

George H. Starke Jr
UF-311

George H. Starke Jr who, in 1958, became the University of Florida's first ever black student, talks about his early schooling and his reasons for applying to the School of Law and his subsequent experiences as a student there including personal security provided for him by the State of Florida as outlined on pp. 5-6. His family's Gainesville and Hawthorne origins are outlined on page seven where he also states that "every decision that was made regarding everything at the University of Florida was made by me". The pressures of being the first black student to enter UF were compounded by media attention, threats to his personal safety and an all round expectation to perform. His eventual decision to leave is explained on pp. 10-14. He credits Dr. Reitz, UF president, and Florida State Governor Collins with making the necessary adjustments to create a climate for successful racial integration. The interview concludes with a summary of Starke's career following his departure from the University of Florida and includes his observations on the assimilation of Florida A&M into Florida State University. Finally while stating that his University of Florida experience was good it was nevertheless, "one that I would not want to experience again".

Interviewee: George Starke

Interviewer: David Ward

April 28, 1998

UF311

W: My name is David Ward. It is March 28, 1998, 10:20 a.m. This is side one with my interview with George H. Starke Junior. Let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

S: Orlando, September 1931.

W: You grew up down there?

S: Sanford and Atlanta.

W: The schools were segregated down there at that time weren't they? So you were in grade school in the late 1940's then?

S: Until 1945 I went away to school in North Carolina to a prep school in _____ which is outside of Greensboro. I finished in 1949.

W: Was that a segregated school as well?

S: Yes.

W: Prep school, was that like grammar school, junior high, high school?

S: In 1945, I was in the ninth grade so I was there from grades nine through twelve.

W: You graduated high school in 1949. Then you went into the air force?

S: Right. No I went to college after that. I finished Mooreshouse College but it was after I got out of the service. I was in the service from about 1953 to the middle of 1957 and then I came back and finished, after which I came to the University of

Florida.

W: When did you apply to UF?

S: When I was in the air force. It took me a little while to figure out what I wanted to do. Then it occurred to me that after I finished undergraduate school that I should go to law school. That would be closest to what I had in mind in terms of my interest in Wall Street that had developed. I thought about finance, bonds, corporate finance, things of that nature. That is why I decided to go to law school. It occurred to me that the timing may be good to apply to University of Florida.

W: The timing may be good in what sense?

S: There was a lot of talk about integration and knowing what I knew about Florida and what I thought about Florida, I thought the University of Florida would be the best school for me. I did apply to three though, just in case and was admitted to all three.

W: Which three?

S: Northwestern and I think the other one was Washington University in Kansas or Missouri.

W: You were accepted to UF. Did anyone interview you?

S: First I had to take the LSAT. I guess that was necessary as a prerequisite for each of the schools for which I had applied. I took that exam at the University of South Carolina and from appearances, I was the first black student to show up there for any reason. The treatment that I received that day was totally different from my experiences at the University of Florida. There was nothing malicious about it, but they did invite me out of the auditorium and they took me to the secretary of state's office. They got a proctor for me who was principal of one of the high schools. That

is where I took my exam, off campus, downtown at the secretary's office.

W: The University of South Carolina, that is in Columbia the state capital?

S: Right. It was funny. In retrospect, it was serious, but it was ok.

W: How did you do on the LSAT?

S: Well enough to be accepted to each of the three schools to which I had applied.

W: Did the University of Florida have any sort of interview with you, on telephone or in person?

S: After I had been accepted, the president of the law school student body came over to see me. His name was Glass, I cannot remember his first name. Jim. He was from Miami. He wanted to tell me about his experiences and some things that he thought was going on that could be of interest. He was a good person to meet with because he was able to answer a lot of questions that I had as well.

W: You were not married at this time were you?

S: No. I did get married during my tenure at the university. The pressures of studying were so great and for so many reasons, that did not work out.

W: I am sorry.

S: Well, I am glad. Subsequently I was married, and that has worked out fine.

W: You have been married ever since?

S: From the time that I got married the second time, yes.

W: This is my main point of interest. Did anyone at the university interview you before you came in to try to gauge your character or anything like that? Or did anyone in the state administration contact you or talk to any of your friends that you know of?

S: I do not know what they did, but the only direct contact I had was with Jim prior to

coming over here. I think I had a pretty good record that spoke for itself, so I am sure my background had been carefully scrutinized, but by whom I do not know.

W: No one ever spoke to you personally or to any member of your family that you know of?

S: No. But as I say, I think things must have checked out pretty well. I never had any problem with anything of that nature.

W: You left the air force in 1957. How much did you know about Virgil Hawkins?

S: Nothing.

W: Had you heard of him at least?

S: Oh yes. I was conversant with what was going on in Florida at the time. I know who he was but I have never seen him or talked to him or met him.

W: Did the Hawkins case have any influence on you to decide to go to the University of Florida?

S: Not at all. I am from Florida, this is where I always wanted to go. I felt the timing was right and that whatever had transpired prior to my being accepted was good. All the things that I read about Virgil and his efforts, I felt badly that he had to go through what he did, but it never had any impact on my selecting the university or my tenure here.

W: You applied in late 1957 or early 1958?

S: Probably early 1958. I was admitted after taking that exam that summer.

W: You took the LSAT in summer of 1958?

S: To the best of my memory, yes it was 1958. It could have been in 1957. I do not recall if I was in the service or if I was back in school.

W: So you did apply in 1957?

S: I am not sure whether I applied in 1957 or 1958. I know that I came here in the fall of 1958.

W: How long after you took the LSAT did you get your acceptance letter from UF?

S: I guess around the same time I got them from everybody else. Probably some time that summer. It may have July, but I am not certain. I know it was not in June. I did know that all of them came in about the same time.

W: My research has shown that on June 18, 1958, the federal district court ordered the University of Florida Graduate Schools to be opened to qualified applicants. I was just trying to glean out exactly if they did it before the fact or after the fact.

S: I would be certain that it was after. I would not have any doubt about that.

W: I would assume that your LSAT was above a 340, which is what UF adopted at their minimum score.

S: I do not remember the number, but I am certain that it was above that. I imagine it was in line with what the other two schools looked for as well.

W: When did you arrive at the UF campus?

S: It seems like I came over here a week before school started. I remember going to the bookstore and I had a list of books and what not. Somebody said that since nobody knew what kind of response or reaction I was going to generate, that it might be easy to get that book list in hand before the swell of the crowd. That worked out fine. As it turned out, there was not any reason to be worried about anything.

W: The students were not nasty to you at all?

S: Never.

W: How was the faculty?

S: The same. I never had any grief at all from anybody. To put it more positively, I was just treated like anybody else.

W: At the beginning did they put an escort with you to ensure that you would not be molested in any way?

S: Funny thing is, there was one, but I did not know it. I remember when we were enrolling and going through the registration process. There were these two old guys in line, one was in front of me and one was behind me. I remember asking myself, now these guys look too old to be here. They went through the line, they got their credentials and their class schedules, everything the same way as I did. It turns out later, when I would be in the library, studying at night, these two guys would be out on the veranda. One day they came up to me and said, George you did not know it, but we were assigned by the State of Florida to assure that things went well and that you were safe and we are leaving tomorrow. We are satisfied that everything is ok. I did not realize it until that point. It may have been around Thanksgiving that they came to me and told me what they were doing. My questions about them proved to be justified. They were not that old, but they just looked older than everybody else in the group.

W: You were a little above the standard age too, weren't you?

S: I was twenty-six.

W: What kind of stuff did you do in the air force?

S: Nothing special. Whatever I was assigned. Routine things. I was not in combat or anything.

W: What was your job rating?

S: I was enlisted. I went in as an air cadet and I had sinus problems. At that time, I did not want to go to Korea, so I stayed.

W: I spent six years in the navy. I was an electronic technician. That was my job. I ran the electronic warfare stuff and fixed it and that was my job.

S: Ours was not that specific really. Most of the time that I was in there, I was in supply administration, procurement, contracting.

W: Did you like it?

S: It was ok for its time. I did not have a problem with it.

W: Did you go to school on the GI Bill when you got out?

S: Partially. My father paid the _____.

W: What did he do for a living.

S: He was a physician down in Sanford. My mother is retired now, I think she was retired then in fact. Retired from high school and a librarian. She was ninety-three a couple of days ago. I am down here now because of her health.

W: I understand that your two aunts, out here in Melrose are also retired schoolteachers.

S: My family originated in Gainesville so I have got a lot of relatives here. My father's family is out in Hawthorne, and my mother's family is in Gainesville. I was very accustomed to being here.

W: Where did you stay when you were going to law school?

S: First with my grandfather's brother and his family, two or three blocks up from Chestnut's Funeral Home. Subsequently with another relative, I do not remember

where she lives, this area someplace. I did not live on campus. In fact, I never went to any of the campus activities because again, nobody knew what to expect and then of course, in the law school, the students were considered somewhat more mature than maybe the general population at the time. Besides, I was too busy. The pressures that I was under to get my work done, did not give me time to do things like that anyway. Partially because I really did not have any desire to, although since I have been active in university affairs. Prior to that I was not particularly interested, I did not have the time. There were other considerations as well, but nobody said do not do anything. Nobody in fact, ever told me to do or not to do anything. Every decision that was made regarding everything at the University of Florida, was made by me. I

W: I understand that you spoke with the student body president at the time, Tom Biggs.

S: Definitely, I remember him.

W: Glass was from the law school and Biggs was the student body president. What did he have to say?

S: Very much like Jim's conversation. It was more or less to acclimatize me to the university and how they perceived themselves as a part of the system and the population.

W: They who?

S: Each of the two of them. Nobody told me about any courses particularly, or any teachers or any instructors. Just about things in general at the university.

W: Did you notice any sort of apprehension from them or from the student body, or any sort of a tension?

S: Never. I would not want to be the first black student to go to anywhere. Where it is real serious work. Again, I think that my career at the university would have probably been a lot different had I been the third or fourth as opposed to the first because of the pressure. Of course, nobody can ever do this again because the times are different and nobody expects to be bothered. Of course, I did not expect that either. But I would not want to be the first, because the pressure was just too overwhelming. You are in a situation where you have to master some difficult material to begin with and that is fine because that is why you went there, but then while you are there, you are _____ than that, a lot of pressures begin to build on you to be a straight A student. Now that you are here, you must do well and you push yourself and you push yourself far harder than anybody else has to. It becomes a burden to be the first there because you want to do well for yourself and you try to rule out all of the other _____ considerations, but they do not really leave you. They become worse. It is a pressure building situation, but it is not a distraction because you do not get involved in other things. You have to focus on what you are there and the mastery of the material. Fortunately, nobody else has to endure that.

W: Did you expect there to be some pressures on you and was it better, worse or about what you expected?

S: I did not expect anything. I expected to be there, I expected to like anybody else and I was. In addition to that, I had other stresses that were not desirable.

W: Like what?

S: I used to get calls from magazines and newspapers and reporters for interviews. I

never did it. It was bothersome because it focused more attention on me than I cared. I was not a public figure and had no aspirations in that regard. Certainly not at that time. It suggested that there a great deal of interest in what I was doing at the University of Florida. People were writing articles from time to time and I tried not to read it, but sometimes you would see it. I remember that there was some mail that had come along which was adverse from some quarters, I do not know where it was from. It was to me, but sometimes the handwriting was not too great and those letters were set aside for later. I did not even know about it. I do know that one time I got a call that told me that I needed to pick another route to go home for Thanksgiving or Christmas because of some intelligence that the Florida Highway Patrol had gathered concerning my safety. Somebody seemed to know that I would normally go or assumed the way that I normally go.

W: Now this was not some crackpot letter, was this an official thing on Highway Patrol stationary?

S: The notice to select another route was official, but the other thing that I didn't even know about that transpired. That is the only thing I knew about, the one time when I was in school, pick another way to go home. But it was on the basis of intelligence that the Highway Patrol had gathered and it was considered serious enough for me to be notified. I just took it in stride. It was just one of those things.

W: Did you take another way home?

S: Yes. (laughter) I went a little out of the way. Forewarned it forearmed. That is the only thing I remember. This is just retrospect at this point. I do not know if anything would have occurred, but they know what they know and I just relied on it.

W: Did you ever speak with President Reitz?

S: No. Not until after I had decided to leave. That is when I spoke to him. I did not meet him really until four or five years ago when I became associated with the alumni association.

W: When did you decide to leave the university?

S: It was probably a very difficult decision to make, but it was right after my third semester in school. It was early 1960.

W: If I might ask, why did you decide to leave?

S: It just did not appear that I would be able to make up some of the deficits that I had accumulated in terms of the ability to graduate on time. It just did not seem possible. Consequently I felt that it would be better to change my own direction than to stay there at that point and face the increasing difficulties in terms of getting my work and getting the grades that I needed and being able, at the same time, to carry my position in the class. The work became very difficult to deal with. It was not, in my opinion, because of the work persay, as much as it was the combination of stresses that it built up to a point where, that is why I was saying earlier, that I probably should have been the third or fourth rather than the first. It is just an enormous pressure to have. Mainly because you know you have got to do good, your family knows that you have to do good, your friends know that you have to do it. People that you know, know that you have to do well. People that you do not know, know that you have to do well. You have a lot of expectations. You try to meet your own, but there are others that maybe subconsciously affect your ability to do what you have to do. You also have to try to block out those kind of things. Sometimes

you can do it better than you can at other times. That is why I think that people who come along subsequently, would not have those problems. I remember there was a black lady admitted to the university in 1959, to medical school. I think that what I am telling you got back to her within the first semester. I came in September, and I think she came in February or January and she did not come back the third semester, which would have been the second for her. I do not know the difference because in my class, I do not know whether women feel pressures in addition or not, but I know that there was only a handful of women in my class. I think that she had probably, there was one in particular, to more adjustments to make to being in what then was almost an all male arena, than I did.

W: Did the law school set you off to the side?

S: No. I was treated the same as anybody else. Really that is all you want. I got to know some of the instructors better than others. They even adopted a special grading system where people would go to the dean's office and get a number, no names were written on the exams, and the reason for that is so that the instructors would not know whose papers they were grading. I do not know if they do it now, but you only write once a semester in law school.

W: So the instructor would not have sort of bias towards african-americans or the women. Were there any other black students by the time you left in early 1960?

S: To my recall there were none. I think there were none anywhere on campus at that point still, except me. I believe that one or two of my cousins came in around the time that I was leaving, in other schools. They lived here in Gainesville.

W: So basically you left because the pressures were great and your grades were not

what you felt they should have been, to be the first black to go through?

S: It was really the pressures period, I think. Maybe it was the combination of a lot of _____ that I do not recall, but I was concerned that I would have to carry a full load all the time and do well in addition to trying to bring along some problems that I had developed in the course of getting to that particular point. I think that some of this is so unique that it is very difficult even to explain. You do not think about the fact that the University of Florida at the time was 105 years old. In all that time, this situation had never existed and naturally you think that you can cope with that and you know that if you can cope with that, you can cope with anything. There comes a time when you have to decide, do you go forward, do you stop where you are, do you withdraw, what do you do? You have to make some choices. It was really one that I needed to make at that time.

W: You mentioned that some magazines were calling you for interviews. Do you remember what magazines?

S: One that I remember in particular was Ebony. I think I had been written up in a lot of those kinds of papers and magazines. There were others as well, but that one I remember sort of vividly because it was the first one that had called.

W: When did they first contact you, right after you first got in?

S: I think it was probably during the first semester. I had been contacted by the papers locally, Jacksonville papers, but I did not talk to any of them. I told them I was not interested in talking to them. The novelty began to wear off and then I remember I would go downtown and before I could open an account _____. Before I got ready to sign my name, they said, that is ok Mr. Starke, we know who you are. I had

a very good reception from everybody, the school, people in the city. Of course I had a lot of family here and I knew a lot of people here in Gainesville, even from the beginning.

W: When you went and spoke with President Reitz, what did he have to say?

S: He asked me was I sure that this was something that I wanted to do. I did not see him then, I called him after I had decided to go. Prior to that I had not had any contact with him. I knew that he would be interested because Governor Collins' office had been very interested in this as well. In fact the governor and Dr. Reitz, I figured, had talked a great deal about this because I was getting input from time to time about things. Some of that would come out of the governor's office at that time.

W: What kind of input were you getting?

S: Primarily it was related to safety. Intelligence that had been gathered about that. There were two instances, one where the security that I had and did not know about it, had been arranged by Dr. Reitz. I had a cousin here who was a deputy sheriff and I used to see his car parked across the street from my house. Later he told me why. He was assigned to protect me. That car used to stay there several nights a week. I did not pay any attention to it at first, but it would always be there by the time I got home. I stayed at the library, I kept pretty long hours over there. If I got home around twelve or twelve-thirty or so, the sheriff's car would be there. He was on that shift sometimes, but other people were on it at other times. That did not last too long either. They quit that before my first semester was over. Basically nobody expected any difficulties. There were just some prospects that they wanted to take precautions against because in fact it had not been done before and nobody really

knew about the whole range of possibilities.

W: Did you ever get any official communication for example, from the governor's office or whatever, speaking about safety issues or did they all come from auxiliary offices?

S: Nothing written. But I knew where it was coming from.

W: It was spoken to you by word of mouth? From whom?

S: I never had one specific person to tell me about things. It was any of several and I guess I do not remember who told me what in that capacity. I did know where it originated.

W: How did you know that?

S: At that time I knew. They were interested in the success of this process and they wanted it to go trouble free. I do not know what they did to ensure that that happened, but I am sure that is all I saw at the surface.

W: The guys following you around campus were assigned by President Reitz?

S: They were Florida Highway Patrolmen in plainclothes. I do not know about the coordination. I have seen other people who knew about this incident, who talked to me about it, administrators that I knew at the university. What office they were in, I do not know. I did not have any dealings with the administration building. Everything that I did was right in the law school.

W: These were white or black folks in the administration office?

S: There were not other blacks on campus as far as I know. There may have been, but I did not know any of them.

W: They just spoke to you subsequently?

S: Just asking me about this or that or the other. Some of them knew about it. It was

very casual.

W: So you did not return to school and called Dr. Reitz to let him know what was going on?

S: No, after my third semester, when I decided what I was going to do, one of the decisions was to call him and let him know that I appreciated the climate in which I was able to operate at the University of Florida because somebody had to sit _____ their policies to make this all possible and the two people who I think did the most in that regard were he and Governor Collins. The state was interested in integrating anyway, but they did not as I remember, pushing the issue. Virgil's case, probably, stimulated them a great deal and helped build up a climate in which something like this could occur. I remember a phrase they used to use in the newspaper all the time was 'this happened without incident'. At that time, as I recall, there were other people in Mississippi and Georgia and other places who were having trouble, but we never had any problems at all at the University of Florida.

W: Is that one of the reasons that you did not speak to the newspapers or magazines is that you did not want to draw attention to yourself?

S: Primarily. I knew it to be historic, so my thought was that the university would want to set the tone for how this was represented, how they thought about things and I was just prepared to leave that to them. I do not know that they did it, but I did not have anything to say to them. Another thing too, is that people were asking me about all sorts of questions, you know how newspaper people do. They get a little bit of something and then they extrapolate it to the point where you do not even recognize how it began.

End of Side 1

S: Some of them wanted to sling it, stir it I guess. I did not want to. Everyone would have their own take, I just left it so that they would, I did not want to discuss anything.

W: So around Christmas 1959, or January 1960, you decided to leave and spoke with Dr. Reitz?

S: No, I did not speak with him until after the semester was over, because that is when I decided that I needed to make some further adjustments. I suspect this was around a little after Christmas.

W: What did he have to say besides are you sure this is what you want to do.

S: He was concerned and he wanted to know how I thought things went as far as the people associated with the university were concerned and had there been any untoward incidents and was I satisfied with the instructors and other official people with whom I had come in contact. The answers were all positive.

W: He wanted to make sure you were not being run off rather than deciding on your own accord to leave. What do you do for a living now?

S: I am a mortgage broker and an investment banker. When I left here, I went to New York and I worked on Wall Street. I worked for **Oppenheimer**, for _____ investment service and subsequently moved to Washington, D.C. when I became an associate director of government affairs for a fortune 500 company. Two of us represented twenty-two of their subsidiaries to the government. By then it was 1978 and I went into business for myself. I was in the coal business and later into the oil business. Primarily, I sold those products to

the federal government and to the states, counties and municipalities. In the meantime, I developed a situation where I had licenses in real estate, life insurance, property and casualty insurance and securities. Subsequently I owned a small NASD broker dealer firm and I sold that firm in 1993. Since then I have been a financial broker. I do _____ and real estate finance. It is one thing when you go to school and you learn what you learn, you know what you know and then you get into business and you do something different. Fortunately the skills you develop are transferrable and it works out.

W: So you were not married when you entered UF in September of 1958?

S: No. During my tenure here I got married here. I do not remember if it was the first or second semester. It was probably the second semester. That was not a good situation either, to be involved in. As I think about it, I do not think anybody at the University of Florida even knew about that. It was something that we had planned to do that did not work out. As a student it was a distraction and you could not afford to have distractions. I had known here for some time prior to that.

W: I understand that in late January 1959, Governor Collins proposed opening all graduate schools, Florida A&M and FSU to african-americans. Did you know anything about that, was there any sort of a backlash on campus?

S: Here, no. I remember it. The State of Florida had a policy that this event and series of activities apparently gave them an added push to do some things, that I think Governor Collins recognized to be in the best interest of the State of Florida. Florida was not like Georgia or Mississippi or any other of the forty-nine states. Florida was Florida. I remember that he did make that recommendation, and not only that, but I remember that he

got into a little difficulty because he wanted to close Florida A&M and have that assimilated into Florida State University. There was a lot of resistance to that because of heritage and historical considerations. That issue I think was dropped, but the broader picture was accomplished in terms of the admissions. Even there the interchange of classes, to some scale, I think that occurred. Then I lost touch with what was happening by that point.

W: Where did you go for undergrad?

S: I finished Moorehouse College in Atlanta. That was a transitional kind of a period in the 1950's. You remember the stories about integration and all that in the 1960's. That was, to me, the best school. It was not that far from home. It had a good reputation for producing lawyers and doctors, physicians, dentists, judges, PhD's, college presidents and what have you. It was probably, at that point, the most respected black school. I say that, but other people may not agree. If I had the preference, I probably would have never left Florida.

W: Your goal for choosing Florida for law school was not to make some huge change in the state?

S: Not at all. The opportunity was there. That is a separate issue, it was not my issue. All I wanted to do was finish law school at the University of Florida.

W: What was major as an undergraduate?

S: Business administration with an economics minor.

W: Do you have anything you would like to add?

S: N. The only thing I would say is that it was a good experience, it was a great experience. It became at that point, the consuming factor in my life. It was something that I would not want to experience again, but that is not even an issue because the United States has changed

so nobody will ever have to do that kind of thing again. That is a good thing from the standpoint of any and everybody. I made some good relationships and I am still interested in the University of Florida. I served on the Board of Directors of the Alumni Association and tried to make some contributions to the success of its mission. I will continue to have a very positive image in my mind of the university and the experience and the people.

W: Even though your time here was very stressful, was very busy, you think overall that you had a good impact on the university, that you did some good for other students?

S: People say that the answer to that is yes, because it contributed to an overall climate. I will have to take their word on that. I know that the university had a big impact on me.