

W: O.k., this is April 4, 1996. My name is Sherilynn Wood and I am sitting out here on the Plaza underneath the shade of the trees and talking to, can you tell me your full name and spell your name so as to make sure there is no problems with that.

A: O.k., my name is Christian Askeland and I am a first-year classics student here at the University of Florida.

W: How old are you?

A: I am nineteen.

W: Where are you from?

A: I am from **Martin County, Stuart, Florida.**

W: Is that where you were born?

A: Yes, it is.

W: So did you just come to Gainesville just to go to school?

A: Yes, this is my first semester--my second semester, actually. Pardon me?

S: How do you like it so far?

A: I like it a lot. It is a very diverse campus.

W: O.k., so you grew up down in the Stewart area and your parents are still there?

A: Yep.

W: Can you tell me what your parents' names are?

A: **Chris and Satyra Askeland.**

W: O.k., just to get a kind of idea of who you are, if you could just give me a little of your family background.

A: O.k., my father is from a Norwegian side of the family. He works as a professional fisherman and as a carpet cleaner. My mother is a public school teacher, she has worked in the public school system for twenty-six years now. I guess she is the wealth-bringer.

W: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

A: I have two half-brothers from a previous marriage named **Daryl and Tony**. I am pretty close to them.

W: Are they older than you?

A: Yes, they are twelve and fourteen years older than myself.

W: O.k., so I met you over here at the Christian table and you were handing out leaflets and talking to people about Easter. It is coming up this Sunday. Can you tell me why you come here?

A: I think that the Plaza is a really diverse place, so it is a good way to meet other people who are different than yourself, which is not always true in the classes. As a classics major, I meet other classics majors and otherwise I really do not meet too many people in my classes. So it is a good way to meet people there. Also, it is a very spiritual place. When people come here, they know they are going to see Christians and **Kirshnas** and **Mormons** and all kinds of people hanging out in the Plaza, so they are open to talking and stuff like that. Sometimes I will just sit down and hang around and maybe come in on a conversation and say, hey, I heard you talking about such and such over there, what do you think about this guy screaming at you or whatever.

W: But you are particularly talk about your Christian life, your Christian beliefs?

A: Yes. That is definitely my purpose for being here.

W: So do you have a certain topic that you come with everyday to talk about or do you just kind of let it flow? How do you approach your visits to the Plaza?

A: Generally I just come and do homework. If I feel God's spirit really calling me to go to a person then I will just go over and sit down and usually there will be something there to pick in the conversation. Sometimes I will be approached myself, it happens that way.

W: So what kind of response do you get from other students?

A: Usually pretty good just because I have, you know in comparison to the other people who are usually pretty abrasive, they usually appreciate someone who is not abrasive and they are usually pretty interested in talking about spiritual stuff in the Plaza.

W: Today you have a table. Can you tell me about what you are actually handing out today?

A: The real purpose is the fact that we are doing a crucifixion tomorrow which is going to start in the Reitz Union and move over to the Plaza, so we sort of want to bring attention to that. Also, just generally for the Easter season. It is a real spiritual time of the year and people are interested. So we are doing that and trying to maybe close up the big evangelical side of the year which is before Easter and then everything slows down after that with a table in the Plaza.

W: Can you tell me a little bit more about the crucifixion that you are doing, what are you actually doing?

A: I am **Pontius Pilot** in the crucifixion. It is set up based on the different gospels with the idea of presenting what happened to Jesus and getting a lot of attention. We will have an evangelist at the end to share what God's plan is for mankind.

W: How do you feel about playing Pontius Pilot?

A: It is sort of hard. There is the most lines with Pontius Pilot. On the other hand it is also sort of hard just because it makes you really question what Pontius Pilot was going through as he saw a really innocent man killed for something he really did not deserve to be killed for.

W: How many people are involved in that?

A: There will be about six actors with lines and about sixty people following around just acting as a chorus, acting as a crowd.

W: Is that something that happens every year then?

A: Yes, it has been going for a few years now. It is supported by a lot of the campus groups.

W: What kind of response do you get from people when you are doing that, when you have sixty plus people walking across campus reenacting a crucifixion?

A: Since there are a lot of people, there is not really an opportunity for negative response, but people feel a little weird with that many people hanging around. I think they are really insulted. We are not really looking for them to respond to us, we are looking to respond to what God did 2000 years ago. Hopefully there is a response in their heart. But as far as a physical response, I do not really know.

W: Do you find that people really gather round when you get to the Plaza? Do people stop and listen to what you have to say, you said someone is going to be speaking afterwards?

A: From what I have heard, there is usually a tremendous crowd, the whole Plaza is pretty much filled up as far as you can see from the cross, but I have never actually been to it before.

W: Can you tell me a little bit about your own religion and why you feel the need to come out here to the Plaza and spread your beliefs?

A: Sure. I was raised as a **Presbyterian and a Lutheran** for most of my life in what I guess would be a Christian family by most of the societal norms and all that. At one point during high school I joined the track team to try to meet girls and be cool and stuff like that. I met a bunch of Christians on there who invited me on a religious retreat called **Christless**, which was really a changing point in my life. It was when I realized that Jesus died for me and it was not something that he just did, but it was something that he expected me to respond to in some way. It was at that point where I made a conscious decision to really live for Jesus and make him a part of my life. At the same means, it is something that Jesus calls us to be evangelists and share what he did with other people, so to fulfill that and it is also a way of loving God too, to do what he asks. So this is one way I can do it and it is sort of a low-pressure way, just come out and hang out and open myself up for opportunities.

W: So are you planning on continuing coming to the Plaza?

A: Yes, if not just to do homework.

W: Anything else you would like to tell me about yourself and about your visits to the Plaza? The kind of observations you have made about the Plaza or anything like that?

A: It is really just a good thing even if you are not interested in evangelizing. It is a really good way to meet poor people who are wandering vagabonds or people who just want to come out and sit in the sun. It is a really great way to meet people who are different than you are. We do not really do that anymore. We are in a society that is more and more creating social norms and sticking to them and not really becoming. We have cultural diversity week but we do not celebrate that they are all diverse, we celebrate that we are black or that we are hispanic or that we are male or female. It is a good chance to maybe break down some of those barriers.

W: So what kind of people come here to the Plaza?

A: A lot of homeless people, that is the big thing.

W: Why is that, you think?

A: Because there is free food, the **Kirshnas** give out free food. That is why just about anybody else comes too. At about four minutes to 12:00 p.m. the **Kirshnas** show up, almost on the dot every day. Then by about 12:00, 12:15 the place is pretty full and there is a big line.

W: Do you also take part in it?

A: No, I do not eat **Krishna** food myself. I think it is fattening. You would not think so but--you will not see many Indians eating it either because most Indians know

how they cook their vegetables and it is not the healthy way of cooking vegetables.

W: Everybody just terms them as preachers that come out to the Plaza, some of the people that really mean. I have heard them being very abrasive and very loud, you know, and gathering crowds and everything. What are your feelings about those particular people that come out to the Plaza?

A: I think there are some really good people that come out too, like **Cliff Kineckley** that the university brought out and some other guy named **Tom Schwartz** has come out twice this year. As long as you are preaching the gospel, if that is what God is calling them to do, then do it, although I would sort of disagree with some of the teachings they have about Christian perfection and stuff like that, but if they are going to sin, that is up to them. I am not here to judge them or condemn them, but whatever they are doing, I will work off of it and share what God has put in my heart, which is a message of love.

W: Well, anything else you would like to say?

A: Nope.

W: Well thank you very much for taking the time out to talk to me.

A: No problem, Sherry.

Interviewer: Sherilynn Woods

Interviewee: William DeConna

Date: April 5, 1996

UF 294A

W: O.k., let me just give a quick little introduction that I am Sherilynn Wood and this is April 5, 1996, and I am sitting at the Plaza of the Americas with Bill DeConna. Could you just spell your last name, well, give me your whole name and spell your name because I do not want any confusions in the transcription.

D: William DeConna.

W: No middle name?

D: Theodore.

W: Just to get a little bit of background about who you are, where you are from and things like that, I just wanted to find out where you were born, when you were born.

D: I was born in Miami, Florida, October 5, 1954. I moved to Gainesville in 1963, attended the University of Florida off and on from between 1972 to 1981. I have a degree from the University of Florida.

W: What is your degree in?

D: Actually, I got my associate here and finished up in California in business management.

W: So do you now work in business?

D: No, I am an associate pastor of a church here in Gainesville called Dove World Outreach Center.

W: I just met you here on the Plaza with your presentation. Could you tell me a little bit about why you come here to the Plaza and about what you were doing here today?

D: I was invited here as a guest speaker by **Intervarsity** who puts on this passion play, or reenactment of the crucifixion that starts at the Reitz Union and 12:30 with a mock trial of Jesus Christ and then he carries the cross across campus through Turlington over to the Plaza of the Americas where they put him up on the cross and reenact the crucifixion. I do not know how long they have been doing it. I guess I have seen them do it for the last four or five years and I usually come out and watch it. I enjoy it. It does me a lot of good just as a Christian to see and to feel some of the emotions. Every year I come out here it is just a great even for me. Like today, I think I experienced it in a way different than I ever have before. Just feeling a little more of what Jesus felt and what his followers felt as the people were yelling and hurting him, I guess I just kind of felt some of the pain that he felt knowing that he had the ability to stop all that and just doing it because of love. I guess I felt today more of the love of God for me, extended toward me as I watched it happen. I was just really privileged to be a part of it and they asked me to share so I shared a little bit of the gospel after the enactment is done. That is basically where they leave it and they ask somebody to come and kind of bring it to a close. So I just shared basically what happens after that, after he dies on the cross, and that is that he is put in the grave but they come looking for him in three days and he is gone because he is

raised from the dead. He is alive today. That is the good news, not that he died on the cross. If it ended there, it would be bad news. But the good news is that he is alive and that he is relevant today to our lives and I found that out I guess a little over twenty years ago in about 1975. I was raised in a church but I had never made Jesus my Lord. I knew that he was the Son of God, but he did not control my life, I controlled my life. Then about twenty years ago, I realized that he loved me and that broke my heart to realize the kind of life I was living and that he still loved me. I decided I was going to live for God from that time forth and I did and went into the ministry a few years ago and I just enjoy coming out here on the campus and trying to reach students. When I first started at the University of Florida I was not a Christian. At that time, 1972, Playboy magazine rated University of Florida the number one party school in the nation and I wanted to be at the number one party school in the nation and that was all I was interested in. I was not interested in Jesus Christ. I went to church on Sundays but I was not interested in him having a part in my life.

W: So you were taking part in the partying of UF?

D: Yes, yes. The typical student, I guess. The average student, you know, doing the drug scene, the drinking scene, doing the partying and running around. It seemed like it was a good time. When I realized that God loved me, I realized that those things were offending God. I knew that if I continued to do that, that I would not be able to have a relationship with God and I wanted to have a relationship with God. I realized that it was not that God wanted to spoil my fun, but God loved me and he wanted me to be happy. Those things were not

bringing me happiness because no matter how much all that party scene and drugs and alcohol that you got, it never was enough; it faded away the next day and you were back at it again. I never had peace inside of me, I was always looking for peace on the outside, trying to get it. But I found that when I invited Jesus into my heart and made him Lord that I did not have to run around looking for peace and joy and love, that I had it living inside of me. I actually had some to give to other people. That is why I am out here today, to share that with other people.

W: Did you come out onto the Plaza of the Americas during that time that you were a student participating in the activities? Have there always been preachers that have been out here?

D: Yes. I do not remember seeing a lot of preachers. I remember the **Gideons** were out one day passing out Bibles. They were kind of standing in the pathway and I remember them giving me one of those little green Bibles. I never read it, but I kind of carried it around like maybe it will keep me from having an accident or something like that. I am sure that was not why they were passing it out, as a good luck charm, they wanted me to read it. But after I did have that experience with God, I did begin to read it and I am glad that they did give it to me. I remember back in 1972 and 1973 and thereabouts, it seemed to me, I think it was around Halloween or maybe it was around Gator Growl, this place was just a wild place. They used to have this all-night orgy over here and I remember, what did they call it?

W: Halloween Ball.

D: Halloween Ball. I remember coming here and this whole Plaza was just shoulder to shoulder with people and every imaginable thing that could happen on the earth was happening on this Plaza at that time. I was a hearty participant of it. So, it is quite a change.

W: So you see a big change then, from then until today, and what kinds of activities occur out here?

D: Well, of course I do not come out to the Halloween Ball, I do not know if it still goes on, but there are obviously still a lot of wild and crazy stuff, and weird stuff that goes on at the Plaza, but I do see more of the Word of God being preached on campus than I did when I was here in the early 1970s. I do not remember seeing anybody preaching. I remember in the 1980s we started to see **Jed Smock** and guys like that come out, but I do not remember in the early 1970s people coming out. I try to come out every week, in fact, we have a campus group as part of our church that is out here at least every Friday if not more and they usually set up a table by Turlington and pass out tracks and share the gospel with people. I try to come out every Friday and preach the Gospel over at the rock, in front of the rock sculpture in front of Turlington and share the gospel with people.

W: What kind of response do you get from students when you come out here, either for this event, if you could tell me something about the response you see today with this particular reenactment and then the response that you get on the Fridays that you come out here to campus.

D: It is quite different between Friday and what happened today. Usually on Fridays, it is hard to tell. You get pretty much a mixed response. By and large just ambivalence, you know, people walking by. But some people yell at you, what are you doing, we do not like that or they might hear something you say and want to discuss that. I really enjoy discussing different points, you know. I do not really like to get into a shouting match or an argument with anybody. The gospel is true and how are most of these students ever going to hear it unless somebody presents it to them? I wish that somebody had clearly laid out the gospel to me when I was a student. I can say that at the time that I got saved at twenty years old, no one had ever clearly shared the gospel with me and I was raised in church. But to me, it was just go to church and you will be o.k., but no one ever laid it out to me. Look, the wages of sin is death and the gift of God is eternal life; receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior. No one ever laid that out to me and I wish that someone had when I first came to the University of Florida, it would have saved me a lot of grief and a lot of trouble. Here today when we have the mock-crucifixion, I think we had a great crowd. People were very attentive. They seemed to respect greatly what we were doing. As you saw, nobody was yelling, nobody was opposing, everybody was watching and listening. Then afterwards I shared the gospel for I do not know, maybe about five minutes, you probably know better, and nobody said anything negative, everybody listened, it was quiet and very attentive.

W: We do have in the background of our interview some controversy over there, it seems two different philosophies or more that are conflicting.

D: After I got done, this guy jumped up and he is standing up there now, you cannot see it but we will describe it for you, he is wearing a hat that says, "God". One guy asked him his name and he took off his hat to say that he is God and he is telling everybody why he does not believe that Christianity has any answers for today and there is a little dialogue going back in forth from opposing views. He shares for a while and then there is another man up there who I do not know but is sharing the Christian view and they are going back and forth and there is still quite a crowd. I fact, it looks like the same crowd that was there when we did the crucifixion. I do not know, is there 100 people there? Maybe more.

W: Yes, about 100 people. We also have the **Kirshnas** in the background, which when you first arrived, because I walked over from the Plaza and first arrived that the **Kirshnas** were performing their music and all and I thought that was an interesting dichotomy of the crucifixion going on and the **Kirshnas** in the background and that is still occurring now. Do you have any feeling about the **Kirshnas** being out here? The Plaza is such a gathering place, can I just kind of get your viewpoints on it?

D: That is the reason we are out here. Jesus said that there is a wide gate that leads to destruction and many there be that go in there at, and there is a straight path and a narrow gate that leads to eternal life and few there be that find it. The next verse he says, "Beware of the false prophets." There are a lot of people that are saying, oh, there are many ways to God, you are a Christian that is fine, just do not tell me I have to believe like you, there are many ways to God. I do not believe there are many ways to God. I believe the way is open to all men,

but it is God's way. It is not my way, it is God's way. God sent his son, Jesus, to the cross to die for our sins. No other man can die for our sins and all our good works or all our religious activities cannot undo any of our sins. For twenty years I did religious activities and they did not undo any of my sins. Until you receive God's sacrifice for your sins, and it is an act of humility. See to me it is just pride, I am going to start my own religion and you do this, that and that and the other and you will be okay and you will go to heaven. Well, there are millions of these all around the world and to me the **Hare Kirshnas** are just one of the many that are saying, well, there are other ways to God besides through His Son. So they need the gospel just like anybody else, I mean that is that gospel, the good news, that God has sent a way. There is one way. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no man comes to the Father but by me."

W: When you are out here, particularly on your Fridays that you come out, do you have people actually come and join your church after you speak with them?

D: Yes, we have had several people. In fact, there is a couple that is getting married. We have a girl that is like a full-time evangelist out here. One fellow, while we were preaching at the rock, one of the guys preaching came from our church and he said, is there anybody here that needs a touch from God? This guy was sitting behind me and he said, yes, I do. And we shared with him and he came to church and he made a decision that he wanted Jesus to be Lord of his life and he has been coming to church since then for the last two years. He and our campus director are getting married in about three weeks. We have had several people make those decisions, yes.

W: Do you find that those students come back to campus and in their classes or their gatherings at the rock or the Plaza, that they continue to spread the word as well?

D: Yes, in fact the man I just spoke about, he is the president of our student group and often on a Friday he will get up and share his testimony or share something about the gospel. On December 8, we had a young Jewish boy come to the table--we have a little table there that says, "Are you going to heaven? Two-question test reveals the answer." He took the test and we shared the gospel with him and let him know that the Jews were looking for a Messiah. All the Hebrew foretold that a Messiah would come. There are over 456 prophecies in the Hebrew Old Testament covering a span of over 4,000 years. Jesus fulfilled every one of those prophecies to the letter. No one else can fulfill those because some of them were time-specific and that time is past. It had to be before the destruction of the temple which happened in 70 A.D. So the Messiah had to have come before 70 A.D and it was Jesus. \_\_\_\_\_ as the Jews call him. This young man, Matthew, made Jesus the Lord of his life on December 8 and he is on fire. He is telling people, he his telling all of his Jewish friends and family. Last Friday he was up sharing the gospel at Turlington and he is a fireball. Yes, he is out on campus sharing the gospel.

W: How many students are involved in your student organization?

D: I would say there are about twenty. We are not a big church. We are probably a church of about 150 and we have about twenty college student.

W: If you had a couple of words to describe the University of Florida now, earlier you said that it was dubbed the party university, what would you call the University of Florida now?

D: Well, from my perspective, it is a harvest field. There are 40,000 souls, that is the way I see it--40,000 souls on this campus. A vast majority of them are crying out for a savior and we are trying to introduce them to that Savior. That is the way I see it.

W: Are the people that were involved in the reenactment, are they from your church or are they a gathering of different people?

D: Two or three of them. Various groups. I can name a few that I remember, I will probably miss a couple. I know Gator Christian Life is a campus group. There are some from that group. Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship, The Rock Church, there are some people from there and I am sure I left a few out but it is pretty much an assortment of different Christian groups. They represent different denominations, also.

W: But you come together for this?

D: Yes, yes, yes. It is definitely something that we agree on. There is no argument about what goes on here.

W: You may have said this before, but just how long have you been coming to the Plaza for preaching?

D: Myself? I guess the first time I actually preached out here was about 1980, but I have not been continually since 1980 because I did go help start a church at UCLA and I spent seven years out there so there was a break in between. But

since 1980 I have been off and on coming out. I would say for the last five years pretty regularly, almost every week. I enjoy it. It is a great atmosphere, it is great to talk to people. University campus', you know, people accept the fact that your ideas are challenged and there is an openness on campus and I just enjoy talking with people about the reality of the Gospel.

[end side A]

W: Just really as a last question, you just said that there is an openness attitude here so that you come to campus. Do you go to any other places around town, are there any other gathering places that you--

D: Yes. A lot of times we go downtown on like a Friday or Saturday night and hang around outside the bars where mainly the students gather. That is mainly my focus of ministry, I have always been interested in college students, you know, for a long time. There are other Outreaches within the church that some people go to prisons and some people go to skid row and you know, it depends on where your inclination is, the individual, but, myself, I usually try to reach college students.

W: What kind of future do see for yourself?

D: Myself? Just continue to preach the gospel. Like I said, I am an associate pastor of a church here in town and I hope to be preaching the gospel on the day Jesus returns or the day I die.

W: And you will continue to come out to the University of Florida?

D: Oh yes, I hope so.

W: Is there anything else that I have not asked you that you would like to share with me?

D: No, but I have enjoyed our little interview. It has been very pleasant.

W: Well thank you very much.

D: You are welcome, thank you.