as prevalent, there was some racism out there. Here was a university that elected a black man? What's going on over there? What are they doing? What are the students thinking about? I heard those things. I know those things were said. The student's university were the ones that spoke. Anyone that elects their city council or county commission or state legislature or congressperson or diversity center, the people speak. The students on the campus spoke.

H: The interesting thing about this, too, is that it really does highlight a lot of the issues that were prevalent in Florida at the time. Here you had a predominately rural conservative state, very conservative on racial issues. Going back to the John's committee, it showed how the people in power were very suspicious of universities, and especially of USF being an urban university. In some ways, you becoming Student Government president, highlighted the fact that you were a model USF student. You were from the city, not from the country. You were going to school in the same city where you grew up. You were black. You had served in the military. You were older than most students. You had family. All these different things showed the profile of a lot of students that took advantage of USF at the time, whether it be a working mother.

M: It was a community university. It still is to a certain extent, but not as much as it was then. We had some dorms, we had infantry housing. It was a community. You came here, you left. You came here, you left. There were some of us that got involved in extracurricular activities on campus, but you're right. A lot of students were older, or had been in the military. They saw different in me, and that's what it took.

H: Your platform. We actually have a copy of it. You mentioned your past with the Black Student Union, and being the senate clerk. You bring out five specific issues. We'll talk about your platform.

M: What were those issues?

H: This will be interesting. One, establishing better communication between students and Student Government. Two, longer library hours and an increase in text collection. Three, advance programming to include all of the branch campuses with variations and talent. Four, broaden the awareness of sexual and minority discrimination on all campuses. Five, promote student input in the decision and proposal process for drop-add and forgiveness policies. Let's take them one-by-one.

M: If I can remember them much. It's been a long time.

H: Let's talk about one, why that issue got on your platform, and then two, how you were able to tackle that problem or what obstacles were in the way.

M: Let's start with the library. The library issue was a major issue when we were here. The library was closing during the weekdays during a certain time when the students couldn't come into the library. It was closed. I think on the weekend it might have stayed open a couple more hours. The students were saying, it needs to be open more. We need to

open more hours. That was always a budget problem. It was a budget problem then and it's a budget problem now. How do we accomplish and get that done? One of the things, having to work with the administration, the president, and saying, what can we do to get the library open for students that either work during the day or they take classes at night and go to the library? That was a major issue. This wasn't the library. The library was the old building, what they call now, the SVC building if I'm not mistaken. That was the library. I remember when this library was built. We worked it out. I think that the state might have given, or the president was able to shuffle some money around. They got the library hours extended while I was Student Government president. What were the other ones?

H: Better communication between students and Student Government.

M: Students didn't know that Student Government was there a lot of times. Or the programs that Student Government offered. When I got there, it was shocking to me. We had an office that elicited off-campus housing and apartments would work with us there. We had a legal office where lawyers would come in and talk to students about any legal problems. Students had legal problems. We had lawyers that would come in. We had a health insurance office there where students could purchase health insurance. We had a lot of things that was happening. We had a staff that was in an office. A lot of students did not know that they could get these things accomplished at the University of South Florida in Student Government. We went about the means of advertising. I think we started making up signs and putting up signs. I think that I was one of the ones that created the prevention group at night to help the students on campus out of the budget

that we had. We started getting the message out that Student Government is for you. We started seeing a major increase of students in students that would use Student Government. Another issue was basically the diversity of campus. We had the Black Student Union. We had a lot of different organizations on campus that want to get A & S fees. I'll never forget there was a creation of, I don't think they would call it a gay organization, they had a different name to it. The gay students started getting more involved on campus. They wanted A & S fees. There was always the issue of, should we give this organization money? We had to find a process on how to do that within the A & S budget. Everyone paid A & S fees. Everyone should have that opportunity to get some of those dollars if they went out to recognizing the campus. We didn't want to discriminate against anybody. This campus had brought together a group that would never be elected, lets bring together this campus to get things accomplished. The branch campuses were not recognized that well. We had the St. Petersburg campus, it was very small, of course. We had the Sarasota campus in New College in Florida. We wanted to bring them into the folds. Students there wanted to be a part of USF. I visited those campuses and tried to make them a part of USF. They had their Student Governments there, but not well-recognized. We wanted to bring them in. We worked on that. Those were the sort of things that we started working on immediately in trying to get things done. We accomplished a lot.

H: It's pretty far-sighted, too, on your part to think about the branch campuses because it's still a problem we have today.

M: There's still a problem, but I don't think it's quite as prevalent as it was then, but still a

problem. The branch campuses, of course, have grown tremendously since 1977. It was a start to getting the students to think that they were a part of the University of South Florida. I don't think that back then the students felt, I'll go ahead and go to school to the branch campus here, but I'm not a part of USF. Well, you are a part of USF. You pay your tuition to USF, the A & S fees for the budget to USF. You deserve to have the opportunity to get some of those dollars, just like the students on the Tampa campus get. That's what we started working on. It started to work. Even though the branch campuses have always been a little problem since that time, and probably before that time, and probably always will be a problem. I shouldn't say a problem, but an issue. It was something you had to look at.

H: Before we move on, I'd like to hold in front of the camera for a moment, you see this campaign ad. One of the things he emphasized was mature and responsible. Responsible was a word that appeared often in your literature.

M: I was a mature student. Like I said, I had come back to school after serving four years in the Air Force. I felt that I was responsible because of the jobs that I did in the Air Force. My last job was a non-commission office in charge of temporary dormitories. I had over 300 civilian employees that worked for me. I was the only military person there. I had to report to me. Imagine, I felt that I was responsible. One of the things that we came up with was this Miller Time and forming a mature and responsible student government to try and stop the bickering. One of the things that I said was that there was a gap between where the Student Government offices were held that time, which was down in the Marshall Center, and the administration. We wanted to bridge, when I say gap, I'm not

talking about land per say, but bring that gap together so Student Government would work together for the betterment of students. That was what we worked on. That's what we talked about. Being a responsible government. I think it worked. I think at that time, we were looking at some presidents here, I think one of the presidents had just left, I can't remember who it was.

H: Cecil Mackey.

M: Cecil Mackey. The one that had the pie thrown in his face, unfortunately. came on every Friday night. That was our trend at that time. I thought he did an excellent job. I tried to get him to stay here as president of University of South Florida. We started working with them, to try and bridge that gap that was there. I think we did it.

H: You tried to affect a different tone. I remember, especially in the early 1970s, it was very combative. The students were almost militant. The administration was, understandably, reactionary. How did you try to change that tone?

M: The hippie movement was not far off. The hippie movement in the 1960s, when I was growing up, was very prevalent. We had a lot of things happening in California, of course. Of course, brought a small state then, per say, but still had things happening. We had the Kent State, which was drastic trouble. We had a lot of other things. We had the Jackson State University. The Jackson's founded a black school. The state had a lot of the hippie flavor left over. There was more of a rebellious mentality than trying to sit at a table and work it out. My military experience and my bringing-up by my mom and dad was fight and sit down and work things out. That was what I tried to surround the administration and Student Government with. My vice president, which was a mature

person, tried to work that out. We tried to hire people for Student Government that were mature and responsible and we'd try to work those things out. That's what we did. We got into some major fights with the student senate. Some major, major issues. [They made] a petition to try and impeach me. The whole works. [It] didn't work. We tried to focus on working things out with the administration. There was, again, the student senate wanted to take part of the A & S fees and send money to Kent State for the war. As much as I sympathize with what happened, I just told them no, we weren't going to do that. The money is going to stay on this campus. Some of those members weren't happy. They were like, we've got to get him out of there. We want to send those dollars up there and that's going to be the bottom line. I said, you put in the budget, I'll veto it. They tried to get me impeached, but it didn't work. Eventually, I think people started seeing that it was going to be a better campus if Student Government and administration worked together. I sat down with the president and had administration parties together. I sat down at a table in the administration office; I think that's the first time that's ever happened. We talked. We got to work together for the betterment of the students. What can we do? How can we communicate? We have our differences. I'll try to work to get together a good budget before it comes over here to you so you have to veto it and the students get upset. We're going to have student senators that will be who they are, rebellious. The majority of us not see it a different way. Some of the student senators saw it that way. The president of the senate, I can't think of his name, he's now in California if I'm not mistaken, saw that. He embraced it. We worked it out. It started the university on a different track. Student Government working closely with

administration.

H: You mentioned the aftertaste of the hippies and everything. Of course, there was another side to that coin and that was the militant black movements at the time, whether it be the Black Panthers, the Black Power, the Nation of Islam, etc. How much play did those sort of movements get here on campus? Do you remember much about that?

M: We had very little of that. I think that the black students on this campus were so surprised that they had a black student body president that they took a different focus. They wanted to work with us. There was a saying that I didn't care for. The new Black Student Union president and I had some problems. We tried to work those out. It was some bickering. It was a very small segment of militants on the campus. They wanted to work together. I guess it was a thing where we have one of our own, now, as our student body president. Let's work together with him to be successful. We'll get more accomplished. That was the mentality of a whole lot of black students on campus. It was a very small segment of militants. There was some things we had problems with. We tried to work those things out.

H: The saying that depicted you as getting into bed with the establishment?

M: I was an Uncle Tom, I wasn't standing up for the black students. I should have done more for the black students than I did for anyone else. One of the things that I told them was, I was born black. I'm gonna die black. I'm older than some of you guys. I've seen segregation. I've seen it face-to-face. I remember the first time I was called the N-word with my daughter in my arms. I'm going to do what I can. You've got to remember, I have to represent 22,000 students on this campus. I'm going to do my best to do the job I

can do for this year's time I'm here. Some of them didn't like that. It was a very small segment. [A] very, very small segment. We worked it out.

H: They must have also seen that your campaign was fueled not just by black students, but there was a coalition.

M: The one thing you've still got to remember, that I've got to remember, you can't, because you're not the color, is that once they had a black president of Student Government was, hey, we're gonna get it all. You can't do that. You just can't do that. I remembered I was black. I looked in the mirror every day. I saw a wife and two children of the same color I was. I saw a lot of students. But I had a responsibility to this campus. That was my focus. I had to be responsible to this campus. That was my focus.

H: You were true to your campaign promises and responsibility. It sounds like there's a lot of balancing act for you to do. Not just during the campaign, but during your tenure as president. How did all of this stuff prepare you for your later career?

M: I learned to deal with a budget. Two point one million dollars doesn't sound like anything now. Two point one million dollars was a massive amount of dollars on this campus. I had to learn how to deal with budgets. I had to learn how to deal with different people from different walks of life. I had to learn how to accept criticism and not get angry. I always prayed to stay humble, I do the same thing now, to not let my head get in the clouds and come falling. If I do that, when I fall back to the ground I'll get trampled. That's what it did for me here. My grades got better when I was a Student Government president. Especially when I got onto the Board of Regents, when I had to focus more on doing that. I thought I was a mature student, a responsible student then,

but I had to really, really become more responsible and manage my time and spend time with my family and children and the whole works. That's what it did here. This was my first step to getting into the public life. Student Government president is public life. You still have to realize, this campus had 22,000 students. I think, at that time, there were more students on this campus than there were in class interpreters. Our budget was larger than class interpreter's budget. Even though I was Student Government president, it was a public position. We had to take criticism. We had to deal with it. That's what this particular job at that time prepared me to do the job I'm doing now.

H: Another thing I was just thinking of is how remarkable your progression was. You started at USF with test anxiety. You had a hard time taking tests. You had a hard time being able to focus your studies onto the test. Then here you are, you've taken on more than ever on your social life, working as Student Government and all these other things. Your grades are better than ever. By the time you graduated, you must have felt like you went through a dramatic transformation.

M: If you look at it that way now, I know I did. I really didn't think of it that way. I know my grades are getting better because I know I was focusing more on what I had to do. I still had a thing in the back of my mind, I want to get my college education. That was drilled into my head by my parents. I wanted to get my college education. Me coming back to school also sent my sister back to school. I knew, then, that I had a responsibility. I was Student Government president. That September, 1977, when the legislature passed the law to allow students on the Board of Regents. When they called and asked me to serve on that Board of Regents, I said yes. My whole life changed

again. I had to have time management. I didn't take any time management courses. I just realized that I've got to manage my time, and what am I going to do and when am I going to do that. I started taking classes later in the evening. I was able to work out a lot of things with my professors that I wouldn't be in class on time because I had to be at the Board of Regents in a meeting. They'd worked with me. There were days that I took tests by myself in a classroom, even before the students took their test or after they took theirs. There were times that I was traveling with the Board of Regents, I had to go into rooms after meetings or whatever functions we were at, or dinners, and close the doors and stay up late at night studying. When I was home I was studying. My wife would keep the kids away while I was studying. I had to manage my time and focus on what I was doing. I knew I had to do a job as Student Government president. [I had to] definitely do a job with the Board of Regents. I also had to get my college education. Those three things were important to me. I had to be a dad, and I had to be a husband. Did my life change? Yeah. Did it change for the better? I hope it did. I saw my grades get better. I learned how to study. I also remember not studying that hard the night before an exam. I remember Dr. Levy telling me that, and Dr. Juel Smith telling me that. It worked.

H: Just to back up for one minute. When you won the presidency, did you see Dr. Levy after that?

M: Yeah

H: What did he have to say?

M: Look what I made. Arthur Levy, I don't even know if Arthur Levy's even around

anymore. Arthur Levy was a different breed of a guy. I think he got his bachelor's, master's, and Ph.D. from Harvard. I think, if I remember right, he did. He was Canadian, born in Canada. He came into the classroom, he lectured out of the books. He would tell you the books you need to read, then lecture out of the books. He would sit there in front of the class in an auditorium, I'll never forget that. He would cross his legs, [and] he would smoke cigarettes. He would put them out on the table. I'm like, this guy's crazy. He would lecture and lecture and lecture. Students had to adapt to that. I guess being the only black in the class at that time, and I made an F, he could probably see my face. The pain of, what in the world just happened there. He pulled me aside. He changed my life. He got me focused on what I had to do. Dr. Juel Smith who was over a program that I can't remember, changed my life and how I had to study. After I became student body president, and I was still taking some classes from him. He would always look at me. He did, he did.

H: How did your wife and your parents react?

M: My wife, who's now deceased, I guess she saw a change in me. She was working at that time for a telephone company here. My time at home was dwindling. She hung in there with me. She took care of the kids when I wasn't around. The reason I came back to Tampa was because of my parents, really. I looked at other places I wanted to go after the military. My dad had been detected with Parkinson's disease. My mom had a brain tumor surgery when I was in the military and health-wise was not that great. It was just my sister and I. I knew she was going to have to have some help with them. That's the reason I came back to Tampa. My dad was really the one that got me involved in

politics. He was happy. That's the only office he's ever seen me elected to. The first election I won was in 1991 for the city council. He died in 1985. He never saw me elected to anything but Student Government president for the University of South Florida. He saw me elected there and he saw me graduate college. That was important. They were proud of their son. My dad always told me he was proud of me. My mom is still alive and proud of me. She's proud of me. They were excited. They were very excited. I think probably the two most exciting times was when I won out here and definitely when I graduated.

H: Let's talk a little bit more about your academic experience. We talked about your two major influences. What were some of the other experiences that made a difference in your life? Were there any other teachers in political science or humanities?

M: Dr. "Sot" Barber, who was a Constitutional Law professor here, played a major influence on me. He and Arthur Levy were night and day. "Sot" was a leftover hippie guy. Smart as all. I took Constitutional Law from him. He just drilled in my head that I had to be the best that I could be regardless of the color of my skin, where I came from, whatever the case may be. Those two were probably the most. Reece Smith, who was active president at that time played a major role in my life at that time. I thought he was the best student for USF president. He probably lost a lot of money, because we had a lot of money from the lawyer, downtown. I thought he brought this campus together in the very short period of time that he was here. Travis Northcutt, who was the dean of the Social Sciences at the time. [He was a] big guy, [with a] southern drawl. [He was] frightening at times. He was a major influence. There were a lot of people. Phyllis

Marshall, at the University Center. We had some problems every now and then, especially with Student Government offices being over there. Sometimes we would get a little loud or whatever the case may be. Phyllis really helped me a lot. I can't really recall any more names. It's been so long, I've forgotten the names. Those were some of the ones that really made a difference. John Lott Brown, when he came on. He was named president after Reece Smith stepped down. I was a regent at that time, when he was president. That was a difficult part for him because even though I was a student regent without a vote when I first got there, he had one of his bosses on campus all the time. I guess for him, thinking about that now, was probably a difficult time for him. He was president of the university, and I was a student still here. I guess he thought about that at times.

H: Let's talk a little bit more about how you became a student regent. You mentioned you got a phone call from the governor asking you?

M: What happened at that time, there was an organization on the Florida Student Association, there still is, that the body of the board was made up of the presidents of the universities' student governments. They elected me as their chairman. The legislature passed the law to allow students to serve on the Board of Regents.

[interrupted by changing the tape]

H: We left off with the Florida Student Association.

M: I was chairman of the Florida Student Association. The legislature, in 1997, passed a bill, and students had been working on this for a long time, of trying to put a student on the Board of Regents. The legislature passed it. The governor signed it. The student

didn't have a vote, but there were nine regents at the time, and I made the tenth one. Once it was passed, I got a call, once it was passed, asking, would I serve on the Board of Regents? I said yes, not knowing what I was getting myself into. I said yes. My world started changing again. There were the most powerful people on the state that was on that Board of Regents. Chester Ferguson, J.J. Daniels, Marshall Criser, who one time served as the president of the University of Florida, all these types of people on the Board of Regents. Then here comes this young black guy, a student. These guys are all millionaires, basically, and here I come. But I accepted the opportunity to serve on the Board of Regents. Jim Smith was on there, too, who one time was governor and served as attorney general for the state of Florida, also. What the Board of Regents did, because I do go before them for all the students of Florida, I think it was 120,000 at that time. Not knowing the impact that the Board of Regents had over the state university system. I accepted the opportunity. [I had] more and more responsibility. I had to do a lot of reading. I not only had to represent USF, but there were other universities that had to be represented. I remember one of my first meetings, and I had been down in Florida Atlantic. One of the first meetings, I had studied the material, I knew it inside-out. I had to raise my hand to get recognized to hopefully get over the other regents to get the attention of the chairman to say, Mr. Chairman, we would like for Regent Miller to speak. I couldn't speak. I couldn't talk. I had no vote. Jim Smith was my ally. He would always see my hand go up and he would say, let him speak. I never will forget, one debate that we had was on the oceanography programs of USF. We dealt with the oceanography program. I studied the material about trying to get oceanography at USF.

I think we tried to work something out between FSU and the University of South Florida oceanography program. I got the attention and they let me speak. Chester Ferguson, I don't know if Mr. Ferguson had not read the material or whatever, Chester Ferguson stopped me in the middle of my conversation and literally chewed me out, basically saying that I didn't know what I was talking about. I can't remember what the debate was. I was so frightened after he did that, like what in the world did I do wrong. When it was over with, he came and apologized. He basically said, I don't think this was the time to do this. We're not prepared for this program yet. We need to wait a little while longer. I wanted to just tell you to calm down, and I apologize to you. I was frightened. I had heard of Chester Ferguson before. He was a powerful man. From that point on, he would even recognize me to speak. The next year, the next legislative session, there was a bill to get the student regent a vote. Chester Ferguson never wanted a student on the Board of Regents. [He] never did. He went and lobbied the governor and the legislature to allow me to have a vote. He was the first one up there. I thanked him for that. I had the opportunity, also, to serve as the first student to ever vote on the Board of Regents. I should have been gone at that time, my time had supposedly run out at that time, because student regents only served one year. Bob Graham would not make the appointment right away. Instead of serving twelve months I served eighteen months. I helped select the president of FAMU, per say. It was quite an experience. Also, I had to manage my time. There was a lot of work, a lot of reading, a lot of traveling. It was an experience that I never will forget. Right now, that experience helped me serve on the education committee when I was on education appropriations. I know the experience of being

student body president and being a student on the Board of Regents prepared me to do what I'm doing. That's one of the reasons I fought so hard to make sure that we changed this whole process of us, the Board of Trustee members, which I still don't favor that much, that we had to have a student on the Board of Trustees. They played a major, major role. The universities have a powerful Student Government. We need the professors, we need the administration, we need every supportive aspect on every university campus, being public or private. It's all about educating the students. If it wasn't for students, we wouldn't have universities. We would have no university system. I think that played a major role, and that's the reason I fought so hard.

H: You suddenly went from a relatively powerful position here on campus to a statewide role. That must have enabled you to make some contacts and some things that helped you out later on?

M: As a matter of fact, the first job I had after I graduated, a utility company here in Tampa, I met the chairman, president, and CEO at that point in time. One of the people the Board of Regents introduced me to. I was getting ready to graduate. We talked a little bit. He said, send me your application and your resume and that's what I did. That's the first job I had after graduating from USF, was going to work for that utility company. It worked out. Still, I met people. Marshall Criser, and those people. I met a lot of people in the state. Legislatures, [the] governor, people involved with the state university system, people I still know today. Some of them I know are still alive. I met a lot of people. One of the things, again, I had to realize, was I had to represent the students of the state, and I wanted to remain on board and do that particular job. That's what it was

all about. It was a trying experience, it was a rewarding experience.

H: It sounds like such a snowball effect, too. Here, someone back in the late 1970s was trying to convince you to run for president and you were like, no, no, it couldn't happen. Before you knew it, you had a statewide role.

M: It happened so fast. That was the thing. Student body presidents, you only serve a year. It happened so fast. Me making a comment to someone about Student Government doing a better job to getting a career together and saying, it ain't going to happen, to well, maybe we have a chance to going to the runoffs, to we could win this thing. To getting elected, and sworn in, to, in February, getting on the Board of Regents. In a matter of seven months, it worked just that fast. As I said, my whole life changed. I went from being a student sitting in Arthur Levy's class, getting ready to drop out, not knowing what the F was, to Student Government president, to Board of Regents. It just blossomed, it moved so fast. It did change my life. It really, really did change my life. I'm happy. Those were times at USF that I know I won't forget. Names I forget. There were really, really a lot of men involved. What USF meant to me back then I never will forget. It prepared me for what I had to do in my private life, it prepared me for what I had to do in my working life. It prepared me for what I had to do in now my public life. That's about it.

H: Let's cap this by talking about your graduation. Your school time must have seemed like quite a blur, there was so much going on. What year did you graduate?

M: I graduated in March, 1978. I was able to march across the stage, I guess it had to be that June, and Travis Northcutt made a recommendation that I graduate – I wasn't an honor

student, I had goofed-off in my earlier years – with distinction. That was wonderful. I sat on the stage at the graduation and had a couple of comments. That was when I saw my dad cry. He was in the audience. My mom, and my sister, and my wife and two kids were there. I was on stage. I went on, with my graduate distinction, whatever it was, and I had to bring comments about students and what we wanted to do after we graduated from USF. A lot of things happened so fast. I got that degree. That was an important thing to me, and that was an important thing to my family. It was an important thing to my parents. He was alive to see it happen. It was a blur, per se, but I still go back and look at everything we did at the time I walked on this campus in 1975 until March 1978. It was a blur, but it was rewarding.

H: One last thing I'd like to ask you is, in some ways, repeat what you said on that stage. Leave some comments for future students, future generations.

M: You know, I don't remember that speech, I must admit, I do not remember what I said that particular day. One of the things I was saying, I probably can think about what I might have said and what I would say to students today. You're in the prime of your life, this young, as far as your education goes. What you get in your head, as far as education, being political science, engineering, whatever the case may be, don't let them take that away, as the good Lord says, no one can take that away. While you're on campus, you have a major, major thrust for your education. You become a well-rounded student when you get involved. It made me a better student. I came here with the thrust of wanting an education, but I also got involved on what was happening on the campus. It taught me political mainstream, it taught me to be humble. It taught me how to take criticism, it

taught me how to deal with people of all walks of life. You've got to get involved, either in Student Government or fraternities or other organizations. Whatever the case may be, you need to get involved. It prepares you for the day you walk out here and go into your private life or your public life if you're going to have one, or your job, whatever the case may be. Now is the time to grasp it all that you can get. You're going to walk out of here one day. Just thinking how the University of South Florida prepared me, education-wise. I couldn't have gotten a better education. I don't think I could have anywhere else. I could have not prepared education-wise anywhere but the University of South Florida. I could not have been educated more for my political life than at the University of South Florida. I could have not been educated more for my work-life outside of politics than here at the University of South Florida. So get it. Get your education. Make your life well-rounded. I think that's what I told them. I talked about when you leave here, never forget USF. Give back. USF gave you something, give it back to USF. We had no football team then. We had a real good basketball team, though. We gave back. That's important.

H: I want to thank you for coming and talking to us today and giving back. You took the skills and all the things you learned at USF and you've really done a lot. Your story is far from over and so I hope that some day you might come back and talk to us about your experiences after USF.

M: Anytime. Just give me a call, we'll work it out and I'll be more than happy to come back.

H: Thank you, Senator Miller.

M: Thank you. I appreciate it.

End of Interview