A: [This is Lillian Adderley doing an oral history interview with Dr. Donald Softley. Today is December 10, 1979.] Dr. Softley, my first question to you is, what made you decide that education was to be your life's work?

S: There was never really an actual decision. I kind of fell into it. When I graduated from undergraduate school I could not decide exactly what I wanted to do. There were a couple of options open to me, one of which was to become a law student at the University of Michigan. [The other was going to graduate school, as] I had been admitted to the graduate program at the University of Michigan. I was in somewhat of a dilemma as to which of the two I should take. I ultimately decided, based on this little system that I made up then, to go to graduate school. After graduate school I decided to become a teacher. I had no lifelong ambition to become a teacher, nor did I have a lifelong ambition to become a lawyer. It was a decision based upon which of these schools, that is, the graduate school or the law school, offered, in fact, the more money. I realized that over the long run lawyers tended to make more money than college professors, but being a lawyer just did not seem to me to be all that interesting. So I decided, based on those things, to become a teacher and, in that sense, to make education my life's work.

A: Okay. What person had the most influence on you, outside of your family?

S: In terms of making a decision to be a college teacher?

A: Yes, to go to college.

S: Outside of my family there was no particular person who had the most influence on me to go to college. It was more of a social kind of condition. I did not think I would work well in a lot of jobs that had been offered to me, so based upon that I decided it would be much better for me to go to college than to work in most of the jobs that seemed to me to be unpleasant.

A: What made you decide to work on your Ph.D., and where did you work on it?

S: I worked on my Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. The determining factor in that decision was that I did reasonably well in the graduate program, and I saw no reason for me not to continue it to a terminal degree.

A: Why did you come to the University of Florida?
S: For a number of reasons. In the first place, I really like the weather in Florida, and I did not like the weather in Michigan. The University of Florida offered me a job at the same time that I needed a job, [and it was] in a climate that I liked, so I came to the University of Florida.

A: Okay. What was the approximate student enrollment when you came?

S: About 28,000.

A: What did you teach when you first came, and where?

S: I taught American history, what is now called American History 2020, and I taught it in Anderson Hall.

A: What did you know of the University before coming?

S: I knew very little about the University of Florida. I only knew that there was such a thing and that it was located in a town called Gainesville. But beyond that I did not know anything about the University of Florida.

A: Okay. Can you tell me what the major goals were of the College of Education when you came? Did you know anything about that?

S: No, I did not.

A: In what areas did you work?

S: I have worked in Afro-American history, American history, American labor history, American social history, some in American political history, a little in political science, and some English.

A: Can you tell me about a few changes that have occurred in these areas that you just named?

S: Most of the changes that occurred inside of American history have been somewhat of an expansionistic kind of motion. That is to say that American history is currently undergoing a revision, and included in that revision are groups that heretofore have not been included, like women and blacks. They are trying, at the same time, to look at the importance of the social life of the American people, which is not exactly a new development, but it is receiving much more emphasis than it has in the past. That is to say that people are beginning to understand that societies are not made up only of elite groups. For example, American history is not only confined to, say, personalities like George Washington or Henry Ford or some of the other great names in history. The large numbers of people who support these figures have as much importance as someone like George Washington or Henry Ford.
A: Okay. Can you tell me where you are from and when you were born?

S: I was born in Detroit, Michigan, October 15, 1949.

A: Where did your ancestors come from, and what did they do?

S: My ancestors ultimately came from, let us say, within the continental United States, specifically, Alabama. My father in his youth was a sharecropper, and my mother in her youth was a domestic worker.

A: Do you have any sisters and brothers, and if so, how many?

S: I have six brothers and six sisters.

A: Oh, that is a large family. How would you characterize the home situation when you were a young child? Did your parents have a notion that they wanted their children to get a lot of education?

S: Education in my family was under constant emphasis. My parents always made sure that the kids did well in school, and they were of a great deal of assistance in that regard. So I would say, based on that, that education was emphasized a great deal in my family.

A: Okay. Where did you go to elementary school?

S: I went to elementary school in Detroit, Michigan, at a place called Duff Hill.

A: Can you tell me how many children there were in your classes, approximately?

S: Oh, about thirty.

A: How many hours were you in school?

S: From 9:00 to 3:00, six hours.

A: What was the school curriculum?

S: Just general education.

A: In what year did you graduate from high school, and what high school did you graduate from?

S: I graduated from high school in 1967 from Eastern High School in Detroit.
A: Okay. What did you do after you graduated?

S: I worked for a year, and then I got drafted.

A: Where did you get the idea about going to college?

S: When I came home from the service, Uncle Sam had the GI Bill.

A: [laughter] Okay. How did you pick the college that you attended?

S: Oh, they offered me a scholarship. I went to a private school.

A: Who supported you while you were in college, and how much did it cost, approximately?

S: The GI Bill supported me, and I had various odd jobs, so in that sense I supported myself. It was a very expensive school--it cost $1,000 a semester, and I went about eight semesters.

A: Where did you live while you were in college?

S: I had a very small, very tiny apartment in Detroit.

A: What was your major, and why did you choose it?

S: My major was in social science, which at that particular time was a combination of political science, history, and English. I picked that particular major because I could not exactly make up my mind as to specifically what I wanted to do, and that kind of program was then all-encompassing.

A: Okay. After graduation what did you do? What was your first job and your first salary?

S: After graduation I went directly into graduate school.

A: What did you do after grad school?

S: I went to work in Detroit. I worked as an administrative assistant for a secondary education program, and my salary was $14,500 a year.

A: All right. What were your certification requirements, or did you need any?

S: I really did not need any.
A: Okay. What influence do you think the College of Education has had on the University, this one or any other?

S: I am really not in a position to answer that.

A: Okay. While you have been here has there been an issue about admitting blacks to the University? Do you think that there was an issue about that since you have been here?

S: It seems to me that the only issue involving the admittance of blacks was in total numbers. I think that the population of a college, a state-supported college, ought to reflect the population of the state. That is to say, if 10 percent of the population of the state is black, then 10 percent of the student enrollment at the college ought to be black. I realize that that ultimately places a quota on the number of blacks who can be admitted, and quotas can work either to good or ill, depending upon from which perspective one views them. For example, if there appears to be a greater number of students than is reflected in the general population, then I think that that number ought to be used rather than any other percentage based upon the population.

A: Okay. Have today's student changed much from years ago?

S: It seems to me that today's students are not as studious, on the one hand, than students in the past. On the other hand, today's students are much more concerned with grades as a demonstration of intelligence than knowledge, which in my opinion demonstrates intelligence. I think, too, that today's students are much more interested in getting through programs and getting out and getting a job than they are in learning something of value while they are in college.

A: Okay. My last question is, what impression do you want to leave here at the University of Florida? If you have to leave.

S: That I tried to make the University of Florida a better place.

A: Thank you very much.

S: You are welcome.