

FNP 38

Interviewee: David Lawrence, Jr.

Interviewer: William McKeen

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M: When and where were you born?

L: I was born in New York City, on March 5, 1942.

M: Were you from a large family or a small family?

L: A large family. One of nine children. I am the second oldest of nine. Eight are still living. All of us graduated from either the University of Florida or Florida State

M: Could you tell us a little bit about your parents?

L: My mother came from, really, a New York Social Register family, one of ten children. My father came from a Long Island real estate family, the youngest of eleven children. My mother's family came over in the *Mayflower*, originally. My father's family came over in the wake of the Irish potato famine in the 1840s. As a little boy, I was living in New York City and on Long Island. My father was a newspaperman at the then *New York Sun*, now defunct, the same newspaper where Virginia O'Hanlon wrote the letter that led the editor to respond, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." My father worked there during the Second World War. . . . [In]1948, literally on my sixth birthday, on March 5, 1948, our family, then five children and a mother and father, moved to a farm in upstate New York.... My father's vision was that he would work on the farm and have a vegetable garden and a cow and maybe a goat and maybe a sheep and maybe a pig--at least one of everything . . . and then work on the weekly newspaper. Of course, farming did not work like that and . . . my father never did go to work for the *Sandy Creek News*. But, for the next eight years, we lived on a farm in the least glamorous form of farming, which is chicken farming. So, if I know anything about hard work and doing it with other people, it is from growing up on a farm.... I literally drove the tractor when I was nine years old and sold vegetables to neighbors. It was a wonderful way to grow up Well, in 1956, when I was fourteen--this is eight years after this grand experiment, my parents decided that farming was none too profitable My parents decided. Let us move to somewhere warm; we are tired of these frozen winters, and let us go somewhere else and make our fortune.

So, we literally used the 1952 edition of the World Book Encyclopedia and looked up Arizona, New Mexico, and Florida, none of which any of us had ever been to (including my mother and father if I am not mistaken). We looked them up, and I think the final telling thing was that my parents were great watchers of Arthur

Godfrey on Sundays. Arthur Godfrey, in the winters, brought the show to Miami Beach, and that is how Florida came to be selected. So, toward the end of the winter in 1956, we moved to Florida.... So, my father ended up selling real estate, subsequently going to a paper now dead, a daily newspaper in Sarasota, Florida [*Sarasota News*] . . . my father worked there for several years. He ultimately went back into real estate for a while but then ended up the last seventeen-plus years of his life working for the *Orlando Sentinel* . . . most of the time in Tallahassee, where he became the dean of the press corps. The House press gallery is named for him today, and he is in the Florida Journalism Hall of Fame. So, I ended up going into journalism, purely and simply, because I admired my father and I wanted to be in the same business that he was. When I was fifteen years old, I started working in the composing room during the summers, at the *Sarasota News* which was his newspaper. Then I was sort of off to the races from there. I was editor of the high school newspaper. I worked summers during college at *The St. Petersburg Times*.

M: Describe what the *Sarasota News* was like.

L: Well, it is almost certainly idealized in my mind . . . at . . . age fifteen, I would go into the newsroom and I would beg to rewrite press releases. So, I rewrote those while I was waiting for my father to go home. He was then the managing editor and the general manager of the newspaper. The back-shop was, of course, the back-shop of those days, which was a hot lead operation in which there are terms like “bank” and “turtle” and so forth. We have a whole generation of journalists now who have never heard any of these terms. The printing craft was a very peripatetic kind of profession. These folks had worked at lots of different places. They would work here for a while and go somewhere else. They were sort of crude and loud and tellers of dirty jokes, but they were warm people at the same time.

M: You were able to go from the back-shop to the newsroom and do some rewriting. Do you think that technology has changed so much that there are none of those early types working in the business.

L: These days, it would be unusual for a newsroom to hire a person who did not graduate from college. That was not true back then. Of course, pay was slightly less than mediocre, but the cliché was sort of true, that you were not doing this for the money, anyway. You just paid your dues and when somebody gave you a chance to write something or report something, that was a huge deal. I can still remember as an intern for *The St. Petersburg Times* the first byline I ever got. I was in the Bradenton bureau of *The St. Petersburg Times* that first summer. It had a two-column headline, and it was about the tomato crop in Palmetto, Florida. Why should I remember that all of these years? It was that big a thrill....

To this day, I think it is a thrill to have your byline in the paper or your column to go in the paper. It is still very personal.

M: Since we have you in a reflective mood, do you want to make any other observations about the changing nature of the species *journalist*? Are they too elitist?

L: It has some tendency toward that. Too many (newspaper people) are out of touch with most people. I always thought one of the big perils in the newsroom was that too many had all their friends in the newsroom. You do not learn an awful lot from people like you. You have to learn from people with different ideas and different ways of working. For all the good I still see in newspapers, there is real peril in being out of touch with most people around you.

M: Something else that you have probably noticed in your career is that all of a sudden, a journalism degree became something like a union card, as the entree to the business.

L: As much as I love, which I truly do, the University of Florida, if I could do it over again, I wish I had majored in history or something like this. I actually was in political science. Because I was expending so much of my energy on the *Florida Alligator*, night and day, I said, "well, let me go over to journalism which will be easier than political science." And that is how I came to graduate in journalism

M: At Vincennes, Indiana, you began working on the high school paper as well?

L: . . . I had a remarkable journalism advisor, a woman named Jo Berta Bullock, a legendary figure. A tiny woman, badly crippled. A beloved figure, not a softie. A person of great intensity. The paper was printed offset. This was before real newspapers, big newspapers, were printed offset which, of course, is a photographic process. A young woman classmate of mine worked in the newspaper, and did something really dumb. In those days, it was not unusual for even "good kids" to pen swastikas on their hands. It was not that many years after World War II, and, clearly, the swastika stands for the ugliest form of racism and hatred. I can remember kids who did that, and other kids would not say, "ah, they are anti-Semitic or haters" or whatever else. Anyhow, this young woman ends up doodling a swastika on the flat, which therefore, because this is photographic process, ends up appearing as an ad. I remember Jo Berta Bullock, who was 4 feet-8 or something like that, a very small person, taking her crutches--she used crutches--she had big braces on--and swinging it up over her head atop our worktables and saying, my God, do you know what you have done? Do you know how many people died because of this symbol? It was an extraordinary moment. And so, the power of symbols, and the power of the

press, your enormous power to damage--has been a lesson that has always stayed with me

M: What was the University of Florida campus like when you got there, in terms of racial make-up?

L: Very white. The university was not desegregated in its undergraduate divisions until the fall of 1962 and, in my recollection, the University's student body was sort of divided between pro- and anti-civil rights I remember vividly the university being segregated. I remember being active in the *Alligator* and covering it. I remember taking pictures. I remember writing about it. I remember asking the state NAACP to write a column, which got me into significant trouble with the university at that time because J. Wayne Reitz [University of Florida president, 1955-1967], whom I came to respect a great deal, was not particularly fond of the student newspaper telling him what to do. Remember, again, this was the time when some people thought the ADA [Americans for Democratic Action] might be a Communist organization, however ludicrous it looks now. So, this was a very divided campus on that subject. You know, I did not tell you an enormous strength in my parents, which was in imparting a sense of fairness. So, I have always instinctively pushed civil rights, and lot of other rights, because this seems to me a fundamental matter of fairness.

M: Did you not feel odd coming from a fairly liberal family and going to a segregated institution?

L: Remember, everything was segregated. We would go into major grocery stores, and there would be "Colored" and "White" drinking-water fountains. My high school was clearly totally white. So, while the University of Florida was essentially an all-white institution, it was also an institution trying to, sort of, come to grips with itself. This is in the immediate wake, you recall, of the Johns Committee, the sickness of Charley [E.] Johns, senator [Florida state legislature, 1934-1966] and governor [of Florida, 1953-1955] for a while, trying to figure out who the homosexuals were at the University of Florida.

M: When you arrived in the fall of 1960, you saw yourself as a political science major who would work on the *Alligator*. Would that be your pathway to a career?

L: I did not actually even contemplate working on the *Alligator*. In the second semester, I sort of wandered over to the *Alligator* and wandered in. I was quite sure that something as important as the *Alligator* would not accept second-semester freshman. It turns out, of course, they were looking for anybody they could get

M: How long did it take for you to assert your authority and declare yourself editor?
[Laughter.]

L: Well, I sort of started in my freshman year, and the paper moved from twice a week to five times a week in my time. By the second semester of my junior year, I was editor of the paper.

M: Did you serve one or two terms as editor?

L: I served two terms, the second one cut short. I was editor the second half of my junior year and then all my senior year, except for the last month. I was frequently in trouble. Part of it had to do with civil rights, and the university administration seeing me as being intemperate and radical. Part of it was I had run a letter to the editor that really pissed off the university president. A student had written advocating free love. It all sounds relatively stupid now, or at least that part does. So the university was not particularly pleased with me. And the Board of Student Publications was controlled by the administration and faculty. Anyhow . . . I had written a front-page editorial that feels appallingly stupid now, an editorial that criticized the choice of my successor as "political." The person chosen is now the first-rate editor of a Knight-Ridder paper in St. Paul. The editorial appeared on the same day [President John F.] Kennedy is shot [November 22, 1963], so we put out an extra on the assassination. The Board of Student Publications calls a meeting for the following Monday, which would have been the 25th, to consider this action on my part. I almost certainly knew that my goose was cooked. I refused to come to the meeting on the basis that, I would not dignify their proceeding by being there on a day that the president of the United States was being buried. The assassination was the one extraordinary event in my lifetime that everybody remembers where he or she was. So they simply fired my ass. I sort of spent the next month getting married, going off on a honeymoon, and then December 30 that year, I went to work for *The St. Petersburg Times*....

M: So, that helped you put it in perspective. Did you leave the newsroom much that weekend? Did you have a television in the newsroom that you were watching?

L: Well, we did not have any more papers. Maybe we had a paper Monday. I cannot remember. I do remember being absolutely glued to the television, watching Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald. It was extraordinary. I remember Howard K. Smith [ABC newscaster] and all these folks with mournful intonations. I have a fairly good size less respect for many of the people on television now than I did then. These were very somber journalists who knew that something terribly tragic had happened to the whole country. I do not remember a more serious time.

M: Let us backtrack a little bit to what brought this all to a head--your relations with university administrators during your time as editor. You said that J. Wayne Reitz was not a big fan of yours. Do you want to talk a little bit about [that]?

L: There as a marvelous incident that happened almost twenty years later, when the journalism school dedicates a new building, and I am the speaker there. I do not know if I realized it, but J. Wayne Reitz was in the audience, when I spoke about my earlier travails. At the same time, I was being named as a Distinguished Alumnus of the journalism school. After the speech, J. Wayne Reitz stands up--now, remember, I say with affection, he is the guy who blew my ass off the face of the map at the time, which was very serious to me at the time--and said words to the effect of. I always knew you would amount to something; I believed in you then, and so forth. Part of me would be inclined to think, "well, you hypocrite" and so forth, and part of me said, "well, is that not kind of lovely?" It was just ironic that nineteen years later, he stands up among several hundred people and makes this little soliloquy about. I always thought David Lawrence would turn out to be something special, and I followed his career. But, it was about a man, me, who had, at the moment in 1963, felt like a pretty devastating thing had happened to him.

M: What had you done to piss him off so?

L: Well, remember that the University was sort of under siege then. Desegregation was coming about. And what is a university president's job? To some degree, keep a damper on it, better keep a lid on it. Then, you have the student newspaper which, remember, was a creature of the university so, at least in theory, Dr. Reitz is the publisher of the paper. In subsequent years, the university resolved this by saying, in effect, "let us get this paper off the campus, and they can have their own independent structure" and so forth. Anyhow, 1963 on campus was a contentious time and a tough time for him and the university. I say with sweetness in my voice now that Dr. Reitz was not looking for help from me, and he certainly did not want the kind of help I was giving him in what the university ought to do. A big word used then in Florida was "agitator." What many even good-hearted people wanted was that people not talk about this. Maybe then the problem will just go away. There is probably a lesson for us in all of this, because if we did not have people speaking up, society simply would not make the kind of progress it should. It was just a very tough time and Dr. Reitz was not looking for troublemakers, and I was perceived as a troublemaker, an agitator.

M: Did he give you any warnings? Did he let you know when he was upset with something?

L: Oh sure.

M: How?

L: Directly on a couple of occasions. I was called into his office. Settle down; I do not want this kind of stuff. I was standing there before the mighty lion, and that is a pretty intimidating sort of thing.

M: Where were your offices then?

L: In the basement of the old Florida Union.

M: You said you met your wife there and that she worked for the *Alligator*. Where is she from?

L: Originally from New York. Her father died when she was six, so by the time she was nine, she and her mother and sister had to pull up roots.

M: What brought her to UF to study journalism, or did she study journalism? Just because she worked on the *Alligator*, I should not assume...

L: No, she did not study journalism. I do not even know if she ever had a journalism course. She did not graduate from Florida. She graduated from Temple University in Philadelphia when we were there.

M: You had some journalism courses which, when you talked about them earlier, sounded like a necessary evil to get out of college?

L: Oh no, and I do not want to give you that impression. I came to have, incidentally, an enormous affection for Rae [O.] Weimer [dean emeritus and professor of journalism and communications, UF, 1949-1973]. I never had him as a teacher, but I came to believe that he was one of God's decent people. He fought cancer with such fierceness that I just admire him as somebody who was able to live with so much agony for so long and smile. But, I did not know him as a teacher. I had two exceptional teachers. By legend, they disliked each intensely and competed with each other--Hugh [W.] Cunningham [professor of journalism and communications and director of university information, UF, 1955-1990] and Buddy Davis [Horance Gibbs Davis, Jr., distinguished service professor of journalism and communications, 1954-1986]. They were both extraordinary teachers in my opinion. The one course I failed was Buddy Davis' in photography. I felt very comfortable writing, but the camera scared me to pieces, and he failed me in the course, and told me he was doing me a favor. Now, this is something my mother would tell me--she was doing me a favor. I ended up taking art photography from Jerry Uelsmann [Jerry N. Uelsmann, Professor of Art and Art History], who was then a very young professor there. He is still there, and quite legendary now. I got over the fear of the camera, and I

have always subsequently felt comfortable with people technically a lot smarter than I am. But, I know that I can frame a picture in my eye in the camera and know what a good picture is, and I like taking pictures.

M: Buddy Davis was legendarily punitive. Did you ever suffer any of his wrath in class?

L: If I did, I do not remember it. He was in charge, so he was not going to take any smart lip from anybody. Also, in my view, he was somewhat of an actor playing a game. Part of it was exerting control. Part of it was to teach. If he thought you gave a damn and worked hard, you were just fine. He could spot a shirker, though. He could spot who did not care that much about journalism, and you were in deep doo-doo then.

M: We were talking earlier about how, certainly at the time, you did not seem to really need a journalism degree, said it was not required. Were you happy only in retrospect to have earned a degree in journalism? At the time, did you recognize the value?

L: If my father had not insisted upon it, I might have left college early to go work for the newspapers. I was hot to go out and work on newspapers. That is what I really wanted to do. My appreciation, really, is for the whole university. It is a privilege to go to a place like the University of Florida. Remember, I was going to a high school that was totally white. Only one Jewish family. No black people in the whole school. Hispanic--well, we did not even know the term existed. Certainly no Asian Americans, and so forth. So mine was a very sheltered world. The University of Florida was a beginning of getting to know a lot of different people from a lot of different places. The whole Gator mentality little interests me. People and professors do interest me. I saw Sam Proctor the other day. I never had him for class. I have read at least two of his books. What a wonderful thing for the University of Florida to have people like that, over a span of fifty years of their lives.

M: So, you met your wife. You were obviously serious enough to want to get married the day you were going to graduate.

L: We, in fact, tried to get married before. My wife is Jewish, and I am Catholic. We were to be married in a Catholic church, and tried to get married the previous September, but the Catholic church moves in its own very special way. That is why we got married in December.

M: She did finish her degree elsewhere? She had to leave school beforehand because of your career?

- L: No. I think it is fair to say she was not an immensely successful buckle-down student in those days, and so ended up going to work for the campus bookstore. She went back to school after we were married. And graduated.
- M: December 30, 1963, that is when you began with the...
- L: *St. Petersburg Times*, \$95 a week.
- M: Were you downtown? Were you at a bureau?
- L: Downtown.
- M: And you had already interned there?
- L: For all of my summers, from high school on.
- M: So, can you talk a little bit about that newsroom. What was that like when you entered it as a full-time employee?
- L: *The St. Petersburg Times* was a fabulous place for a young person to work as a reporter. Making \$95 a week, I was taking home something considerably less than that. Let us say it is \$79. We had a child nine and a half months later, in October of 1964. On the other hand, rent was \$60 a month, and the landlady felt sorry for us and moved it to \$55. Our dream was, if we make \$10,000 a year by the time we are thirty, we are going to be just fine. The *Times* was a place where you could have all kinds of responsibility at a very young age, and it was a place that, while it had a pretty sizable newsroom staff, you certainly knew everybody there. The executive editor was Don Baldwin. The managing editor was a man named Courtland Anderson, who died young but had been managing editor of the paper when he was twenty-seven years old. A very sharp fellow.
- M: How did he die?
- L: Cancer at age fifty. He was dean of journalism at Ohio University, had left *The St. Petersburg Times* in his early thirties.
- M: We were talking about the newsroom at *The St. Petersburg Times* that you joined at the end of 1963. Nelson Poynter [president, Times Publishing Co., 1953-1969, and chairman of the board, 1969-1978] had a desk right in the middle of the newsroom. Correct?
- L: No, not correct at all. I do remember Nelson Poynter vividly, and his then wife, Henrietta, as well. At one point, I succeeded Bob Haiman as telegraph editor. Telegraph editor now sounds beyond antiquated. Ultimately, they changed the

title to news editor. But the A section of *The St. Petersburg Times* was not for local news. It was for national and international news, which deeply reflected Nelson Poynter's feelings about what was news and what was not, and what was most important and what was not. The telegraph editor was responsible for the A section, minus the editorial pages. I remember Henrietta Poynter who was an interesting, intimidating, and somewhat fabulous figure in her very own right. Boy, I can remember her going down the bank of wire machines; the *New York Herald Tribune* wire, the *New York Times* wire, the AP wire, the UPI wire, the state wire, the such-and-such wire. She would look at each of them, rolling up the wire stories in her hands. It was pretty intimidating, because here is one of the owners, making up her own mind about what is news and so forth. Meanwhile, Nelson Poynter used to call every night, about 8:30 or so, to ask, "what is going on?" And you better know what was going on. If you said, "not much, Mr. Poynter," it would not have been smart. He would start a conversation, "do you know about such and such; have you heard about such and such;" have you thought about such and such? This was a man who breathed for his company, a visionary man. He was a man of total integrity, a man who had the newspaper foremost at heart, a man who had taken a lot of crap himself. People referred to him, which he was not, as a communist in conservative St. Petersburg. He was a man who I thought had all the right values and cared deeply about the newspaper. He was a man, in a sense, of the world, not just St. Petersburg, not just Pinellas County, not just the State of Florida, not just the United States of America but of the world. A great man of business, too. He was the man who set up the process that keeps the paper in its rare and independent status. He is the man who had profit sharing before people were talking about profit sharing.

M: You talk about him as a visionary, and you gave a couple of good examples of Poynter as a business type visionary. Do you see him as an editorial visionary also?

L: He was a man who was not provincial in any way. He understood the importance of local news but, he also understood the news in a global context, which is exceedingly rare. Look at how the paper did over the years which I think, in part, is because it had a larger view of its mission in the world. At the time I was there and, I think, always since, it was one of Florida's best newspapers. Florida has been particularly blessed because of the economic underpinnings to the particularly good newspapers. If you go around the state and you look at newspapers today, then I think we have some pretty darn good newspapers. I could easily name ten good newspapers in this state and others that would not fall that far behind. What other state could do that? I am not sure there are any other states that could do that. Part of it was fueled by Florida [being] such a boom place, a relatively easy place to make money. So Jacksonville had a good economic base for a newspaper, and Tampa did, and St. Petersburg did, and

Miami did, and Fort Lauderdale did, and Orlando did, and other papers were not slouches, either.

M: We have not really talked about the role of women in journalism. You have mentioned Henrietta Poynter, who was a very strong-willed person. Would you say *The St. Petersburg Times* was ahead of its time in treatment of or regard for women?

L: Well, I would say yes but not so far ahead of the time that it was a world-beater. There were people there who were women who had substantive responsibilities but for many years their responsibilities were very much connected, most of them, to women's news, softer kinds of things and so forth. A very smart woman named Anne Rowe, later Anne Rowe Goldman, was in charge of the women's and feature sections. She clearly could have been the editor of the paper. So I would say the paper was some ahead in some of the places but not a long way ahead. Of course, *The St. Pete Times* got into relatively deep water a few years ago on exactly this question. So, no, I do not think it was a particular pioneer in this area. The whole business was sort of shabby on the subject. Women made distinctly less, had lesser jobs, and did not have much of a path to get more responsibility and more money.

M: Aside from the nightly phone calls, what were your dealings with Nelson Poynter?

L: That was it.

M: That was it? He did not adopt you or see you as a . . . ?

L: No. I always felt enormous warmth about him, particularly because when I left for Washington—which is where I went to from St. Petersburg—I was a member of the Newspaper Guild, and Washington was frightfully expensive. Though I made more money, it was frightfully more expensive. We then had two children. There was a strike. Benefits were then something like \$30 a week. This was a big deal in our house. How long would the strike last and so forth? I went over to see Nelson Poynter at CQ [*Congressional Quarterly*, a periodical owned by Poynter's Times Publishing Company] and he said, essentially, whatever you are making at the *Washington Post*, I will match that for the duration of the strike. Now, I actually never exercised this because the strike was over quickly, but that was a remarkably decent gesture. Later, I became active in ASNE [American Society of Newspaper Editors], so I was seeing him at conventions and so forth for several years before he died. Now I could have a little bit different conversation than I before. But he always was of a different generation and of different stature.

M: We were talking earlier about the problem of journalists becoming more distant from the world they are supposed to cover, and the fact that they could be elitist.

Do you see the *St. Pete Times*, either under him or since, as being an elitist newspaper?

L: Well, the only time I really know the *St. Petersburg Times* is when I was there. Now, realize, that now goes back thirty-plus years, and I do think, in many ways, it was an elitist newspaper. An elitist newspaper with a soul. It was relatively easy at that place to be pretty insulated and isolated from much of the real world. You know, It is only in the last fifteen years that I have really, myself, come to grips with how much more I needed to know about my own world. I wish I did not have to say this but I do. The majority of the people in the newspaper business know relatively little about their own communities. Certainly that is true of metropolitan newspapers.

M: What was your epiphany? We are getting ahead of ourselves, but...

L: I am not sure it was an epiphany. I would say that one of the interesting experiences that I had in my working life was being managing editor of the *Philadelphia Daily News*, the No. 3 newspaper facing the *Bulletin* and the *Inquirer*. Each of them had hundreds of newsroom people. At the *Daily News* we had fewer than 100 people. It tests every competitive part of you as to how use your resources wisely when somebody has three, four, five times more people. And who are your readers, really your readers, and how do you genuinely reach them? That period from 1971-1975 was important for me. Another important moment for me was going to the advanced management program of the Harvard Business School, not because I learned a lot about finance, but because I was in a class with people from thirty-three countries, not counting the United States of America. That was in 1983. Ever since I have made it a practice every year to go somewhere else in the world to learn. Ours is a frequently isolated country because it is so big, so powerful, so self-sufficient in many ways, though much less than it used to be, of course. It is very easy to have your whole life in this old American prison. This year I will be in France, Sweden, Italy, and Greece. Just discovering the world has been exciting for me. Another very important moment came in Detroit, where we had two newspapers, both of them losing money. It was easy enough that one or the other could be dead. At the *Free Press* as publisher (during the four years of application for a Joint Separating Agreement), I found myself responsible for 2,000 families' lives up in the air. You learn what is really important. This is really old-fashioned, but the joy in my life is learning things. I am now terribly enmeshed in early childhood education. I knew nothing about this three years ago. I have met a vast array of people I would have never known before.

M: Long after Poynter's death, the *St. Petersburg Times* did a twelve- or sixteen-page pamphlet on itself called "Tower of Power," and the subhead was something about, "a newspaper that may be too good for its community." I

wonder what you thought Poynter's reaction might have been to something like that.

L: I will tell you what my reaction was: it made my skin crawl. What arrogance, "too good for the community." Well, that is just bullshit of the highest order. It is disrespectful to the people. The fact that people have not been educated in France or have not been around the world or whatever does not mean they are dumb. Readers are pretty damn smart people. No, I rejected it totally and I would be stunned if Nelson Poynter, who I do not think was an arrogant man at all, would feel any different.

M: How long were you at St. Pete overall? You joined in the beginning of 1964?

L: Well, the end of 1963. Three and a half years.

M: Okay. And then to the *Washington Post*?

L: Yes.

M: Were you wire editor, news editor, the whole time?

L: At *The St. Pete Times*?

M: Yes.

L: Oh no. I held a whole bunch of different jobs, partly as a reporter and partly as editor.

M: Reporter there? Did you cover the Capitol?

L: No. Well, the only thing I ever covered was [when] I helped cover one legislative session in Tallahassee with Martin Waldron, who was a legendary figure in the newspaper business. But the coverage I did was mostly general assignment, some county commission, some school board, some zoning commission, etcetera, from the time I was an intern until subsequently.

M: What did you want to be? Did you want to be the grand fromage somewhere?

L: Well, I never said to myself, I want to be publisher. I was twenty-seven years old when I was a managing editor of a newspaper. So, I sort of woke up when I was thirty and said, well, I have done this; what do I do now? So, I had a good deal of responsibility at a very young age. I left St. Petersburg when I was twenty-five, worked two years in Washington, first on the news desk and then, when Style was formed, I became the news editor of Style. Dave Laventhol was

in charge of the section. Then, I became managing editor of the *Palm Beach Post*, because I really wanted to run something. Cox [Enterprises, Inc.] had just bought it from Perry Publications and Gregory Favre, who was the editor, asked me to be the managing editor. I only worked there for a couple of years, from 1969-1971, and went to the *Philadelphia Daily News* for a couple of months as assistant to the editor and then became managing editor. I worked there until 1975. Then I went to Charlotte to succeed Jim Batten as executive editor [at the *Charlotte Observer*], and I was there for three and a half years. Then, to *The Detroit Free Press* as executive editor in 1979, succeeding Kurt Luedtke. I then become publisher of the *Free Press* in 1985, leaving there in 1989 to come to Miami.

M: So, you were there for the creation of *Style* at the *Post*. What do you want to say about that? That is considered such a defining moment.

L: Well, I had been asked in 1968 by Ben Bradlee (Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of *The Washington Post*) to go back and work as the night women's editor, because he had a lousy leadership struggle there, and give him a sense of what was going on and what he needed to do. So, I went back there and worked for six or so months. That was a time in this country when newspaper people were reconsidering women's pages. A lot of people were joking about the feminist movement, but there clearly was a serious feminist movement. Starting up *Style* was an extraordinarily intense time. I remember staying at the hotel next door overnight, working hard, to do right by this thing. It had a collection of really bright people, people [like] Judith Martin ["Miss Manners," syndicated columnist] a writer for that section. I remember editing Sally Quinn, who was a brand new reporter there covering the embassy beat. Dorothy McCardle was a legendary old hand who covered the embassy scene, too. Paul Richard was the art critic of the paper, and still is. Paul Hume, the classical music critic, was the guy that to whom Harry Truman [Harry S. Truman, President of the U.S., 1945-1953] wrote the famous letter defending his daughter Margaret's singing voice. Nicholas Von Hoffman, the columnist. Later in 1969, Nick Von Hoffman was sent to Haight-Ashbury [the then-hippie district of San Francisco, California] to do a series. Haight-Ashbury was a big deal then. He did not like my editing, and he quit. I do remember Bradlee saying, oh, do not worry about that; that is Nick, he will be back, no big deal, and that is exactly what happened. But, it was a very heavy time for me, as a young person working with a star columnist.

M: What did you do after that?

L: I left in the summer of 1969 to become managing editor in West Palm Beach.

M: What was that paper like when you joined it? That was before its Pulitzer for the migrant workers.

- L: It was a paper that would not have dreamed of winning a Pulitzer. It made a great deal of money, as a monopoly of sorts. Remember, Palm Beach County then was 300,000 to 350,000 people. It is now a county of about a million people. So, it has had enormous growth. Here, I was twenty-seven. The editor of the paper was, maybe, thirty-four, Gregory Favre. We practically hired the staff new, added an awful lot of people. We were so young that we did not know all the normal road-blocks to doing good things. We hired people like Dallas Kinney [Pulitzer Prize recipient, 1970, for "Migration to Misery"] and Kent Pollock that led to the Pulitzer with the migrants. But, there were lots of other awards and lots of other things done. It was a young staff and certainly not overpaid. But for an extraordinary number of people, it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Enormous energy, enormous enthusiasm, a sense you can do anything and, again, the economic underpinnings to do a bunch of things.
- M: Let us talk about your father's career now, to be parallel. Was he in the capital by this time?
- L: Oh, sure.
- M: You had associations with movers and shakers in Florida politics by then, either through him or in your own career?
- L: Though I started at *The St. Petersburg Times*, it was when I come back to Florida in 1969 as managing editor of the *Palm Beach Post* that I began to get more of a sense. I clearly had the opportunity to know the leading political figures. I was in West Palm Beach when I first met Lawton Chiles [Florida governor, 1991-1998]. He was walking around the state. That is where it sort of begins for me.
- M: And the governors in that era? Did you know Claude Kirk [Florida governor, 1967-1971]?
- L: I know him quite well. But he knew my father better than he knew me. I know Reubin Askew [Florida governor, 1971-1979] and he knew my father even better. Reubin Askew was the kind of person who, when my father was dying in the hospital, went to see him. When my father died, the state Cabinet, of which [Robert] "Bob" Graham [Florida governor, 1979-1987] was presiding, signed a special proclamation honoring my father. So one of the joys of coming back to Florida was seeing a considerable number of people whom my father wrote about and who remembered him so fondly and vividly. My father had a reputation for working hard, getting the facts right, and being fair. People from whatever part of the political spectrum would have said, that my father was fair.
- M: Did you ever feel that you were under more scrutiny because of your father than other journalists?

- L: No. First, my father spent the preponderance of his life not as an editor, and I have spent many years as editor or publisher so, in a sense, we did different things. There is an extra burden in being the offspring of successful people, but doing something enough different gave me some room. Plus, my father was always inordinately proud of his children. A picture of all his nine children was in front of him every day at work. We were my father's definition of success.
- M: In terms of his career, do you think he ever wanted to be an editor? Did he envy you that?
- L: If he did, it totally escaped me. He had a very good life doing what he did. I do not know an editor—certainly proof of my myself—who at times would **not** wish to be I. F. Stone [Isidor Feinstein Stone, unconventional American journalist, author of *I. F. Stone's Weekly*], doing your own thing without legions of editors around you. In many ways, the best job in a newspaper is as reporter, not editor.
- M: When you got to the *Palm Beach Post*, what did you do, now that you were the the managing editor? What policies did you institute that had not been in place before?
- L: Remember, this was a newspaper owned by a man named John [Holliday] Perry [Jr., owner of Perry Publications], a legendary figure who was deeper into miniature submarines than he was into newspapers. There was not a good paper in the lot, and Perry newspapers were money machines all over the state. I had never been an editor or a managing editor for a newspaper before so, what do these people do? I had to learn on the job. Anybody who gets one of these jobs has to learn on the job. Remember that this was not your normal situation. You have a lot more money to spend, maybe not enough but a lot more money to spend, and you have a good market to do it. It is a place with plenty of good stories, most of which have not been touched for years and years and years. The paper had not been aggressive about anything.
- M: For example?
- L: The migrant labor movement was in the paper's backyard.
- M: It is such an odd county. Such wealth. Such poverty.
- L: And migrant laborer conditions that were the modern equivalent of slavery. The paper's new aggressiveness made a lot of people nervous. Nor had the paper traveled anywhere to do stories. We did some extraordinary projects. I remember one on drugs, a very sophisticated, tough piece of reporting on a vital subject. We did not hesitate to do things like sending Kent Pollock to Vietnam. The *Palm*

Beach Post sending someone to Vietnam? And so forth, thinking then we could do a bunch of things as well or better than somebody else.

M: After a couple of years there, was there an irresistible offer from Philadelphia, or did you just want to get out?

L: I had gone to a APME convention in November of 1970 and sat on a picnic table in a park in Honolulu with Larry Jinks, of what was then Knight Newspapers. Larry essentially said, you really ought to come work for Knight Newspapers [Knight-Ridder, Inc.]. Soon after, I was invited to come see Byron Harless, who was a legendary figure of that time. He had been the first person to interview me when I was a senior in high school and wanted to be an intern for the *St. Petersburg Times*, and he later became a principal counselor to the leadership of Knight-Ridder. A quite special human being, in any event. I talked with him and ended up going to see a guy named Rolfe Neill, who was then the editor of the *Philadelphia Daily News*. The *Daily News* was just an awful paper at the time, a tabloid, principally street-sold. I ended up going there far more for reasons of the quality of Knight Newspapers than I did because of the *Philadelphia Daily News*. My predecessor as managing editor was a legendary figure who had a desk piled high with pieces of things, by legend could find anything, worked there eighteen hours a day, went home to “mom,” his wife, wrote the advice column to the *lovelorn*. When Malcolm X died, this is the guy who grabbed a recent *Saturday Evening Post*, rewrote an article, and made a five-part series on Malcolm X. The paper had a wonderful sports section, but nothing much else that was self-respecting. The paper improved dramatically over the next several years. Its crucible came at a time when Frank Rizzo was the mayor [of Philadelphia, 1971-1979], a legendary figure in American mayoral politics, larger than life, former police chief. Rizzo was in a terrible feud with a guy named Pete Camiel, who was head of the Democratic Party, about who was lying about something. I have forgotten the issue. Rizzo, who was very charismatic, was headed toward potentially being governor of Pennsylvania. People either hated him or loved him, but he had a big “love him” backing. We convinced Frank Rizzo to take a lie detector test with Pete Camiel. Rizzo, a long-time and tough cop, was pretty sure he could beat it, but he clearly ends up failing it. The headline was, “Rizzo Lied” with a picture of Rizzo strapped to the lie detector machine with a quote alongside that says, “‘If this machine says a man lied, he lied’--Frank Rizzo.” Of course, it blew him up. He never was a significant political figure subsequently. Over those few years, the paper became far more aggressive, far more into real coverage in the community, including people who frequently never got covered. It was a paper that stood up for people. It was known as the People Paper. It was a tabloid and willing to have outrageous headlines, but, it was a tough, aggressive, straightforward newspaper in everything it did.

M: Did you see that as a key moment in your career?

- L: It was significant in my beginning to understand what newspapers needed to do to get close to readers and keep your own soul.
- M: What drew you away to Charlotte?
- L: Jim Batten, the executive editor in Charlotte, was going to headquarters in Miami. He was one of the sainted people in my whole life. If I had to pick the single best person I have known in this business, it would be Jim Batten. He was a man of instant integrity and the fullest decency and the greatest possible human and journalistic values. Jim was leaving to go to Miami because Knight-Ridder wanted him to play a larger role in the company. He eventually became chairman and CEO. They needed his successor as executive editor.
- M: At this time, did you think of yourself as still an independent, or did you see yourself as more of a Knight-Ridder?
- L: I have never felt [like] a company man in the way that some people do. While the attraction to go there was, then, Knight-Ridder and its quality--I am now old enough to have known John S. Knight and Jim Knight, and Lee Hills, a great journalist and the top editor in Miami and Detroit--I never thought that I worked for Knight Newspapers or Knight-Ridder. I always thought I worked for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, *The Charlotte Observer*, *The Miami Herald*, the *Detroit Free Press*.
- M: You went to the *Palm Beach Post*, which was a newspaper that needed shaking up. You went to the *Daily News*, which needed that, too. But, Charlotte at that time had a pretty good reputation, did it not?
- L: It had a fading reputation when Jim Batten went there, but he worked hard and successfully to build back those standards.
- M: So, you went from managing editor to executive editor. What does an executive editor do?
- L: The definition changes from place to place. Generally, the managing editor is the day-to-day operational boss of the newsroom. The executive editor might be the person who is the managing editor's boss and the person who is ultimately in charge of the newsroom, or it could be the person who is in charge of the newsroom and the editorial page. In Charlotte, as executive editor, I was ultimately in charge of the newsroom. Later, as editor, I was in charge of the newsroom and the editorial page.
- M: So, what changes did you institute there? You were there for four years?

L: Three years, from 1975-1978. Some of this fades as time goes on. One of the things we did, in my estimation, was to try to get a far fuller picture of what existed in that part of the world. Most of the people who worked for the *Charlotte Observer* had never been in a textile mill, which was the principal industry in that part of the country. I dragged people all around the Piedmont of North and South Carolina, trying to understand the small towns surrounding Charlotte, from where an enormous number of readers had come. You have to get out of the office. You are not learning anything at the office. You better get out and see who is out there, who the readers are. You have to walk around a lot. You have to go see a bunch of different people in different settings. *The Observer* needed to be considerably more than simply a Charlotte newspaper, it needed to be a Piedmont, North Carolina newspaper as well.

M: Then from there, you went to Detroit?

L: And followed a guy name Kurt Luedtke who was a brilliant figure in this business. He could have been a brain surgeon if he had wanted to. He could have been anything he wanted. He wrote the screenplay for *Absence of Malice*, which was nominated for an Oscar. The second screenplay he wrote was *Out of Africa*, which won best picture. *The Free Press* was not a particularly happy place at that time. The competition had intensified. *The Detroit News*, an evening paper, was now into the morning field. Neither newspaper eventually made any money. The newspaper, when I came there, had a total of four minority professionals on the staff, one of whom insisted he was not a minority. I insisted that the paper move toward being representative of the community it served--not for a social engineering experiment but to be able to cover and reflect the community far better. The paper grew in a whole bunch of ways, including in resources, including in circulation, but it sure as heck was not making any money. And by this time, the *Detroit News* was not making any money at all. In the late 1980s, the *News* was being sold for fifteen cents, and the *Free Press* for twenty cents. It was an insane situation. And the best bargain anywhere, for a reader. So, the powers-that-be were both getting nightmares, and deciding they were going to move toward a joint operating agreement, which would combine the business operations, but leave the newsrooms separate and independent. It was not a fun place to be, I promise you. It took four years to get it, and it only came about on a four-to-four tie vote by the United States Supreme Court. For all that period of time, in the case of the *Free Press*, 2,000 families' lives were all up in the air. Lose, and there would not be a newspaper. So, just learning to live under those circumstances was crucial. How do you hold on to good people, for instance?

M: What did you come up with to hold onto?

L: Well, what you come up with is some monetary incentives but beyond that, people want to be where they trust you, where they think you care about them,

where they think you care about their careers, and so forth. But we did remarkably well in holding onto them. Just to hold onto people was a big job. The paper had remarkable loyalty. It was a long, tough siege for an enormous number of people, with some big ups and downs. At one point, August 8, 1988, the attorney general rules that it can go ahead. Days later, there is a stay, and then it is all back into the court system. It was a tortuous, awful thing.

M: What did this situation do for the quality of journalism in Detroit between the two papers? Because we do not see competition very often.

L: On the one hand, wonderful things; on the other hand, not so good things. Certainly, excellent journalism came out of the competition. The minus: Each paper was forever tempted to copy every thing of the other. You start a new section; I will have a section on the same thing, only I will do it better. You frequently end up working not off of your own ideas and game plans.

M: What was the attraction to Miami that would get you out of this situation?

L: Going to a JOA [Joint Operating agreement] was like playing for a tie. I am too competitive for ties! A JOA meant separate newsrooms but combined business operations. Now, remember, I was responsible for business operations and also the news and editorial operations, so a JOA would mean lesser responsibility, for one. Then on Saturday and Sunday, we would have these bastardized combined papers. Well, I am a very competitive person, and I am not necessarily interested in joining mastheads and that kind of stuff. Moreover, Knight-Ridder wanted me to do something else. They wanted me to run the *Miami Herald* and *El Nuevo Herald*. I was significantly skeptical about it, because why would I want to be in the headquarters city?

M: You felt they would be breathing down your neck?

L: Even good people would be breathing down your neck. Mine would be the paper they get at home, and so forth and so on. It is their community. They have their ideas. I would always rather be 1,500 miles away, even with good people. I emphasize that these are good people, and I was never asked to do anything immoral, and so forth.

M: The staff at the *Herald* when you joined it was a pretty amazing group of people. Do you want to talk a little bit about it? The newspaper had this reputation of an attitude, and also great writers.

L: The *Herald* had so many strengths. It was very aggressive in what it covered and did. It had wonderful writers. It had as good a set of columnists as exist in the country, and that only got stronger over the years. On the minus [side], it also

had a reputation for being unfriendly to minorities and as a newspaper pretty significantly out of touch with a changing community. During the 1990s, the *Herald* won five Pulitzers, in as changing a community as there exists in the United States of America. This is a community here that is 55 percent Hispanic, 22 percent or so African-American and/or black, and the rest non-Hispanic-white. So folks like you and me are a pretty distinct minority. It is also a community with enormous promise to people in the Americas. It is also significantly undereducated and underskilled and, in many ways, growing poorer. It has had a significant problem of corruption, some of it petty and some of it big. The *Herald* won a Pulitzer in the past year for coverage of exactly that. Change is very threatening to people, so change over the years has been very threatening to people at the *Herald*. For years the *Herald* was, to some degree, inattentive to its own community and quite attentive to, oh, people like us, who are up in the Treasure Coast, who are in Palm Beach County and Broward and wherever else. Meanwhile, the community continued to change, and the *Herald* was relatively ill-positioned for this. Today, for instance, there are a half-million people in Miami-Dade County who either can only deal in Spanish or much prefer to deal only in Spanish. The *Herald* comes in the English language, the last I looked, and that is a significant problem. Maybe, evolution in time will take care of a good deal of this language challenge. But more and more people are coming here, many with the same kind of challenges. Remember, as well, that the exile population that came here from Cuba in the early 1960s is significantly different from the refugee immigrant community coming here now. The people who came here in the 1960s from Cuba were generally educated people who once had money even if they did not have it now. They were often educated people, prepared for success. And, they had a newspaper reading habit. Havana had a half-dozen daily newspapers, in the 1950s. Today there are no real daily newspapers in Cuba, now. The *Herald* made its, sort of, first foray into Spanish language journalism in the early 1960s in translating a couple of columns one day a week. Not until 1976 did *El Miami Herald* come about, and that was, more or less, the translated version of *The Miami Herald*. To use the vernacular, we just did not get it. These people wanted "my own newspaper." Anyhow, it was not until 1987 that *El Nuevo Herald* came to be. My point is that it was not until 1987, when we began to say, these folks need their own newspaper with their own set of editors and reporters, thinking their own way, and so forth. To this day, people are struggling with, what is the smart way to do this and what are we willing to do? Only a year and a half ago I agreed that we would sell *El Nuevo Herald* separately. Before, you had to get it with *The Miami Herald*. Many people just wanted the Spanish-language paper. So, ultimately, we decided that they needed to be able to get just the Spanish-language paper.

M: Throughout your career, probably because of growing up with the influence of your parents, you always had a sensitivity to minority issues and minority concerns, and I guess it was heightened in Philadelphia, Detroit, and then here.

Do you feel now, having left *The Herald*, that *The Herald* was beginning to do things right?

L: I think the newspaper business needs to be in constant evolution. The question is, can you keep it in constant evolution and hold on to all the values. That is the trick. I do not think *The Herald* or anybody else reaches the Promised Land at any one point. I do not think you are ever going to reach it. The community is going to change, and the newspapers should change.

M: After, I guess, nearly ten years at *The Herald*, you chose to leave [but] you stayed here. Is there something about Miami?

L: It is interesting. Increasingly, after more than three decades in newspapering, I came to want to do something in public service. But, I never could figure out what to do. My wife Bobbie would say, well, whatever you want to do, I will support you in that. But I just could not figure it out for almost three years. It was not a question of money. I probably have--I do not know--forty dollars in my wallet, and I am happy with that . . . actually twenty-six dollars. I write, at the most, two checks a year. I handle no money. I could not tell you how much money we have. We have no highfalutin' taste. We do not belong to country clubs. I drive a Volkswagen bug, and I am totally happy with it.

M: My son would envy you.

L: Metallic blue.

M: What year?

L: New. I do not play golf; I do not play tennis. I do not belong to any social clubs. I love to travel. I love to read. I care a lot about art. And much of my life is centered around my five children and my wife. About three years ago, I got involved in early childhood education and development, and started to understand it. Governor [Lawton] Chiles asked me to be on the governor's Commission on Education, and then I was asked to chair its readiness committee. That is how I came to be involved in this issue. Anyhow, last summer, a year ago--this is semi-crazy--I said, the only way I can ever resolve my uncertainty about the future is to leave the newspaper. Let us say I did not want to go to another newspaper at this point, and let us say I wanted to be a homeless-center director. Now, I do not, so if you see a job, do not think of me.

M: Okay, I will not.

L: But, no one would say, oh, the publisher of *The Herald*, he might be a candidate for that. I would just be off the radar screen for all sorts of opportunities. And I

wondered whether I could psychologically survive not being a big shot and not making a whole bunch of money. And there are other things involved in this including that the [newspaper] business became far more of a business--inexorably over the years and, thus, a lot less fun to me. I never missed a day of work, so I would always be up for the next day. I just needed to do something else. So, I resolved, the only way to do it was to leave. Now, because I had no other "job," I simply announced on August 4 of 1998 that I would leave at the beginning of the following year, which I did, and that gave me some time to look. The announcement, if you go back and look at the paper, only says something about my interests in doing something with both public service and with children. It was not thought out better than that. The following Saturday, a man named Jerry Katcher calls. Jerry Katcher is a man in his seventies. He owned a bank in town with a number of branches, which he sold to Mellon [Bank] in Pittsburgh and therefore had a lot of money. I have known Jerry over the years, been involved with him in things in the community, and he called up from Aspen, Colorado, and said, some of us have been talking, and we do not want you to leave town; if you want to work full-time on children and readiness, in which I know you are interested, we are willing to set up a foundation [The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation] so you can do it. This was, and is, terribly humbling to me, so I have sort of committed myself that I will work hard on this for at least the next couple of years, and see what comes to pass and what difference we can make.

M: Do you miss the newspaper business?

L: I never look back. I love newspapers, always will, and think they are important, but it was time for me to do something else. How many years do we have in this world? My father was sixty-four, and he gets cancer. He ends up retiring early and dies at sixty-six. He had all sorts of plans, and he got to do none of those. The easiest financial decision at age fifty-six was to wait until I was sixty, when our youngest, Dana, graduates from high school. But, I do not know how much time I have, or how many years, and I do not know what I will end up doing. Maybe I will do this for years. Maybe I will do this for a while. Maybe I will do something else. I do not know. But I will tell you how different I am. Or maybe I am not that different. But, we had somebody from the benefits office come over to our house the following Saturday, after the Tuesday announcement. She came over and explained what we were entitled to. We had stock options and other things, and we needed to understand it. I did not realize until that Saturday that I was technically able to retire. I had been with the company twenty-five plus years, and I am at least fifty-five. So, I do not draw any of my retirement now because it is advantageous for me to wait a while. But, retirement was not even a consideration. That show how, in many ways, money is unimportant to me. We have five children, and I am not trying to figure out how much money we can leave them. We are there to help them. My folks did not leave me any money,

nor did I expect them to. Other people can use it more than I can, including some of my siblings.

M: Do you think that your work in this area is going to send you into politics, as a lot of people thought you might?

L: There was a moment there where it was sort of heady to be asked by a bunch of people, including the attorney general of the state of Florida and other people, to please consider this and so forth.

M: You are speaking of running for governor?

L: Right. But, it never really seemed real to me. I raised a lot of money for other causes, but I do not really want to raise money for myself if I can avoid it. Part of me says, this is a job you could do; you care a lot about the issues; you know how to get people together; you are an inclusive person; you would be fair. But, the timing made no sense. I do not say never to anything, but I do not focus an ounce of my energy on that subject. What I do know is, that if we could ever get children started off better in this world, we would have a profound impact on society. I am excited about all of this. I love my new life. Look around this office. You did not see many journalism things in here, did you?

M: No.

L: You did not see any.

M: No. The awards are for humanitarian . . .

L: Children and stuff like that. I took the state certification course here to be able to work with children.

M: I see by this artwork that you are a fantastic painter, too.

L: Oh, yes, it is quite extraordinary. I did that, too.

M: Did you really?

L: Absolutely.

M: It is good work.

L: Well, you would be stunned at how it was done.

M: Drip-paint.

L: Yes, with marbles.

M: I have saved my son's. Looks just like that.

L: This was actually rolling in marbles around in a shoe box. I am just excited about having something new to do in my life. I only have one life. I have clearly lived way more than half of it, right? I am fifty-seven.

[End of the interview.]

Samuel Proctor Oral History Program
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Florida Newspaper Project

Interviewee: David Lawrence
Interviewer: William McKeen