

George Starke
UF-310

George Starke, the first black person to enroll at University of Florida in pp. 1-3 discusses his experience of sitting the LSAT examination in Columbia. His enrollment at UF, people he had direct contact with, where he stayed, security issues and unwelcome media attention are outlined in pp. 3-5. Immense pressure culminated in his leaving after three semesters and going to NYC to work for Oppenheimer and for Moody's Investment Service. Later he represented the Greyhound Corporation to the federal government in D.C. His current focus is commercial real estate finance and investment banking. His father's education as a medical doctor and his mother's reservations regarding his attendance at UF are discussed in pp. 7-8. He refers to correspondence with Florida Governor Collins. His non-participation in student social life is attributed to his uncertainty of the response from the undergraduates. He had no negative experience at UF. Interviewer Proctor on pp. 8-9 gives a summary of the UF integration experience in the 1960s. On p.10 Starke talks about his own son's education. Proctor on p.11 gives the background to the Virgil Hawkins action that led to the court order admitting black students at post-graduate level. While Starke was a student member of the NAACP he was never active nor did they seek him out. While a board member of the National Alumni Association he was introduced to Stephen O'Connell a past president of UF and a member of the Supreme Court that had denied Hawkins. Dr Reitz, UF president in the late 1950s, told Starke that he thought he proved to be the right person.

Interviewee: George Starke

Interviewers: Samuel Proctor and Joel Buchanan

March 28, 1998

B: Saturday, March 28, 12:30 in the afternoon. This is a luncheon with Sam Proctor, George Starke and Joel Buchanan at Chaucer's Restaurant. We met with Dr. Proctor to be able to ask George Starke some questions. There is a lot of music and background noise, but hopefully everything that is important will be heard.

S: I had not decided _____ law school. I decided to apply to three schools.

P: You had made up your mind to go to law school. That was your career goal?

S: Right. Because there were some things that I wanted to do. I wanted to work on Wall Street or in Miami. What I wanted to do would be in the nature of corporate law with an interest in municipal and corporate finance. That was a field that I thought offered a lot of challenge and opportunity. I decided for a year, but then it took me a little while and I had the time to go to student services and decided where I wanted to go and I picked three schools. I had been reading about what was happening here and Florida had always been my love in so far as a place to live, so I decided to apply. I figured that the worst that could happen is that they would say no. Meanwhile I had been accepted at Northwestern and Washington University.

P: So your academic average must have been very good?

S: At least they were good enough. I passed the LSAT, which is an interesting story in itself because I had to take that at the University of South Carolina. That was nearest to where I was when I was still in school.

P: Where were you stationed at that time?

S: By then I was back in school in Atlanta. When I went there that day, and I saw, I was standing up talking with some guys from West Point because nobody else would talk to me. Not that I was looking, but I was just standing around, so these guys had a little group and people were looking kind of peculiarly, far more so than they did when I came here, except for reporters. Anyway, we were talking and some black people in a car saw me up there talking and they drove around the block and came back and they said, say you, you cannot stand up there. I said, well I am waiting for an exam. They said, what? I said, yes. They said, you cannot do that! So they left.

P: Were you the only black person there to take the exam?

S: There were 700 people there and I was the only black person. So they left and then when we went into the auditorium. After awhile I heard somebody say, ssssssss. I knew right away that somebody was making that noise to get my attention. They did not want to come up in front of everybody. I was sitting in about the middle of the auditorium, so finally I ignored him. Finally he walked in front and he did like that [gesture] and like this [gesture]. The guy said good luck. I did not know what was going on at that point. They were ready to assign people to other classrooms for the exam and he took me out to the veranda and he said, you know I really hate to say anything to you about anything, but my job requires me to tell you that you may not take this exam along with everybody else. However, we have made some other arrangements. What they had done was they called the high school principal in Columbia, South Carolina and they took me in a car over to the Secretary of State's office. I took my aptitude exam

in his chair in his office. He said, look, you are the only one who has air conditioning. It is a funny thing. Well, apparently I passed the exam and was subsequently accepted to the three law schools to which I applied. The one from Florida came last.

P: It came after Judge DeVane [Dozier A. DeVane, District Judge, Tallahassee] had issued the order. They had to accept, they did not have to accept you, but they had to accept blacks on the graduate level.

S: Right. That is exactly what they did, and they thought that the law school was the best place because people would be more mature and probably have a lot to lose by doing silly things, which nobody did.

P: When you applied here, they did not raise any questions at that point. They accepted you on the basis of your grades and the LSAT. Did they know that you were not a white student at that time?

S: Absolutely. How, I do not recall, but they knew I was. Jim came to see me and he was president of the student body of the law school at that time I think. Then Jim introduced me to Tom Biggs him when I came. Their thinking was that I should come over a week early to buy my books from the book store. I had the list.

P: How did you arrange for housing?

S: I had a lot of relatives here and I stayed with some. One of my cousins, Kendall, was a deputy sheriff. I noticed that at night he used to park diagonally across the street from where I was staying. He did that for two or three months. Other people would relieve him from time to time as well. He later told me that his

assignment was to make sure that I got home safely at night.

P: Did you have any problem the first day when you came?

S: Not at all. I had already gotten my books and things, so I had a chance to get a feeling for the layout of the land. They were still in Bryan Hall, across from the Hub. All these reporters were out front so I decided I did not want to go through that. They were just looking and waiting.

P: So when you got here, were you greeted with any hostility?

S: No, what happened is that I saw those reporters out there and I decided that I was not going where they were, and I went into a side door. I decided that since I was there, I went down to the front seat and I sat in the center isle of the front seat, rather than anywhere else. The only move that I made was where I choose to sit.

P: Dean Fenn [Henry Fenn, University of Florida dean of College of Law, 1948-1958] was the dean of the law school? Was he gracious to you?

S: Absolutely. Things went well. Robert Mouse, who was chancellor, was the first person I remember coming into contact with. Later I met the dean, but meanwhile, when the lunch break came, reporters tried to surround me and were asking a lot of questions. The only thing that I gave them was my name. For two or three days they were trying to figure out where in Florida I was from. I decided that I was not going to talk to them and they asked questions and I would say, I do not know what the university has in mind. I do not want to say anything that is going to be contradictory to what they want to say and do, so I just shut up. They speculated about things for awhile, but in the end, I never talked to them. Later, I

found that during the registration period, we had to walk through the auditorium and there was a couple of guys in line ahead of me. One was ahead of me and one was behind me. I said to myself, those two guys look a little old to be in this class. Then I noticed at night they never studied and they were always out on the veranda and sure enough, a couple of months later, they told me that they were highway patrolmen. Then everybody knew why they were there.

Somebody was always in any class I had. I did not even realize it. They told me that they were going home and that they had a good job for the last couple of months, and they thought that everything was going well.

P: You stayed here three semesters and then you decided on your own to leave?

S: I would not want to be the first black to go to any school anywhere. But you know the area that we lived in was what it was. It carried inherent pressure that you do not need when you are in law school. For that reason I thought that my time had come.

P: Had you done alright academically?

S: Not nearly as well as I expected of myself. I studied. We had one professor, Clark, who said the same thing everyday. So we had notes from somebody who took shorthand and I knew everything in that course, even without the notes. The pressure was so intense on me to do well and exceed that when the exam was over, I remembered nothing about it, and the only thing I had written on my paper was my number. It was completely blank. The moment I walked out, all of it started coming back to me, but because of the pressure it just was not there that day.

B: Was the pressure internal or the perception of what you had to do or you felt the pressure?

S: All of the above. I was trying to keep it totally separate from what I to do.

P: But the faculty was generally accommodating to you? You did not run into any bad people did you?

S: I never had a bad experience at the University of Florida of any kind.

P: Realizing the times that you were living in, 1958 is a world away.

S: It was a very transitional period for the whole country and the state and at the university.

P: And the resistance on the part of the south and the conservatives. We had a good governor good back then in LeRoy Collins [LeRoy Collins, Florida governor, 1955-1961].

S: I met him subsequently. I was on a committee that he chaired for women's _____ having to do with urban problems, I do not remember exactly.

P: Of course another thing that was happening at the same time on our campus, was the John's Committee was beginning all of their activities. That also kind of electrified things. At that time, they were just looking for socialists and communists, which of course was the reason for the origin of the committee. It added to the tenseness of the times.

S: I do not remember much about it now, but I do remember that it existed around that time. It had adverse tendencies.

P: You met Reitz [J. Wayne Reitz, University of Florida president, 1955-1967]?

S: Not when I was a student. I met him maybe two or three years before he died. It

was through him that I got active in the alumni association.

P: After you left Gainesville, what happened?

S: That was really kind of a dismal period. I went to New York and I worked on Wall Street, I worked for Rockenheimer and for Moody's Investor Service. From there I was associate director of government affairs for the Greyhound Corporation. Two of us represented twenty subsidiaries of the company.

P: So you never worked for the federal government then?

S: No. After leaving Greyhound, I opened my own business.

P: Was the Greyhound job in New York?

S: In D.C. I represented them to the government. Then I opened a company that I owned that sold coal and petroleum products to the government. Subsequently I owned a small _____ broker dealer firm which I sold in 1993. Since then I have been a financial broker.

P: You achieved your goal then. Your father was a doctor. Where did he go to school and get his medical degree?

S: He went to Florida A&M and from there he went to _____. He finished there about the time you came here.

P: Was he a general practitioner?

S: Yes.

P: Is he still living? I know you said your mother is dead.

S: My father died at eighty in 1978.

P: Did you get a daily telephone call from your mother while you were here saying George, be careful?

S: She was really worried sick about it. Dr. Reitz asked me how my parents felt about my decision. I told him that my father supported my decision to come here far more than she did. She was always concerned that something would go wrong.

P: When you left here, you left not unhappy with your experiences here, more probably unhappy with your own self?

S: Exactly. I remember I wrote Governor Collins [LeRoy Collins, Florida governor, 1955-1961]. I had not met him, but I knew that he was interested in my being accepted here. On occasion I would get a little information through the highway patrol about this that or the other. I wrote him and told him that I could see his handwork around and I thought he would be glad to know that during my tenure at the University of Florida, I got a lot of benefit from it. I made some lifelong friends and at the same time, I felt that I experienced absolutely no problems at all from anybody in any position.

P: Did you make some friends that you maintained?

S: Some, but they kind of drifted away over a period of time.

P: But you could not have very much of a social life?

S: I never went to anything on campus. The only thing I did the whole time I was here was study. That was all. But that was my choice because in talking _____ what type of response I would get _____ a lot of undergraduates were at that time. I just decided to avoid that prospect.

P: Did you have any bad experiences at all with individuals?

S: No.

P: You were lucky. I am sure not every student or every faculty member was a good person.

S: I am sure you are right about that, but I did not come into contact with those.

P: Integration went smoothly on our campus. Unlike others like Mississippi or Georgia. There was no violence, no buildings were burned, nobody went out on strike, they did not have to close the school or anything. That says a lot for both Gainesville and the university. It was not until the end of the sixties that you began building up. By that time, they had already developed the athletic program, you had Sam Taylor here. He was elected as the student body president. So lots had developed along here. There was less violence, less opposition on campus than there was within the community itself. They were able to integrate the Primrose School without incident. They were able to integrate the University Inn on 13th Street without incident. There were two things that happened. One happened at the end of the 1960's. By this time there were about fifty blacks on campus, which still is an infinitesimally small number. At that time the student enrollment was probably about 18,000 or 19,000. There were about three or four black administrators. I do not know if there were any black faculty at all at the time. They wanted the university to allocate funds to bring more black students and black faculty and they wanted the Center for Black Culture to be established. They were making the demands which Steve O'Connell was resisting. That was what brought about the confrontation. They had the sit-in in Tigert Hall and they jailed those students. That is, they took them down and they let them go and then dropped the

charges. That was when the students left. Not every single one left, but about ninety percent of them withdrew from school. Floyd Shenkman [Frederick Alan Shenkman, University of Florida, assistant of criminology, 1971-present], who now teaches in the Criminology Department, did a doctoral dissertation on that and interviewed a lot of those individuals who were participating.

P: Where did you take lunch? There were no real eating facilities on the campus other than the cafeteria.

S: I did not live that far from the school, so I could go home.

P: You had a car?

S: Yes.

B: Where did you go to high school? You mention that you were in Atlanta at that time when you took the test.

S: I was in school in Atlanta at Moorehouse. But I went to high school in North Carolina in College Park.

B: So your family then moved back to Florida?

S: My family has always lived in Florida. I went up to North Carolina to a boarding school.

P: Do you have kids?

S: One.

P: Where did they go to school?

S: He went to Moorehouse and eh graduated in 1986 and got a job with GM. Now he is with **Nesan Corporation**.

P: What does he do?

S He is the district manager. He has about ten dealerships. They live in Winston-Salem, North Carolina now.

P: Are you going to retire back to Florida?

S: I would like to move to Florida right now.

P: How old are you?

S: Sixty-six.

P: You do not look sixty-six. It sounds like you have a lot of family in this area.

S: My mother's family originates here. My father's family originates out of Hawthorne.

[skipped a large portion]

B: Why was there so much chatter about Virgil Hawkins and not you? Virgil Hawkins came here before you?

P: In 1949. George came in because the courts said that they did not have any choice in the matter. They had to take somebody. There were actually five students that applied. Hawkins and someone else applied for law school. One girl applied for pharmacy, one man applied for agriculture and a fifth one applied for chemical engineering. All of them were turned down and were told to make an application to Florida A&M. When they came back and said, there is no law school at Florida A&M, the Board of Controls said, well we will set up a law school. First they said we will find a place out of state and we will pay for you to go. Then they decided that they better set up a law school so they were going to set one up at Florida A&M. Meanwhile these applications are going through the courts and they finally get to the state supreme court which turned it down on the

basis that if they admitted them, Virgil was the only one who persisted, his physical presence could create a disturbance as a result of the agitation and that the white students would resent it. Although Virgil Hawkins started the ball rolling, he never was admitted to the University of Florida. On the basis of his application, that is when it finally went into the federal courts. Judge **Devane** then ordered the Board of Control to order the University of Florida to admit black students on the graduate level. George became that student. I thought maybe they had sought you out, the NAACP. If it had not been you it would have been somebody. You came so quickly after the decision, that everybody thought this was kind of a setup thing.

S: That is an interesting question, because I have been asked that before. It has been a long time, but I was asked during that area, was I member of the NAACP. I said yes, I had been a student member, but I was never active in a chapter or anything. Finally they asked, well who is paying your way here and I told them I had the GI Bill and my parents. They said, the NAACP is not giving you any money? I said no, they are not.

P: Did any of them seek you out, like the NAACP, afterwards and you know the was Rosa Parks has been sought after over the years?

S: No. The closest thing that came to that and I turned it down, was Ebony magazine expressed an interest in interviewing me, I guess in my second semester. That was the only overture from anybody.

P: I think the places where there was violence, the University of Alabama and Georgia, where the names then became obvious.

S: They used a phrase then on the television, it was always in the papers when I was here. This occurred without incident and that was the way it was during my whole stay here.

P: Which was good for you and the university.

S: Like I told David this morning, I was treated just like anybody else. I told him that was all I could ever want.

B: _____ speaks about his visit. He said the University of Florida _____ a quiet period, when he was here, people did not disturb him or even deal with him. Were you dealt with or did you just come and went and that was it?

S: Mine was pretty much like he described. I remember one time I went down to one of the stores and they said well come on in Mr. Starke. My picture was in the paper so a handful of people downtown knew, but I already knew a lot of people in Gainesville. As far as the school was concerned, I was treated fine.

B: This is an interview, Saturday, March 28, 1998 with Dr. Sam Proctor, historian, University of Florida, George Starke, the first Afro-America student at the University of Florida and Joel Buchanan, the historian and we are having lunch at Chaucer's Restaurant here in Gainesville.

P: Did you ever meet Stephen O'Connell?

S: Yes I did. I met him at one of the board meeting that I came to.

P: He was on the supreme court at the time that they were denying Virgil Hawkins application. When he became president here in 1967, there were some unhappy about him coming in.

S: Dr. Lombardi introduced him. I remember being in an auditorium and I think he

and Dr. Lombardi were standing there when somebody introduced me to both of them. I met both of them I think at the same time.

B: I told George that when I interviewed Dr. O'Connell he spoke about George. He told me about what his role was being on the state supreme court at that time.

P: When I interviewed Reitz, he spoke too about when you came in. There was no hostility, or if there was, it was not expressed. The University was pleased that things went quietly.

S: He told me subsequently, that he thought I proved out to be the right person.

P: You were absolutely the right person. You were not looking for a confrontation and neither were they.

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