

FNP 66

Interviewee: Michael Foley

Interviewer: Robyn Benkendorf

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B: This is Robyn Benkendorf. I am here with Professor Michael Foley from the UF [University of Florida] journalism department in his office in Weimer Hall. He has agreed to talk to me today about his career today with the *St. Petersburg Times*. Thanks very much for giving me some of your time.

F: My pleasure.

B: Tell me a little bit about your background. Where were you born and educated?

F: Well, I was born in Rockford, Illinois, which is a town about 15 miles south of the Wisconsin border, so it's cold. When I was fourteen, or slightly before then, my father owned a successful business, I guess we were kind of middle class. He didn't have a college education. I think his advanced degree past high school was in welding. He did develop a successful distributing business, but his dream was always to own a bar on the beach in Florida. So, when I was fourteen, in February, when there were seventeen inches of snow on the ground, he yanked me out of school in a very traumatic fashion and we moved to Clearwater, Florida; it was 1960. So, that's where I went to school, in Clearwater, and then I went to a variety of other places, USF [University of South Florida] and JC [junior college], back to USF and then I ended up here in journalism, that's where I got my degree in 1970.

B: How and when did you become interested in journalism?

F: How long have you got? I'll give you the short version. It's purely fate, I tell this to my students if they ask when they write my obituary. It was just absolutely luck and it worked out well. It was in 1968, I was married, I'd been married for two years, and it was the height of the Vietnam War so everybody was a student who wanted to stay out of the Vietnam War. I was twenty-two and I had gone the year before and passed the draft physical, which all they did was find a pulse and you were suitable for drafting. But I was still in school. So anyway, I was in the University of South Florida, I was driving over there every day and I really didn't like school, I was majoring in psychology. We got into this abnormal psychology and it was really turning me [off] so I just dropped out. Like a fool, I said, I can't take this anymore. So I ended up with sixteen hours of F's and a draft notice, so I got drafted. It wasn't, you know, take another physical, it was you're drafted, you're going to Vietnam. And so I quit my job and sold my car and kissed my wife goodbye and got a gold watch from the people where I was working as an office assistant, and went up to Jacksonville to go in the army. Then it turned out I was a day over. In the meantime, there was a number of going-away parties and a

number of other take you out to buy you a drink, Foley, you're going off to the war [situations]. A lot of time the idea was if I wasn't going off, [if] I hadn't gotten drafted, I would go to the University of Florida and major in journalism. Why? Well, I had a friend there who was majoring in journalism there and said, well, it's a hell of a good time. And I really had no idea what he was doing. And so, it was an interesting thing to say. I got to Jacksonville and they said, well, it's been one day more than a year since your last physical, so you have to take another physical. Everybody else they just put on the bus. So [I said], okay, I'll take the physical. And they found that I had high blood pressure because I weighed sixty pounds more than I do now, smoked three packs of cigarettes a day and had eaten a batch of pork chops the night before, and I'm very sensitive to salt, I found out later. But they couldn't get my blood pressure down that day so they rejected me and sent me home. My wife was crying and my dad was crying and I walked back in the door fourteen hours after I leave. Then after I was back for a while, the doctor decided, you know, you've got high blood pressure, you've got to change your habits. In the meantime, people were saying, well, now that you're not going to go to the draft, you're going to the University of Florida, right, to major in journalism. [I said,] well, I guess so. So I did, I went up in the fall of 1968, I think it was. I moved up here and they said, what do you want to major in? What kind of journalism? I said, well, I don't know, what's the difference? They said, there's advertising and public relations [And I said,] news editorial, that was a sequence. Because that's writing and I had several professors at USF tell me I could write. That's how I did it. My friend was in advertising, I didn't even know he was majoring in advertising. That is how I got into journalism, truly.

R: Just kind of on a whim.

F: Just totally by fate, and then I got here and I really thought I had a talent for it. I liked it, I liked finding things out, I liked telling stories. Since I was a little kid I always wanted to be a writer, but I didn't have any, you know, form for that. I just wanted to magically be a writer. I figured, well, journalism worked for a lot of other people, like [Ernest] Hemingway and some of the others, so why not. So that's how I got into journalism. The story's true, there are some other facets of it I'm not going to go into, but I did not purposely try to get out of the draft. In fact, they finally had a lottery number that you got for your birthday, I would have been 327 so I wouldn't have been drafted again anyway. It was a very interesting experience and I'm glad it happened. But it was weird, which is fine because I like weird things.

B: Well, it sounds weird. Were there any journalism professors during your college career at the University of Florida who really had an impact on you?

F: Several. In no particular order, I don't intend to differentiate among the three that

had the most influence on me. It was “Buddy” Davis, Horance G. “Buddy” Davis, Jr. [Distinguished Service Professor of Journalism and Communications, 1954-1977], a legendary irascible curmudgeon of a professor who taught me reporting, for one thing; I had him for, it ended up being five courses. He was quite an incredible guy, he was a tough guy, one of my first courses here was reporting and he walks in the room and when the class is supposed to start he locks the door. The students who arrived late because they don’t have any idea where their classroom is were banging on the door, wanting to get in. And he goes over to the door and he opens it and says, next time, get here on time, and he slams [the] door in their face. He just locked the door every time when the class started. You had to show up on time, he didn’t want to fool around. Those of us who were in class didn’t know whether we were the lucky ones or not. It was very scary but he was a superb teacher who had a lot of thoughts on the world. He taught me reporting, the introductory course, 2100, he was involved in that, photojournalism during the summer when the regular photojournalism teacher wasn’t there, and then also editorial writing and a course called senior seminar, which you took in your senior year. That was kind of a loose discussion course where in those days, and you probably won’t believe this, you could smoke, he let us smoke in class.

B: Oh, my God.

F: [Laughing.] I know. He’d let us smoke in class because he wanted to smoke a cigar, so if we brought ash trays, we could smoke in class.

B: Was that a common practice?

F: No, he was one of the few; there were very few professors that did it. This was back in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I got A’s in all five classes, that’s a singular achievement, I think, here. The second, and again not in any particular order, it was a man named Hugh Cunningham [professor of journalism and communications, 1955-1973] and he was one of these brilliant newspaper guys who can do it all, a renaissance man of newspapers. It was great because Davis was very liberal politically and, in fact, wrote editorials part-time for the *Gainesville Sun*. The year after I graduated, he won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing for his editorials. Cunningham, the other guy I had as an influential professor, was conservative, exceedingly conservative, very religious, deeply. He and Davis agreed on nothing, but they’re both brilliant journalists. But Cunningham could do it all and he taught a course that is no longer offered here, which is really too bad because it was an incredible learning experience. On Thursdays, the class which consisted of, I guess, twenty kids, went to the *Gainesville Sun*, which was an afternoon newspaper at the time, and put it out. We were the staff. You worked as reporter or you worked the slot [copy desk] on the A desk to put out the front page of the section or you worked as a

sportswriter or you worked in the features section, but you went down there and you worked for the *Gainesville Sun* for an entire day. You got there at 6:00 in the morning and worked there until 4:00 in the afternoon.

B: That would be a great experience.

F: It was fabulous. You'd get bylines, you laid out pages, you sized pictures, you wrote headlines, you wrote stories, you got wire copy and he marked it up and he just sat there. He could do this, he could oversee the newspaper to the point where if he had some person down on the slot on the A desk and [this person] was supposed to put out the front page and just quivered and started crying and went crazy on deadline, he could do it all in five minutes, he was unbelievable. Then he'd go upstairs and he'd set the type if he had to, he was just that good. Over the summers he'd take a group of students to the *St. Pete Times* or to another paper for the whole summer term and he'd teach all three courses, editorial writing, applied journalism, which was the name of that course, and senior seminar in a block, so you worked for the paper in the meantime. Unbelievable course. Eventually the *Sun* went to an a.m. paper, a morning paper, and the course got reduced to one page of the paper and now it's reduced to nothing. It's really a shame because it was a renaissance of courses here, I think. He was the second one and he taught me how to do all sorts of things. He gave me a B in his course because his deal was if he could unquestionably recommend you for a newspaper job either as a reporter or a copy editor he'd give you an A. If he could recommend you as one or the other he'd give you B. He told me at the end of the course, he'd talk funny with an accent, he said [imitating accent] Mike, Mike. And I've done this imitation for him in front of a lot of people. He said, Mike, I'd be glad to recommend you for any reporting job anywhere, but don't go near the copy desk. I was horrible. That's what happened with him and he was just an enormous influence, I so admired his ability to work with words on deadline, to write headlines quick and to lay out pages without even thinking about it. The third was a woman named Jo Anne Smith [associate professor of journalism and communications, 1959-1968] who taught a number of things but primarily she taught Law of the Press, which was a required course, I don't know if it is still, and History of Journalism. I learned an enormous amount from her. I took History of Journalism and Law of the Press from her. She was a former sportswriter, one of the few pioneering women sportswriters that came back and got her Ph.D. and taught. Maybe it was the contrast between her nurturing style and Davis' brash, "ha, caught you again" [style], devastating you in front of your peers by ripping your copy to shreds in front of everybody. She was more of a nurturing person who was interested in everything you had to say and kind of got you. Those were the three really outstanding teachers I had and they're all three retired now; all three still living, but they're retired. That was almost thirty years ago, it's a long time. Did that answer your question?

B: Yes. Very well. What years were you here for college?

F: People think, well, remember when we did this, remember when we were on the *Alligator*? I never worked for the *Alligator* while I was here. I was here for eighteen months. I crammed two years worth of work into eighteen months because my wife was six months pregnant when I graduated and I had gotten the basics out of the way at junior college, knew what I had to take, got up here and I think I spent one semester, trimester and quarter, I think I went to school under all three of the systems. I spent one semester as a sophomore and I think I became a senior because I don't think I spent any time as a junior at all. It was like the fall of 1968 until the spring of 1970. I just went straight through finishing up because I had to get out because I was twenty-four years old and my wife was pregnant and I had no money and we had no insurance, which was stupid, but that's another story.

B: Could you give me a brief summary of your job experience and how your career progressed after you left the University of Florida?

F: Brief, no.

B: Okay, well, tell me about your positions.

F: Well, I left here and I went to work for the *Evening Independent*, which was the afternoon paper that was put out by the Times Publishing Company, which also publishes the *St. Petersburg Times*. It's funny, just last Saturday there was a reunion of the *Evening Independent* staff. The paper was closed in 1986. I'm fond of telling people I helped make the *Evening Independent* what it is today—closed [laughing]. I started in 1970 as just a general assignment reporter and the reason I got hired, the corporate editor who hired me was at this reunion last Saturday night and we reminisced about this, it was at a Gainesville function while I was still in school. It was the Society of Professional Journalists induction and they had a guest speaker, and it coincided with the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors convention and we all met before the convention and had a cocktail reception before dinner. I had been introduced to him by somebody who'd worked there over the summer and in one of Hugh Cunningham's courses had recommended me as a sharp kid and Cunningham had said good things about me. The interesting thing about it was that we kept ending up at the bar at the same time to get a drink during cocktail hour and he made a joke. [He said,] I may have to hire you because you drink at the same pace that I do. He remembered this last Saturday night and this was thirty-some years ago. I got hired at the princely sum of \$125 a week to go to work for the *Evening Independent*, not bad money for then. You bought a house for \$12,000 and could buy a car for less than \$2,000. God, I'm just so old. So I went to work for the *Evening Independent*, and this is going to sound a little preachy but I don't mean

to, I was lucky enough to get hired at the time, and I give this advice to people when they're choosing between two jobs or deciding where to go. I say, where's the best editor you're going to work for? I was lucky enough to get a city editor who was really spectacular, he was also at this reunion. His name was Jack Alexander. He was a city editor and a real old-fashioned city editor. The *Evening Independent* was an interesting experiment in newspapers because it was an afternoon newspaper and although it was on the same floor and in the same building and owned by the same people, and the news department competed heavily with the news department of the *St. Petersburg Times*, one of the best newspapers in the country. So here's the *Evening Independent*, this little old afternoon paper that had none of the big guns because those people didn't want to work for the *Independent*, they wanted to work for the *Times* because that's where all the prestige was. They had some interesting ideas to make it different. All the stories except for one page were local, all local, nothing off the wire except for one page on the inside. The entire front page was all locally produced news and none of the stories jumped, there was no three graphs then please see story on page 6. Nope, all on the same page, [it] didn't jump.

So it was quite a challenge to fill up that front page every day with just local stories. It was published Monday through Saturday. Jack was one of these experts at taking what may seem like nothing and turning it into something, writing a story about something and finding the news angle and finding the change and the trend on the most important thing. That's what I learned from him. I was a reporter there for three weeks and he said, you'll probably just be general assignment for six months or so until they figure out what you're all about. I had no experience, zero, I didn't write for the *Alligator*, I had one story published in the *Alligator* [and that was] by accident because all of the reporting stories when I was in school here, we used paper and manual typewriters and carbon paper, and the carbons, the copies [of] each story all went to the *Alligator* when you turned your stories in to your lab teacher. He or she would just ship them to the *Alligator* and they'd decide whether they wanted to use them or not. My very first story I wrote was in the *Alligator* and that was it, there was never another one. Anyway, I had no experience, I was absolutely green and I remember the very first day I walked into the newsroom [and I said], show me where I can sit, give me a phone and an ash tray. You could smoke at your desk, of course, we all did. Then at about 10:00, maybe it was 9:00 if you had to be there at 6:30 and the deadline was 11:30. [My editor said,] Foley, come here, I want you to do a story about the weather, it just rained a lot. He said, here, call this guy and this guy and this guy and look up their numbers and call them. [Panicked sound] I didn't know what I was doing, so I called them [and my editor said], well, write the story. So I dove right in and write the story. St. Petersburg is getting its biggest spring bath ever, or something along those lines. They thought that was fine and it was in the paper that day, my first byline. After that, I was assigned two cities to cover, Pinellas Park and Kenneth City, which I did for

about eight months. Then the biggest beat of the paper, the City Hall beat opened up. I had made friends with the guy who covered St. Petersburg City Hall, that was the primo beat. Every day at least one front page story came out of the beat, it was just good stuff. He recommended me for the job and Jack liked me, the city editor said, well, let's give it a try. So I covered City Hall for about three, maybe two years. I just blossomed. It just worked real well because I fit in, I got along and overcame my shyness and met the people and was picked as staff writer of the year at the *Independent* in 1971 after I'd only been there for a year. I have a plaque, I'm going to bring it up and put it here in my office. I covered City Hall and then I was promoted to assistant city editor right after that because I was blindly ambitious and didn't know what I wanted to do. Then I was that for probably a year and then I went to the *St. Petersburg Times* again on a fluke, which I'll get into if you want to. I went to the *Times* as assistant metropolitan editor because they needed somebody. City editor, or metropolitan editor, assistant managing editor, managing editor, executive editor—that was twenty-two years now. We are twenty-two years now into my career. Then I went over to the corporate side of the paper as the vice president. I had not planned to stay in St. Petersburg. The only reason I moved there was because that was where I was from and I had a job. But always my motto was, I am going to stay here as long as I'm learning something, as long as I'm not bored. So, it seemed like whenever I'd get bored, bang, I would get another job, I would get promoted, something would happen. That's why I was there for twenty-two years in the newsroom. Then I went to the corporate side of the paper and became the vice president in charge of community affairs. My job was to put a face on the paper. The editor didn't want to do it. The publisher had left, and they didn't have a new publisher or any kind of personality who wanted to go off and meet and greet the public and speak at the events and all and join the various local organizations, and so they wanted me. They decided I could do it because I knew how the newspaper worked. People would ask me hard questions about why does the newspaper do this, and I could answer them, whereas the treasurer wouldn't know and the publisher wouldn't know how the newsroom operates. So, I did that for eight years, and I liked it a lot. It was very interesting. And then that was thirty years. That was enough, thank you very much.

B: What inspired your jump from the editorial side to the corporate side?

F: Twenty-two years is a long time. Besides, the next job I would have had, if I were to be deemed worthy of it, would have been the top job, CEO, editor and president, and I never wanted that. I wanted to be a writer. I never wanted to be a corporate big shot. That just wasn't in the cards. I just didn't want to do it. The editor and president had to groom somebody for that job for when he retired, and if I didn't want it, somebody else had to have it. Now, whether I would have been considered for it or not doesn't make any difference. I didn't want it, so I wasn't going to be considered for it. I don't regret that, either. I am very happy doing

what I'm doing right now. So, if I had done that, I would probably be stressed. I'd be in a mental hospital. Running a newsroom is extremely stressful. At one point when I was managing editor, I was responsible for 420-some people, everything from copy clerks to Internet [staff] to our Paris bureau chief, and a budget of \$24 million. Out of that, every year I would have to figure out wages, wage administration for everybody, how many hires we could make, where they could go, what they would do, who would work for whom, reorganization. That was the long term planning that I did, strategic planning. Then, on a day-to-day basis, everything in the newspaper except for the advertising and the editorial page was my responsibility. Everything in the newspaper. They all worked for me. That's really stressful because you'd get hit with a zillion decisions all day long. If you're not concentrating, you maybe make one [decision] in haste, and then at 3 o'clock in the morning you wake up and your mind starts to race and you kind of run over your entire day, and it's like this cold hand is gripping your stomach. And you say, oh, my God, what did I do? I did that? Oh, my God! Oh, I can't believe I did that! And then you kind of lie there saucer-eyed the rest of the night waiting for the paper to get thrown at your doorstep, and then you rush out to look at it and say [sigh], that's pretty good. That looks better than I thought it would. After all, that's not bad. You can't do that for very long. You just can't do that, can't have that much responsibility, because all the ethical calls—do we publish this picture, do we not, do we name this person, do we not, do we run this story, do we not, is this the lead story or is this a lead-in story? And they all dumped it on me. I reported to one guy, who was the top guy. If he was out of town or something, it was me. I did that for eight years. And then I was executive editor, and the managing editor reported to me, so he would take a lot of the brunt of that. And that was enough. When I left here [after graduation], my goal in life, I figured maybe some day in the distant future I will be city editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*. Well, I was city editor of the *St. Petersburg Times* seven or eight years after I graduated, and I did that for five years.

B: Then what do you do after that?

F: That was my favorite job at the paper, being city editor, and I was really good at it. I had a bunch of tremendous reporters working for me. Many of them have gone on to incredible things. Howell Raines, the executive editor of the *New York Times*, worked for me as my political editor. Pat Tyler, who now works at the *New York Times* and is in line to become the Washington bureau chief of the *New York Times*, worked for me, covered night cops when I was city editor. The current editor and president of the *St. Petersburg Times* was an intern for me and worked for me. The movie editor of the *LA Times* [*Los Angeles Times*]. The whole industry is rife with Pulitzer winners who worked for me when I was city editor. Rick Bragg, who I think is one of the great talents of American writing, he worked for me at the *St. Petersburg Times*. That was great. That was the best job I ever had, being city editor, because I could lay off all the big decisions on

somebody else, like the ethical decisions and all that, because it was the managing editor's job. I worked with all this incredible young talent. We brainstormed and we had fun. I could teach a little bit and watch them develop and watch them grow and watch them be better writers and move on to big things. That's why I like doing this job. It's the same thing, essentially.

B: Watching people grow.

F: The people are younger and they have a lot longer way to go, but it really is incredibly satisfying to me to see people progress. There's nothing comparable.

B: When you became managing editor and executive editor, did you have any specific goals for the paper or policies that you started?

F: It's been a while since that was.

B: Anything in general?

F: I think there were several things that were important to me and still are. I thought, and I still think, that stories need to be written to the reader and for no other reason. There is no other reason to write a story. If nobody is going to read it, then don't waste the time, don't waste the newsprint, don't waste the ink. Don't just write a story because you can. It's real important that it's interesting, it's real important that it's understandable, it's real important that it's reader-friendly. The reader says, hey, I didn't know that, or, wow, this is interesting, or, I never understood that before and now I understand why that is. I think that's real important. So, not to be boring is the way I look at it. Don't be boring. The other thing, and this was taught to me by a number of different reporters, both good and bad, is that what we're after is the truth. We're not after a good story, we're not after a good quote, we're not after a Pulitzer Prize. We're after the truth. If somebody says something to you and you don't think they meant it, that they just said something and if you quote them as saying that they will look, they will be saying something they don't really feel, it is incumbent upon you as a writer or an interviewer to say, look, did he really mean to say this, are you sure that this is the truth? I know a lot of journalists who say, well, they said it, let's print it. There are a couple of reporters who are just so good at that [finding the truth]. One of them was Tom French, a kid who covered cops for me right out of college. He won the Pulitzer Prize not long ago and has written several books and still works in St. Petersburg. His goal was to get the truth. If somebody said something that might have made a great quote, he would say, okay now, did you mean to say that? He was after the truth. And the guy would say, oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. And [Tom would say], okay, I'm after the truth. There's a difference between a good story and the truth sometimes. That's why there are tabloid TV shows, I think, and many tabloid newspapers that are interested in half a story because if

they report the whole story it is not a story anymore. They are not interested in the truth, and I think that's what is wrong with journalism today. I think if I had a serious philosophy at the time, that was part of it.

B: Yes. I remember you telling us in reporting class.

F: It was hard to instill that in people because you'd get this great quote and let's go with it. Well, is that what the person meant to say? If it is, great, even better because it's the truth. But if it's not.... That's hard to get across to people, that's hard to make them understand. I have friends who worked for a tabloid newspaper where they've made stuff up. I mean, they worked for the *Weekly World News* and entertainingly and wonderfully made stuff up. There's a great quote in the textbook from the former managing editor there, Sal Ivone, who said, if a woman calls up and says her toaster is talking to her, I don't tell her to get help, I tell her to put the toaster on the phone. I love that, but that's a totally different business. The other thing, I guess the third thing besides go for the truth and make it interesting, is don't take yourself too seriously. If there's some fun to be had here, if there's a way to make the story funny or make the environment fun or funny, let's do that. I would much rather stand on top of the desk at six o'clock around deadline time and scream, where the fuck is the copy, which I used to do [laughing]. People remember that. My motto, my three things that I said to all new reporters and all reporters getting new jobs, and somebody wrote this down and gave it back to me, Tom French did, was make it sing, get the dog's name and don't fuck up. Those were my three bits of advice that I would give to new reporters. I guess those were the main things that I tried to instill. I had the advantage of working with some incredibly talented people, and I always felt that I could learn from them as much as they could learn from me.

B: Is it weird to look at them now and say, gosh, they started with me.

F: It was so interesting, two or three weeks ago—I'm going to totally impress you with name dropping here but—Thursday my wife called me and said, call the answering machine at home and get this message because a guy called inviting you to Howell Raines' bachelor party. I'm thinking, good God, I haven't seen Howell in years. We've talked on the phone. I got him tickets to the Final Four and he's been out to see the band, but ever since he got promoted to the big shot, you know, he was promoted to executive editor six days before September 11 [2001], and so he ran all their coverage for a year and the newspaper won seven Pulitzer Prizes, which is more than twice as many as any other newspaper has won in one year ever. Three was the maximum. Anyway, he was a big shot, and the guy calls me and says, you don't know me, I'm a friend of Howell's here in New York, and we're putting together a bachelor party for him, and your name is on the list. This was on a Thursday, and the party was on a Tuesday. He said, I've been trying to get ahold of you, I've been sending e-mail to the wrong place, I

had the wrong phone number, and I finally got you. So, I said, you know, I've just got to come. It's inconvenient, I've got class, I don't really have that kind of money to travel to New York on short notice, and it was nine degrees, but I had to go, so I went.

It was in this wonderful little village restaurant not far from where he lives, in the basement, in the former kitchen of this place. It was built in 1814. So, it was the former kitchen where they had two huge fireplaces where they used to do all the cooking, and there were eighteen, nineteen guys there. That's all. One was Ken Auletta, the writer who did a 15,000-word profile on Howell for the *New Yorker*. Gay Talese, the writer, was there. Dan Rather [CBS Evening News anchor] was there. But not all the guys knew each other. Peter Pringle from the *New York Times* was there. Several *Times* people were there. So, a lot of guys didn't know each other. They didn't know me, so they thought I was a big shot, too. It was so great. It was so fun. Just these eighteen guys sitting around this U-shaped table, and Howell introduced me as his former boss. Wasn't that cool? I thought, this is great, I've got this great man, Howell Raines, introducing me as his former boss. Anyway, all that said, it is weird to see. I can pick up the *New York Times*, I get it on Sunday, and I look at the front page, and I would guess four out of five Sundays there is at least one person there who is either an intern . . . Isabel Wilkerson was an intern for me at the *Evening Independent* back in the early 1970s, and now she's a national correspondent for the *New York Times*. Rick Bragg is in there all the time. Tyler is on the front page. It's just page after page. Because Howell just liberally stole from the *St. Petersburg Times* when he left, just took them all, anyone he could, because he knew how good they were.

The *St. Petersburg Times* is a very special place because it is an independent newspaper. I didn't realize it when I went there, but that is the best. You couldn't go to work for a better place, I don't think, than an independent newspaper, which, of course, the *New York Times* is, also. But the *St. Petersburg Times* was when I went there owned by one man, Nelson Poynter, who died in 1978. I actually flew to New York with Nelson Poynter for the 1976 convention, so I actually got to spend a couple of hours with the great man all by myself, one-on-one. We also flew first class, which was great. But, it was owned by him, and his vision was that newspapers should not be owned by chains because the owners of a newspaper really needed to breathe the same air and drive the same streets and send their kids to the same school as the reader so that they kept in touch and catered to and reported on and committed journalism for their readers because they did it and they knew it. This was important. Before he died, he tried to fix it so that the newspaper would not be bought by a chain, by Gannett, by Knight-Ridder, by the *New York Times* or somebody else, and so he essentially gave the newspaper away.

Many newspapers were independent, and they were great because they were

independent, and then when their owners died, the inheritance taxes were enormous and the heirs had to sell it to a chain in order to pay the taxes and to get rich. But he didn't want his kids to get it and he didn't want his grandchildren to get it. He wanted to give it to a school, after they were taken care of, of course, and so he established a school, the Poynter Institute, although it was called the Modern Media Institute until he died and then they changed the name. So, the paper is still owned and operated independently by one person who chooses his or her successor and who lives in St. Petersburg, and that person comes from the newsroom, from the news side of the operation so that you have this unique situation, where[as] in most of American newspapers the publisher is in charge of everything, the money guy, the money person who has to make sure that there are profits and all of this. In [the] *St. Petersburg [Times]*, the editor and president is the top guy, and the publisher reports to the editor/president, which is unique. So, the news department comes first. Covering the news is more important than big time profits or pissing off an advertiser. It's absolutely unique in American journalism.

B: Quality was more important than bottom lines, then.

F: Absolutely. In fact, I was on the board of directors for ten years, and we had a minimum profit that we had to make, of course, to recoup business, and also a maximum profit. If it got above a certain figure of profit, we weren't spending enough money on the newspaper. You'd be hard-pressed to find another corporation that has a policy like that, and that's just the way it was. It was good. It was a good paper, and that's why Howell Raines came to work there, and that's why all these bright kids from Indiana, Tom French, and this is why Rick Bragg decided he wanted to come there. We hired him to work in our Clearwater bureau, and he turned us down. [He said,] I don't want to work in Clearwater. Then about a month later, he wrote the most wonderful letter—I wish I still had a copy—of ingratiating him, saying what a horse's ass he was for not taking the job, could he please have another chance, begging for another chance. But this is the kind of place it is, this academy for young people who want to learn how to write quality [copy] and get a chance to travel. That's one of the reasons I stayed for so long. It was just a wonderful place. It still is a wonderful place. Some great people have been cranked out of there and gone off to bigger and better things. Some of them, actually, after they've done a stint with the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, and who said, I'm not coming back, come back. That's how they manage to maintain the high level of the paper.

B: Where did all the funding for the Poynter Institute come from? Was it just mainly the *St. Petersburg Times*?

F: It was all the *Times*. The *Times* makes its profits, pays taxes just as any other corporation, and then takes the after-tax profits and gives a portion of them to the

nonprofit Poynter Institute to run seminars for all ages of journalism, all journalists in various stages of their careers. There's a summer writing camp for elementary school kids in the summer, there is a program for teachers of journalism in high school and junior high, and then there are professional seminars. I used to go there about once or twice a year. I went to a seminar once when I was a managing editor, a seminar on ethics, and it was all free. Poynter covers the tuition and the hotel and the meals.

B: That is how they give back to the community.

F: Absolutely. But you bring in people all the time. I went down there for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Poynter Institute not long ago. Howell was on a panel. Tom Brokaw [*NBC Nightly News* anchor] was on a panel. Dan Rather was there. These are the kinds of people who show up at this. I was one of the many who attended the ethics seminar. I was a participant with a young woman reporter for NBC who was covering the Pentagon at the time. She is now Katie Couric [*NBC Today Show* anchor]. Well, she was Katie Couric then, but she wasn't quite a big shot then. But that's the type of person who goes to this wonderful program. A lot of their stuff focuses on ethics now. So, that's why I stayed in St. Petersburg for so long. I had all this incredible opportunity to do things.

B: So, the *St. Petersburg Times* basically feeds off of the Poynter Institute, but what sort of influence does the institute have on other newspapers around the state?

F: Around the country. It educates journalists from all over, absolutely from all over. Raul Ramirez [news and public affairs director of KQED Public Radio], he's a Poynter fellow. He was there last week for a week-long seminar, and he's from San Francisco. It's got a worldwide reputation. They do programs for foreign journalists. The Poynter Institute exerts no influence on the *Times*, nor does the *Times* influence the Poynter Institute. They are relatively independent, given the fact that the chairman of both is the same guy. He runs both. It is a wonderful altruistic situation. The executives are well-compensated, no question about that, but it is a local newspaper first and foremost, and that's why the *St. Petersburg Times* is one of the best newspapers in the country, I think.

B: Your opinion is definitely valid, and a lot of people feel the same way.

F: Yes.

B: There has really been a change in technology, a huge improvement over the past ten years or so.

F: More than that, but, yes, you're right.

B: Yes. When you were editor, how did this technology make a difference in the way you guys covered news?

F: It was a horrible pain in the ass. When I started working there, March 23, 1970, that big black machine was down on the first floor, the linotype. The second floor of our building—the news department was on the third floor or second floor—had a bunch of those. That's how the newspaper was printed. It had hot lead that was melted and formed under letters, and it was typewriters and it was carbon paper and it was pasted stories together sent downstairs. The type setters typed them in, and it came out in hot lead type. I watched it go from there to what they call cold type, which is what it is today, the stuff that comes out of the machines already set in type, through to electric typewriters to type setters who would type in stories on a tape, would run the tapes through the machine, and then the type came out of the computer. I watched it go from film developing where it was only black and white photos. You would run color every once in awhile, but it would look like shit. It was horrible color. It was impossible to register. It was sort of like mud. It was bad. We would cover a football game in Gainesville, the sports department, and we'd charter a plane to come back. On the plane, the photographer would develop his film. He was using film, and he developed the film on the plane and get it back in time for us to put it in the paper the next day in color. We'd get this huge criticism from Florida State [University] fans because we always ran Gainesville games in color and FSU in black and white. They screamed, why? Because they played their games at night and we couldn't get the film back in time.

I watched it go from there to now, when the photographer shoots a picture and transmits it, it's there and it's digital and it's perfect. It's digitally printed, and it's transmitted over fiber optics to the printing place. What it did, it gave you time, it gave you quality, high-quality stuff. The world is in color, so the pictures in your newspaper should be in color. Also, it facilitates. It makes it easier. You don't have to dictate stories. You don't have to call them in over the phone. You can file them and punch them through the phone lines. It makes it easier for a reporter to concentrate on being a reporter, and not being a technician and not operating the teletype or whatever it might be. You don't understand how hard it used to be to get stories in the newspaper. Our Tallahassee bureau, for example, all our wire copy came in on a teletype machine, which is essentially a typewriter that you would send stuff to. You would type it in on one end, and it would be typed out on the other end, but it was all in capital letters. There were no lowercase letters, so the copyists had to go through there and capitalized all the things that needed to be capitalized. Now, everything is done. It comes to you ready to put in the newspaper. It is so much easier, and you can do more quality work. In the computers, you can do phenomenal designs that before you couldn't do without an enormous amount of work and an advanced deadline. Now, you

can design a page in a computer in no time, and it just comes out like magic. So, I think that's what it has done: it has made it easier. Because in the newspaper and other visual things, the message is not just the words and not just the pictures and not just the design; it is all three. That's what you're getting across because some people only look at the pictures, some people only read the headlines, some people only read the cut lines under the pictures, and some people actually read the news story, which is great. But you've got to have all three or four to come across, and that's what technology has done for the news. But then the next step in technology, which really nobody knows what can happen, the Internet, what is that going to do to newspapers? Nobody knows. If I knew, I wouldn't be teaching; I would be a consultant, I'd be rich, I'd be living on an island somewhere. To hell with your interview. Forget about it, kid, get your grade on your own. I don't know. Nobody does. So, you have all these different newspapers trying to figure out how to make a buck off the Internet, and what they've really essentially done is found a way to give away their product for free.

B: How do you feel about convergence?

F: I'm glad you asked. I'm going to tell you.

[End of side A1]

F: In the minds of the publishers and some people who are studying this as a discipline, convergence is a way—I'm going to go real stupid and crazy here—to gain synergy by combining the electronic, the print and the television broadcast arms of the journalism business into one gigantic empire where people are able to facilitate their stories through the system and go gather the information and take the pictures and film the video and write the story and then go on the air with the story, and this is what makes it all better because all three are working as one to come up with the big story. I think that's bullshit. I think it's a way for publishers to save some money on hiring people and working on three jobs. I just think it's crazy. I think a good writer should write. I think a good photographer should take pictures.

B: And not be expected to do everything.

F: I think a good videographer should do video. I think a good TV person should do TV. If you take a good TV person and make them write stories, it's often going to be drivel. Some people have done very well at it. There are some people over at the *Tampa Tribune* who are very good at it, but I think those are rare cases. I don't think that's the rule. I think it's a way to save money, purely. The *Gainesville Sun* used to be a better newspaper than it is now. In fact, I made a joke at a Hugh Cunningham tribute not long ago. I started talking about his class and when he took the whole class down, and I said, that's before the *Gainesville Sun*

became a newsletter. People in the audience were [roaring]. But it's true. It's a shadow of what it was, and it was never great. Now, in the squeeze for profits, they have a small staff, they have an inexperienced staff, the paper is narrower, there is less in it, they don't have a lot of people writing local news, they run more wire copy. This is what has happened in the whole newspaper industry, and they wonder why kids aren't reading the newspaper. Well, A, it's a dinosaur, and, B, it's shitty. There's nothing in it for them. The good writers are gone. The good editors, they're not paying them, they're gone. And there's not enough space to do anything. So, you've got this great technology to do what? To put out a crummy newspaper. This is what the chains have done, in hiring freezes. A good guy was Jay Black.

B: Who was he?

F: He was the executive editor of the *San Jose Mercury News*, a Knight-Ridder newspaper, and he protested the budget cuts. He said, with these budget cuts that you have handed to me this year, I will [be] putting out an inferior paper, I will not be able to cover the news, I quit. And he quit. He absolutely quit, which I thought was wonderful. It made this big splash, and he was right. A lot of the editors say, we've got to do what we can. But, see, the profits don't have to be that high. A 30-percent profit is enormous, just enormous. Any other industry is 6, 7, 8 percent. 10 percent would be good. Newspapers want way too much, and for a long time they could get it because the economy was booming and it was expanding and there were a lot of airlines that would advertise like crazy. Cigarettes used to advertise in the newspaper, not much anymore. A lot of newspapers won't take cigarette advertising. All that is part of it. The *Times* is going to be fine. It's a good newspaper, and it is going to be around long enough to continue paying my pension until I won't need it anymore. But my students don't read the newspaper. They read the *Alligator*.

B: It's free.

F: Because it's there, and they can work their crossword puzzles.

B: Exactly. What do you think newspapers can do to attract more readers?

F: If I knew, I would be on an island somewhere as a consultant. I think newspapers have to get better. I don't think they can cut anymore. Stop the freaking cutting. It's like [publishers say], okay, we're not making our big profits, so what we're going to do is make the product less worthwhile. Well, people aren't taking it anymore because they can finally get by without it because there's not that much in it anymore. [Publishers say], fewer people are taking it, so we'll have to make it smaller, we'll have to cut out this feature, we can't afford it anymore. Sorry. I just don't think that's the way to do it. I mean, my plan for the *Times* was always in

Tampa, where the competition was very stiff with the *Tampa Tribune* and still is, my idea was always to cut the price to a dime. Instead of making it twenty-five cents, make it a dime. That's fifteen cents cheaper than the *Tribune*. You don't pay for the newspaper with circulation money anyway; you pay for it with advertising. I always thought that would be a great gimmick to get people in town to buy the paper. For fifteen cents [difference] or for twenty-five cents difference [from] a thirty-five cent [paper], man, everybody would buy the *Times*. They looked at me like I was absolutely crazy.

B: It's money.

F: Well, it's me.

B: Let's talk a little bit about newspapers in general. What do you think the most important functions of a newspaper are?

F: I'm giving my stock speech here, but there have always been three major functions: to inform, to entertain, to educate, to lead on the editorial page. You can go back to Thomas Jefferson and what he felt was a cacophony of voices where you have all these different people saying a lot of different things that you say, okay, well, now I can make up my own mind because I've heard a bunch of different opinions. I think that's what newspapers are supposed to do. I think that newspapers come closer to being accurate than any other media. I absolutely believe that because they are held more accountable. It's very easy to clip something out of the newspaper and challenge it because it's written down. It's much harder to do that to a radio broadcast because they never correct anything on the radio. They don't care. TV rarely airs corrections, unless they get sued, again because it's so shallow [and] there's no depth. But a newspaper, you can clip it out and demand, hey, this is wrong, I'm not sixty-five, I'm fifty-six. They correct it. The good ones do. It is much more accountable. The Internet has no accountability whatsoever, zero. Page after page of erroneous information. I have a couple of horror stories my students came up with just this semester about the Internet. One of them wrote a story about the Bosstones, and he spelled it with one S. I said, I'm old and I don't know the music, but I think there are two S's in it. But I looked up the Bosstones, and their official website is Bosstones. But there are pages and pages and pages of the Mighty Mighty Bosstones and one S wrong. He said, well, it's on the Internet. I said, that doesn't mean it's right; it's wrong, it's an error. Lake Wauburg here in Gainesville. It's spelled with a U. Kids want to spell it with an E. It's all over the Internet with an E, too. I called up the Internet, and I got a picture of Lake Wauburg, I got the sign of it that says Lake Wauburg, and that's the name of it, that's the name on the sign. But the Internet had page after page wrong, and so it drives me mad.

But the newspaper has to get it right for history and for the ages. I think if there's

any great hope for newspapers, it's local news, which nobody else covers, and it's being accurate. The local news, as long as they don't continue to cut people so they can't cover it. People are much more interested in, you know, why there was a siren in their neighborhood in the middle of the night or why were the cops at so-and-so's house last night. They are much more interested in that than they are in one erudite pundit's opinion about the economy of Afghanistan. I am telling you, they may care a little bit about that, but [they say], I wonder what that siren was in the neighborhood last night. Their interest level is very high in what journalists consider a very low level of reporting. You get out of school and you report on—I did—Pinellas Park and Kenneth City, these two tiny communities. Well, people in Pinellas Park and Kenneth City are damn interested in road work and schools and things like that. As I progress, or other people progress, the interest wanes as they get up to covering [bigger stories], and by the time they get up to the top, what are they? Political commentators. And the readers don't give a shit. They still want to know why there was a siren in the neighborhood last night. Whereas the reporter has reached the pinnacle, the interest level has hit bottom. It's a crazy, crazy thing. So the answer, if you are pressing me for an answer to your question, I don't have one. I don't know. But I really do believe in newspapers as a bastion of accuracy and reliable information if they're willing to spend the money to get it and to keep the people and get the people and train the people and encourage people to go to school to learn how to do it, and I don't think it's happening enough. The *Gainesville Sun* doesn't make a big case to be a journalist, and that's too bad because we're in a university town with one of the best journalism schools. It doesn't make any sense.

- B: Let's talk a little bit about accuracy because there are always going to be errors no matter how hard you try.
- F: You're absolutely right. People make mistakes.
- B: So, what do you do when they get published in the paper?
- F: Correct them. Fix them prominently and do it cheerfully and explain why you made the mistake when it's appropriate. Absolutely. Some people say, well, look at all the corrections in the paper, that must not be a very good paper. It is a very good paper because, again, they go back to the foundation I talked about before: truth. Good journalism has always had three basic components: it's fair, it's accurate, and it's complete, a good story. A fourth one was added because of the competition for people's time: it has to be interesting. It has to somehow be compelling. You want to know, or maybe you don't know you want to know until you see it and say, oh, my God, the typical "hey Martha" story or the typical "holy shit" story where the reader goes, "Hey Martha, look at this," or, "Holy shit, I didn't know . . ." And now there's a fifth component that has always been there but now more than before: it's got to make money. Given the quantity of trash TV

and other competitions for people's time, a newspaper has got to spend more time, money and effort to be interesting. *USA Today*—which I always thought was a joke when it first came out, and I still think that it has a huge hole in it, a giant gaping hole, [in that] it has no local news in it, which is what the lifeblood of a real newspaper is—has done as well as any newspaper could have. The *New York Times* is my favorite newspaper in the world, but it's not for everybody's taste. A lot of people just don't find it that appealing. But *USA Today*, in a certain way, has done what it set out to do, but it doesn't have any local news. So, I don't have the answer, I wish I did, but I can rant pretty good about it all.

B: Let's talk about ethics at newspapers. I have often heard in my classes that it's a lot easier for a wealthy paper to be more ethical and they are much more inclined to be that way. Do you think that is true?

F: In some respects that makes sense because if you describe ethics as going after the news no matter what, in other words, taking on big tobacco as *60 Minutes* wouldn't do, if you recall—did you ever see the movie [*The Insider*], I can't remember the name, but Russell Crowe was in it, and they had this whistle-blower and then the brass, under huge pressure from the tobacco companies, wouldn't run the story. They had enough money to fight and they finally did, but a lot of newspapers can't afford to take on, first of all, a big advertiser in town because they will pull their advertising. It will cost them a lot of money, so they don't. Newspapers rarely write stories about car dealers, and car dealers are among the scummiest business there is, but if you write a story even about one car dealer in town, all of them pull their ads. That's, what, 30 percent of your revenue. That's kind of scary.

Nelson Poynter, the former owner of the *Times*, almost lost the paper because they ran a couple of stories critical of the paper's biggest advertiser, a man named [J.E.] Doc Webb, who owned Webb City in St. Petersburg, which is the world's largest drugstore. It expanded over several city blocks. It was the very first shopping center, essentially, in St. Petersburg, and Doc Webb invented it. He took page after page after page, ten pages every day in the paper advertising all the bargains of this place. Poynter wrote a nasty story about him and would not retract it, and he [Webb] pulled his ads. Poynter couldn't make the payroll, but he stuck in there. He almost lost the newspaper. So, that is a definite consideration. Even if somebody is wrong, even if you're right as a newspaper, and the people you write about and you expose as bad guys sue you, it's going to cost you a lot of money. Whether you are right or wrong doesn't make any difference. It's going to cost you a lot of money. If you don't have the deep pockets, if you don't have the money and you're not willing to spend it, then you can't do good journalism. You just can't. It's very expensive.

We were sued once. Lucy Morgan and Jack Reed did a series of stories on the

sheriff of Pasco County. They wrote the story, and he was indicted and kicked out of office by the governor and after prosecution was found not guilty and sued the paper for damaging his reputation, and so we went through a six-week libel trial. The jury's finding was, it's true, not guilty, it's true, no damages, no nothing. It still cost half a million dollars, plus my time for six weeks, Lucy's time for six weeks—long before that because she was prepping for the trial for four or five months—and Jack's time. Two Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters out of commission for six months.

B: What position were you in?

F: I was the managing editor, and I was the corporate representative. I sat at the defense table for this whole trial in Tampa. My salary, which was considerable at the time, and my attention was away from the newspaper for six weeks. It's very expensive. Thank God the *Times* has a lot of money and isn't afraid to spend it. It is not afraid to spend it to cover the news. I'll bet you the *Gainesville Sun* would give a second thought to something like that. I guess that's a flaw in the system.

B: Everything is underlined by money, and that's unfortunate.

F: No question about that. But you're right, you have to be able to afford to have high standards. It's not just ethics; it's all sorts of other things. That was a good question.

B: Good. Do you think newspapers have a civic responsibility to communities they serve?

F: Absolutely. Newspapers and TV stations and radio stations and news magazines and all the media are protected by the First Amendment, freedom of the press. They have constitutional protection to do what they do, to write nasty things about people if they are true. That is an enormous responsibility. It's a huge freedom. What you do is protected by the Constitution. Think of another profession that's protected by the U. S. Constitution. You have the right to write stories about things, and as long as they're true, they can say nasty things about people. Damn, that's a huge responsibility. You then have an enormous responsibility to take the huge power you have over people and places and institutions and history and reputations and the educational system and the FCAT [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test] and the University of Florida. You have all this power to do things, and if you don't do it responsibly, if you don't have this moral and ethical backbone, then you absolutely should not be in business.

I think that's why America has become so disillusioned with the media, because there are sloppy reporters and there are papers that make errors or they have people who work for them who have less than solid integrity and they don't explain what they're doing. Big

case. Janet Cooke, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, wrote a story about the nine-year-old heroin addict and then she made the mistake of winning a Pulitzer Prize, and somebody did some investigation and found that she had made it up, that it was a composite of various people. Well, you don't do that. But throughout the internal investigation, Ben Bradlee, the executive editor of the *Washington Post*, [said,] we stand by our story. You dumbass, you were wrong, you don't stand by your story. [He said,] well, we're investigating, and I back my reporter 100 percent. You reporter is a horrible liar. Man, that was huge. *60 Minutes* not running the tobacco story. *60 Minutes* has always been this icon of slash-and-burn. Nobody is too big for Mike Wallace [CBS News *60 Minutes* anchor] to take down, and he just wimped out. That's why the correction policy is important. That's why newspapers, especially, and all the media need to explain why they do what they do, why they endorse candidates, why they have an editorial position. It's the most honest thing they can do, to have an editorial to say what the owner thinks. Now you can judge everything else in this newspaper because you know what the owner's opinion is. That's what the editorial page is all about. But they never explain that. What gives you the right to endorse candidates? Well, it's a responsibility. It's a duty. If you are going to take editorial positions on all these issues, and then it comes down to push comes to shove time where the voter has to go in the voting booth and actually make a selection, the newspaper ought to at least say what it would do. They have to do it. They can't cop out then and say, I'm not going to tell you how to vote, I have all these positions on the issues and I'll tell you whether you're right or wrong but I'm not going to tell you how to vote. Bullshit. You say, here's who I would vote for. _____. But they don't ever say that. They never explain themselves. That's what my job was when I was on the corporate side, to go out and explain the newspaper to people. My standard topic as a speaker, [whether I was speaking as] an after-dinner speaker, lunch speaker, breakfast speaker, speaker to a college class, my title was always, "What's Wrong With the *St. Petersburg Times*?" People would just come up raving. They'd love that.

- B: You brought up the editorial board. Let's talk about that a little bit. How involved were you in the decisions of the editorial board?
- F: Not at all. Zero. It is totally separate, news and editorial page. When I was executive or managing editor, I was in charge of everything in the paper except advertising and editorials and the Op Ed page, of course. Those two pages were totally separate. That's up to the editorial board. The news department is not involved in that.
- B: How much independence did the editorial board have from the higher-ups?
- F: The higher-up sat in on the editorial board every day. He'd sit in there and read the *New York Times*, so he knew what was going on. Then he, of course, handpicked the editor of editorials, so he knew how he agreed. They'd always discuss the controversial things, like who they were going to endorse for president and some other things. But total

independence, not at all. Nobody has total independence from the publisher. It just doesn't happen.

B: How much influence do you think the publisher should have over what a newspaper does?

F: Should?

B: Yes, in your opinion.

F: I don't know. If the publisher is someone, say in a big newspaper chain and the publisher is someone who just transferred in, is a young guy or gal on the make, on the way up, ambitious, ready to go and is moving through the chain from paper to paper to paper, has just come up to be publisher of the paper and has been in town for about six months to a year and doesn't really know what's going on because his eyes are on the next higher paper in the chain as he improves his career. I don't know that I want that guy making decisions. He knows nothing about the community, and he doesn't give a shit. He doesn't care because he's leaving. That's one of the many things that's wrong with chain ownership.

But they do have enormous influence because they hire and fire the editorial page people, period. What I think they should have and what they actually have is quite another matter. And then you have the *St. Petersburg Times*, where they live and breathe and send their kids to school and drive on the same roads and pay the same taxes, and I think the publisher has a pretty good idea of what's going on, has been there for twenty years. But these cookie-cutter guys who, the manageable objective and the goal is to make a certain profit The goal of any newspaper should be the reader. If it's the revenue, then you've got problems. That's a long way of saying I don't know. These are some very tough issues.

B: Aside from the whole Webb issue when he wanted to pull all of his advertising out of the paper, did you see a lot of other advertiser pressures as the result of editorials and news stories?

F: Always. Car dealers were surely the worst because they are the most sensitive bunch. You know, I am sure there are some honest car dealers in the world, but a lot of the techniques are not. They have a terrible reputation. The only people who rank lower than car dealers are journalists, and lawyers maybe. But they're so incredibly sensitive, so you could not run in the newspaper a story on how to buy or get a good deal on a used car. They would go absolutely crazy. They were totally irrational and nuts. Since they control so much of the spending, the newsroom is gun shy about running stories about cars. They run these "advertorials," which I find to be the worst possible thing you can ever put in anything, and everybody, including the *New York Times*, does it now, where they will put

on the top [that] all this material has been paid for, but the reader doesn't really notice that.

B: It is very misleading.

F: I hate it. I just really think it's a horrible thing.

B: Have you seen that popping up a lot more recently?

F: Yes. The *Alligator* does it. The university buys two pages a week. I told Sarah [Myrick] when she was editor [of the *Alligator* in fall 2002], Sarah, why doesn't it say at the top, this material is supplied by the University and this space is paid for by the University? On both pages, it should say that. Otherwise, it looks like the *Alligator*. I bet you 99 out of a 100 students don't have the slightest idea that's all the university. In fact, they probably wonder why they'll see a story on that page and then another story written by an *Alligator* staff writer. Why did they repeat this story? Because these are press releases from the University, and this is a real news story. If you are going to do it, you have got to change the type, which the *Alligator* does which is okay. But then you have to label it so anybody can see it: this entire page consists of advertising. You don't want to mislead the reader.

B: Exactly. People in the editorial department and the advertising department often don't get along because they have different views for everything about the paper. Why do you think this is, and did you see this a lot at the *St. Pete Times*?

F: It's at every paper. Again, I'm using the car dealers, but it was our advertising department that would come to the news department, although it was never done salesman to reporter or salesman to copy desk chief. It was always at the very top, board members usually, [to whom] which it is perfectly appropriate to talk about things. The advertising director would never go into the newsroom. I don't think he's ever been in the newsroom. That is absolutely forbidden. People have been fired for that type of thing, for suggesting stories and things like that. It's absolutely forbidden at the *Times* and at other newspapers, I think, and if it's not, it should be.

The most famous story I can tell you where you had this real conflict—and this is probably one of my favorite stories about the *St. Petersburg Times* and one of the reasons I love it and revere it and the people—involved Gene Patterson, the editor emeritus of the paper who was there in the late 1970s, early 1980s. It was a story by a University of Florida product, a man named David Smith, who was a student here when I was city editor. I would come up to interview prospective interns, and I had met him when I was looking for a stringer. He was really good. Won the Hearst competition [premier award for collegiate journalism] for stories he had written for the *Times*, and then we hired him as soon as he got out of school. He covered night cops and rapidly progressed through there

and was then up covering city hall for the *St. Petersburg Times*. He came across this story because he was real good and dogged and determined and would meet people at midnight and talk to the little people and was just that good.

The Rockwell Corporation was negotiating to buy some city land out in the northeast area of the city called the Gateway Area, an area prime for development, to build a factory that would come in and supply tons of jobs, a huge boost to the economy, really jolt St. Petersburg out of the recession it was in. The paper thrives on growth, so if you bring in 900 employees and all this payroll and other stuff that would fuel businesses and they would all advertise in the paper and so forth, of course the paper is interested in that. The publisher of the paper was on the Chamber of Commerce, and he was part of the negotiating team with Rockwell, and [this was] very, very secretive, absolutely hush-hush. So, he found out that Rockwell was going to build a plant, and he was very concerned, very curious, what does Rockwell, which builds munitions plants, what are they going to put in St. Petersburg? So, he went to the city manager and said, look, I found out about this Rockwell plant, what are they going to build? He had found out enough to know that it was something to do with bomb sites or something, even to the point where around the plant they were going to have a big vast open area chainlink-fenced in, which was very suspicious, like going into where they had this dead zone. So, he had this story, and he came to me. I said, great story, fabulous.

Then we went to Jack Lake, who was the publisher [1971-1986], otherwise a wonderful man, had all the best intentions, and he just hit the roof. He [Smith] knew he [Lake] was on the committee that was trying to get this in. The city manager said eventually, look, you better go talk to your publisher. He went to Lake, and Lake just hit the roof and went crazy and went marching directly to Gene Patterson, who was the editor and chief executive officer of the company, and said, look, we've been working on this for years to bring this plant here, this is a lot of jobs, this is a lot of money, and if there's one word in the newspaper about it, they are not coming, Rockwell will not come. Gene Patterson, to his credit, said, if they won't come because there's a newspaper story there must be something more here than meets the eye. He decided to print the story, which we did, and Rockwell did not come. Rockwell just said no, no complicity. They were going to build a bomb factory there, essentially, a munitions plant. I always admired Patterson, to this day, for staring down the publisher, saying, no, we will print this story. That was one of those great moments of journalism. It cost us a lot of money, and the entire business community was pissed off, and the publisher wasn't speaking to the editor of the paper, but it was the right thing to do. That was the ultimate in ethical stories, I have always thought.

B: A little bit more on ethics. What was your policy regarding membership of your reporters in outside citizen groups and stuff like that?

F: I wrestled with that for a long time. You've got rights and you have certain duties and

responsibilities as a citizen, as a parent, as a taxpayer, as a member of the community. On the other hand, you have this perception of a conflict, if your city hall reporter has a bumper sticker touting somebody for mayor and is covering the race, you're not going to have a lot of credibility. You have to draw the line somewhere, so this is how I came down on it.

I would not prevent anybody from doing what they thought they had to do, but I would point out to them how this would limit what they could do. If you were the city hall reporter and you wanted to put a bumper sticker or yard sign touting a mayoral candidate you were covering, you couldn't cover city hall anymore. You were eliminated from covering municipal government. So, your value would be diminished because you couldn't cover that, and then anybody else could. If you decided you wanted to run for the school board and yet you were a reporter, you could do that, I can't prevent you from doing that, but you can't be a reporter. You can't be both a reporter and on the school board. So, your value would be diminished to the company. That convinced people. They understood that. After a while, they would have ceased to have anybody in the company, and therefore they would not be on the staff. But it wasn't because they became a member of the school board or put a bumper sticker on their car. It was because there were a lot of things they couldn't do anymore because they had publicly shown. That's how I did it. I remember the famous case was Linda Greenhouse, who works for the *New York Times* and covers the Supreme Court and yet marched in the pro-abortion rally on the Mall in Washington. There was this huge debate over whether she should cover this issue in the Supreme Court. I would not have let her. I think it was obvious. She publicly marched, and everybody knew it. I think she had diminished her value to the paper and should not have done it, but the *New York Times* decided differently, that she could be objective on this issue. Maybe she could, but the public doesn't think so. The public says, hell, she carried a damn sign in the pro-abortion rally, she's not going to be fair to right to life. So, that was my solution to it, the diminished value thing. If you want to send a contribution to somebody, that's a private matter. Go ahead and send a contribution. I just don't want to see your name turn up on a big list in the newspaper. It's a fine line for news people. Then you carry it too far. Len Downie, who is the executive editor of the *Washington Post*, doesn't vote, thinks it would be a conflict for him to vote, which I think is ridiculous.

B: So, when you become a reporter, it is kind of a trade off.

F: You have this enormous license, the First Amendment, to write and be a source of information, be a conduit of information to people, and I think there are certain things that you give up. My father just didn't understand journalism. He was old school, and he always wanted me to do something that was absolutely unethical. We would go to a restaurant on Mother's Day, for example. I would take my mom and him out for dinner on Mother's Day. There would be a long line, and he would say, go tell them who you are. I was city editor of the paper. Go tell them you're the city editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*. You'll get a table. He was absolutely right, I would have gotten a table, I would

have gotten a great table because I was the city editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*. I couldn't do that. I couldn't accept a favor that wasn't available to the regular public. But he was old school. The reporters he knew when he was younger would take gifts and write nice stories about people. Does that answer your question?

B: Yes, it definitely does. Let's talk about what you are doing now. What influenced you to pursue your master's degree and come back here to teach?

F: Do you want an honest answer? I'll give you an honest answer. I left the company, I retired from the *St. Petersburg Times*, and cast about for a long time trying to figure out what I wanted to do next. One day, I get this call from [Dr. William] McKeen [professor and chair, University of Florida department of journalism]. He was an old friend. I had known him for fifteen years. I used to come up here and recruit, and then he would be looking for a summer job, when he was teaching and didn't have a summer job, and I would give him one. I would let him work on the sports desk or some other place on the paper, and he loved it. He was a good employee. We developed this friendship. We were both interested in music and both had kind of bizarre senses of humor. He called me and said, look, I want you to come on up and let's have lunch. He and Dr. [John] Griffith [journalism professor] took me to lunch and said, look, would you like to try your hand running a reporting lab? I said, what do I do? [They said,] well, it's the same thing you took thirty years ago, where you would have the lectures twice a week and then you have twenty students in a reporting lab where they do two stories and you grade them and you teach them and you fine-tune them. [I said,] sure. [They said,] two days a week. We can't pay you much. We are going to pay you what an adjunct makes. Just try it for a semester.

That was the spring two years ago, same schedule as it is now. Griffith taught the lecture, and I had a reporting lab on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons. I would drive up on Wednesday morning and do the lab, go to the lecture on Thursday. McKeen said, I can't pay you enough to make it worthwhile, so stay at my house. He was single then, had his own house. So I said, okay, I'll try it for a semester. So, I did that for a semester, and I really liked it. It was really scary. I was petrified. I didn't know what I was doing. Griffith was winding a thirty-year career or so down. So, I would go to the lecture and help him with the tests and look [at] some other stuff. He got me involved in judging the Hearst stuff. I really liked it. I really enjoyed it. The first guinea pig class I had, I really felt sorry for them because I really didn't know what I was doing. I had been an adjunct before but not at a high-powered school like this; I'd worked at USF. Then I taught that summer. I taught two labs in one day. I drove up on Wednesday. The lecture was on Monday and Wednesday mornings, and then I had a lab and a lab. It was a long day. I drove up in the morning and drove home at night. It was a fourteen- or fifteen-hour day. Then I graded the papers. I liked that, too.

Then the next semester, they started talking about, well, what do you think of taking over

the lecture? Then about a month before the spring semester, Griffith said, it's time for Foley to do that. Okay, great. I was eager to do it. It was fun. So, then I took over the lectures last spring. I really liked that. I really liked being in control of the program. I really enjoyed it. I do things differently than they have been done here. I do them more along the lines of what's real. Should we have let the kids use Spell Check? Of course. I give open-book style tests. I want everybody to learn how to use the style book. Use your notes. Not during tests but when you are writing a story, talk to the person next to you. Let them read it for you. Let them look it over. Let them proof it for you. I think that's a great idea. That's what happens in newsrooms all the time. [Reporters ask,] how do you spell this? What's that guy's name? This "don't let them use spell check" bullshit. That's the real world. That's like not letting somebody use a calculator. It's artificial. Anyway, I really like it.

McKeen wanted to hire me on the spot. He would've given me a faculty job in no time on account of my thirty years experience and network of people I know and all the other things. But the dean [Terry Hynes] really thinks—and she is under enormous pressure from the administration, from the college—that the minimum to teach at this school, to be on the faculty, is a master's degree. That is essentially why I'm doing it. It will be kind of nice to have a master's degree, and I will have it probably by the end of this year, by December, but it's not going to change who I teach, it's not going to change my knowledge of the business. My knowledge of the business is going to be based on thirty years with the *St. Petersburg Times* and reading the newspaper. She even told me, I'll bet you're a terrific teacher. I get great student evaluations, really long. My students like me a lot better when the course is over and they passed than they do during the course. But it really is great. I just love it. I'll do the master's, but that will be done, and then there is a faculty job available that they just started advertising for in editing and publishing, and it fits me to an absolute T. [It is f]or an experienced journalist who lectures in the college and is to be a liaison with the industry and go out. I've applied for that, and I have a real good chance. I am very confident. That will be in the fall, and I will actually make a living wage. Right now, given the fact I'm in graduate school, I am paid the same as a graduate assistant, so last year I made \$17,000. I am back to the \$125 a week, only this is \$10,000 more than that. They don't pay their graduate assistants much, and that's what I'm being paid. I became a graduate assistant last summer when there was such a money crunch that they wouldn't let the faculty teach. McKeen was desperate, so I was a graduate assistant so I could teach. Otherwise, they wouldn't have had the reporting program last summer.

B: It's a good thing they found you then.

F: I hope so.

B: How does your newspaper experience influence the style that you teach?

F: I am able to tell students, and they understand that I know what I'm talking about, for one thing, because I illustrate usually with my mistakes that I made, that in this class you lose 50 percent for a fact error, for a misspelled name. [Students say,] well, that's such a small thing, professor, I only missed it by one letter. In the real world, you do that too often, you get fired, you lose your job, you don't work in the business. Fifty points on a practice story in a lab exercise is nothing, but you ought to learn to get the names right, get the names and the ages and the addresses, so that you don't help destroy the credibility of the craft. It is just as important, if not more important, in public relations. You misspell a client's name in a press release, and you are history. You need to know how important that middle initial is in a story. I don't apologize for harsh grading. I don't apologize for insisting that people understand how to use words, the precision of words. Grammar, punctuation—if you don't learn it here, you won't learn it, and you will not work in the business. You will not even get hired because your introductory letter will be so screwed up that you will never get to the interview process. It is true. It is absolutely true.

I can say that because I hired people for twelve years, and if I got a letter with my name misspelled or the wrong name or a misspelled word or a grammatical gaffe that was really stupid, I am not going to bring them in for an interview. I don't care how good their clips are. If they are that stupid, if they don't care that much in their letter of introduction. That's reality. Am I harsher than I would be in the newsroom? Absolutely. Now is the time to be harsh. Here is the other thing. This is a course that, yes, like other college courses you have to read and you have to learn the material, you have to come to lecture and you have to work hard and do the work. That is all correct, but that is not enough to pass. You have to be able to do the work, you have to achieve a certain skill level to get a C from me in my lab. You have to be able to write a story, a legitimate story, simple but interesting with all the elements of style in a limited amount of time, or I am not going to give you a C. It is not going to happen. [Students say,] but I worked so hard. Yes, you did, but you still can't do the work. My professional experience gives me the confidence to say, okay, this is not acceptable, this is not enough to pass. No one has ever graded papers as minutely as I do. I mean, I grade down to punctuation, and that has not happened to many students before. If it had, then they were dealing with an incompetent. It is really important. [Another thing t]hat has to do with the practical side of your education here is that the first five, six weeks of the lab grades don't count nearly as much as the last few because the last six stories, if you are doing A work, you are writing A work and you are getting published, I am going to give you an A. Even if your first ten stories were a B, C, and D, I am going to give you an A because you can do A work, you are doing A work. You improved. I am going to give you an A. But it doesn't happen that way. You don't write ten weeks of C-level stories and then write six weeks of A level stories. You gradually improve week to week to week. That is how it works. You improve with practice. Some students think, well, I can wait ten weeks and I can turn it around and I will still get a B in this course. Well, no, you can't. You just cannot turn your performance around like that. You have to work week to week to week.

[End of side A2]

F: The satisfaction of the job is watching students, and I have had more than several who have just been a C at the beginning, really. I had one student last semester, God bless her, she came up with the class mantra, which now I announce at the beginning of each class, she would turn around and say, "This sucks, this sucks, this sucks, this sucks." And I loved that because by the end of the course she was coming to me with ideas, she was getting published, she broke a couple of stories. She got a B+ in the course. Never quite an A, and she knew it. I give very few A's. But she changed her major from public relations to journalism. I have several. There are several at the *Alligator* like that now because they really decided that this is something they want, they get really excited about. A lot of them didn't get A's in the course; they got B's. But it is pretty cool.

B: But B is good.

F: B is very good, and it is especially good in my class. An A, I give about two or three a semester out of two labs. You got to be really good. Sarah got one. She was the editor of the *Alligator*.

B: Sarah Myrick.

F: Yes. Jill Martin, the sports editor of the *Alligator*, got one. I give few.

B: How important do you think it is to actually study journalism in an educational setting?

F: It is not.

B: Not at all?

F: No. If you are the type of person who can go out and get stories and write them well, and get an internship or find a way into the newspaper at a young age and you can do that part of it, then a broad undergraduate education is great. I needed the craft work, I needed to learn the skills, I needed to learn the terms because I didn't spend my entire life wanting to be a journalist. I did it on a whim. So, it was important for me to have Buddy Davis and Hugh Cunningham and Jo Anne Smith.

Tracy **Schwartz** [student at the University of Florida] is not a journalism major, and she doesn't need to be. She is really, really good. But that is hard. For every Tracy **Schwartz**, there are 200, 300, 1,000 other people who could never do that on their own, and that is why the journalism school is very, very good to encourage, or to discourage, [they are the] same thing. My last lab, I give a very short lecture. I say, okay now, it has been fun, and most of you are passing and blah, blah, blah, and I talk about how there are two ways to go: you have either discovered that you want to do this or that you don't. If you've

been coming to class every week and you've been sitting at home in front of your computer hating every second of writing, hating gathering information, hating checking facts, just loathing it, I say, think about changing your major because that's what it is all about. You're going to get out there and you're going to get a mortgage and you're going to get big car payments and you're going to get married and you're going to have kids and responsibilities, and you're going to have to go to a job you're going to hate. So, think about it. But if you like it, if you can do it, if you really enjoy it, it's the best job you can have because you go to work and you have no idea what's going to happen that day, totally something different every day, a new assignment, a new challenge, something else to write, something else to be clever [about], a chance to be creative, not sit in a cubicle somewhere, to get out, to meet people, to do things, to organize events. It is the greatest job in the world. I encourage you to go out. But if you hate these basics of it, think about changing [your major]. And they are juniors going on to be seniors and they don't want to hear that, but it's the most honest advice I can give them.

B: How useful are internships to students?

F: They are not just useful. I think they have become essential in this job market, for two reasons. One, it gives you experience and it looks good on a resume and you get some clips and you've done the work and you know how to do it and you really can play. Two, it gives you an inroad wherever you intern; if you're really good, they're going to hire you. They know it. They don't have to take a chance on someone they don't know. I used to always come to Florida and take two interns, from the University of Florida, every year. If they were any good, they got hired. They ended up on the staff. It was a great pipeline. And they knew it. That's the value of internships. It's really important to get out in the real world. Paid, unpaid. I think they all should be paid, but they're not. Even working for the *Gainesville Sun*, even the *Sun*, you get clips, you get edited, you learn about the business. You see how it works. You see the good, the bad, and the ugly.

B: How is working with reporters and working with reporting students different or alike?

F: That's a real good question. Reporters weren't afraid of you. Reporters didn't enter the class with this huge reputation, reporting is hard, reporting is rigorous, reporting is a big pain in the ass. It has got this incredible negative reputation as a class, and my lab especially. You know [they say], he's a horrible grader. It's true, I am, but I think people learn a lot, whether they want to or not. But I don't believe the grades mean anything. But my scholarship, but this, but that. Sorry. I never looked at grades in my life when I hired somebody. Never. The only time I ever looked at a transcript was if somebody had a Phi Beta Kappa membership. Then I'd be impressed with their grades. Otherwise I didn't care. The clips were what I wanted to see. The clips were the only thing that was important.

Raul Ramirez, when he was here, I don't think he graduated until a few years ago

because he was the editor of the *Alligator*, he got jobs, he was a great journalist, he was fine. He didn't have to graduate, he didn't have to have good grades, he didn't have to do anything. He was a good journalist, a fabulous journalist, a tremendous player. You see how smart he was. He was just brilliant, and he has really done some things in the industry that were good. He is Cuban, a minority, and he concentrated on these segments of the population that the mainstream news people just overlooked, and he had a huge number of selling points for that. In any event, what I'm getting back to here is [that] students don't necessarily want to learn. Reporters want to learn. Students don't want to learn, they just want to get through the course with a good grade. That's their tradeoff. And it takes them a while to learn that they should learn and they need experience. Reporters want to get better every time. They want to look good. They want their writing to be better. They want to show off.

Reporters are an interesting breed and newsrooms are an interesting place because there are these incredibly talented Creative people are like this. Creative people have enormous egos. You have to have an enormous ego because it's you saying, okay, I am going to tell you what happened at the City Council meeting, I am going to do a profile of this person that will make you understand how this person works. I am going to write a review of this concert that will make you decide whether it was any good or not. I am going to tell you stuff, I am going to give you facts and present information to you. I am going to help decide who's the next mayor of St. Petersburg, president of the United States. You have to have a big ego in order to take on this monstrous responsibility, this huge project. But yet, they're all insecure as hell. So, you go up to them and say, your lead could have been better. [They say,] what, it could have? How? What would you have done? Was it that bad? You hated it, right? Even the big time reporters would turn in something, and they'd go back to their desks and pretend to be nonchalant, and they were watching every move I made, watching everything I did. [They think,] what's he going to do? What's he doing? Oh, he changed a word. Oh God, it must have been horrible! He hates it! That's just the way they are. They are very insecure. That's what used to drive me. I was horribly insecure. This is why this craft is so hard. It is so hard because what you are doing is you are taking a set of circumstances and you are going out there and you are deciding what to write down, what to take notes on, what to see, what to hear, what to smell, what to breathe, what to cover, where to go, what time to be there, who to call, and then you bring it back, and then you tell it. It's your words, it's your thoughts, it's your soul that goes on the screen or on the paper. And then you give it to somebody, here's my soul, here's my creative process, here is what I'm about, this is my whole career and this is the story. And then somebody says, geez, what is this shit? It is devastating, but that's the nature of the business.

One of the first lectures I give in class—and people don't remember the first lectures—is the best advice I give. One of things I say [is] don't be self-conscious. By the end of the course, they aren't. They are saying, can you look at this and tell me whether it's any good or not? It's not. I don't like it. Or, don't look at this. Don't be self-conscious. We're

all trying to be better here, so ask your neighbors, ask your mom, your dad, your roommate, your friend, strangers on the street. Say, hey, look at this, tell me, can you understand this, does this make sense to you? By the end of the course, they do that, but it takes a long time to break that down where the students say, oh, I don't want anybody to see this, oh no, don't look at this. In that respect, reporters and students are similar. And in other respects they are not. They're professionals. With reporters, you have to hammer them, or I'm going to fire you. It's economic. With students, it's grades. With either, if you take the professional approach, okay, if you don't do the work, you're out of here, you're not going to succeed, you know, some students will say, I owe you two stories and I'll get them to you when I can. I say, I don't want them. Or [students say], I'm sorry I'm two hours late. [I say,] well, the press has already rolled, your story is no good, it's over, I'm sorry you missed the deadline. [They say,] but it's only two hours. [I say] but if you keep missing deadlines, you're fired in the real world, you're out, you're done. [They say] oh, I never thought of that. Somebody today came in, a kid sat in that chair and said, my story this week is about St. Patrick's Day. I said, did you turn it in? [He said,] oh, I'm going to turn it in at the lab tomorrow. [I said] that's Wednesday. St. Patrick's Day was Monday. It has no news value. St. Patrick's Day is dead today. St. Patrick's Day was hot this morning because it was a report on St. Patrick's Day. But tonight? When was it? [He said,] oh, yeah, that was a long time ago. By Wednesday? [He said,] oh, I didn't think of that. He will next time. Am I making sense?

G: You definitely are. So, to make a good reporter, what does it take aside from a huge ego and enthusiasm to learn?

F: Well, neither one of those are required, but, hell, if you want to be good at it I think the desire for the truth. You have to work hard. Tom French, Lucy Morgan, Howell Raines, Rick Bragg, Pat Tyler. I can list a zillion reporters I thought were really good. But I think the desire to get the truth, to be fair, to be accurate, to be complete. Professional curiosity is extremely important. This maybe is another difference between students and reporters: Reporters understand that they have to be curious about something, have to be interested. They can't say, God, that's boring, I don't want to cover the city council meeting because it's boring. Your job is to cover the city council and not make it boring, make it interesting. That's your job. They understand that. Students say, who cares about that? Find out something that people care about. That's what you have to do. That's why it is so gratifying when I get this from a student, after all this time of finally getting down to the point [picks up a student's paper], here's a lead on a story: "Laura **Noho's** feet are getting tired." You've got to read the second paragraph. It's about the Dance Marathon, and she's talking about how this is going to be her third year and she's got one more year to go to get this status. You know, it's worth it for leads like that, that are so darn good, because they are taking an event that has been written about a zillion times and putting a new face—or new feet—on it.

That's the biggest disconnect with the students, when once they make that connection

and say, okay, this event may seem boring but how can I make it interesting, what's interesting about it, I've got to ask more questions, I've got to find somebody interesting, I've got to find somebody who hates it or somebody who loves it but I've got to find a human emotion and the details to make it work. The sooner they come up with that idea, the sooner they understand that, the easier it is to write a lead on a story and the better grade they are going to get. That's the magic. That's when the light bulb really comes on. For some people, it never does.

B: That's unfortunate. Who do you think are the greatest journalists of your era? Or are there just too many?

F: Way too many. Were [Bob] Woodward and [Carl] Bernstein [*Washington Post* reporters] great because they brought down a president? Sure. Did then Bernstein become a celebrity and an annoying pain in the ass? Did Woodward begin to write books where he used quotations from people he never talked to? He made them up, that that's what they would have said if he had talked to them. What happened when Ben Bradlee with Katharine Graham [former *Washington Post* publisher], who printed the Pentagon Papers and oversaw Watergate and did it against enormous pressure to fold from society, from her friends, from his cronies in the political arena, and did it anyway, and then stood by their story when Janet Cooke made it up.

It is such an art, and it is not a science, and so somebody can be great and brilliant and a giant one day and an asshole the next. It is really hard. I am a big fan of Tom Wolfe, and he writes fiction, but he is an impeccable reporter and he has an incredible way through his fiction of reflecting a culture, a culture's mores and what's going on. Howell is an excellent journalist, a tremendous journalist, won a Pulitzer Prize for writing. Howell is from Alabama. He is not Jewish. He went to the University of Alabama in Birmingham and grew up in Birmingham. His Pulitzer Prize piece was a feature about his housekeeper, a black woman, Grady. It was called "Grady's Gift." He wrote it for the *New York Times Magazine*. Did that break any great ground? Did that unseat a president or cause a corporate scandal? No. But it talked about a different time and how blacks and whites and such go on.

Then you've got these small-town editors who write about the issues in their community, and you never hear of them, and yet they sit in their editorial offices and they write columns or editorials or stories about the issues that affect their community and they do it in the face of advertiser pressure and they do it in the face of ridicule and the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association] hates them and the country club doesn't like them and the people at the school board and the school teachers and everything else, and they do what's right. Those are great journalists. They don't have to ____ to go see. Those are great journalists. I can't answer your question. I've obviously been dancing around it. I can give you my standard, but I can't list names. First of all, I'd leave somebody out. **Hal Bristo** is a grand journalist. Gay Talese is a grand journalist. Rick Bragg is very, very

good and probably hasn't hit his peak yet, by a long shot. He is an enormously talented storyteller. All the Watergate stories are hard to read because they were writing them on deadline and they were about a very complicated subject, and they were inching the story along. You read that body of work where you say, geez, this is impenetrable, how do you get through this? And then you read Rick Bragg, and it is just this brilliant stuff that doesn't really, you know, topple presidents. Journalism is great. The grand story, the Enron scandal, the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, all those are giant stories that giant journalists have tackled. Yet, some people kind of do what journalists are supposed to do, which is hold a mirror up to the community. That's real. That's great journalism also. Why did the siren go off in my neighborhood last night? If that answers a bunch of readers' questions, that is damn great journalism.

B: What was the strangest thing that ever happened to you or your newspaper during your career?

F: It is not strange. It was terrifying. [Nelson] Poynter, when he gave away the stock in the Times Publishing Company, didn't own it all. His sister, whom he had a feud with for many, many years, depending on how you counted it, [owned] 5 percent or 20 percent of the company, there was some debate because there were two different types of stock, one was controlling and one was not. It was not ever publicly traded; it was always family stock. And he never asked for it back, never bought it back from his sister, and they really disliked each other. Then he died. Then not long after that, she died, which was a problem. There was a standing offer to buy the stock from her by his successor, Gene Patterson, but it was never a lot of money. The money was always in the budget, \$5 million anytime she wants to sell. Well, she thought it was worth more or just didn't want to sell it just to spite her brother. So, when she died, it passed on to her two daughters and their two husbands, who said, holy shit. They came to Patterson and said, this is worth some money and we want [it], I have no idea what the figure was, I wasn't involved in it. [Patterson said,] no, we will stand firm, the offer is fair.

Well, they went to a man named [Robert] Bass, one of the infamous Bass brothers of Texas who inherited an enormous amount of money from his father in oil, ____ I believe, and then turned it into a huge fortune. He and his partner, not partner, more of his henchman, David Bonderman [head of Texas Pacific Group], bought it from the two sisters, or at least went into a partnership with them and then came to the *Times* and said, okay, we own a big chunk of your company, and we want to see your books, and we want you to make more profit, and we want you to do this, then do that, and furthermore we are offering to buy you out. We want the paper. It took two years and \$56 million to get rid of them. Bonderman went on to become a huge businessman in his own right and was just in the news recently for having his birthday party and hiring the Rolling Stones to play for \$7 million. I spent a day with Bonderman and Bass touring our facilities with Andy Barnes [chairman and chief executive officer of the Times Publishing Co]. But that was the scariest and probably the strangest in many ways. They just hated me. I was

managing editor at the time. They hated me because they'd sent out an offer to buy the paper for \$165 million. I got the letter as a member of the board of directors. They sent letters to the whole board. I said, great, this is a story, let's put it in, "Bass offers to buy St. Petersburg . . ." They went berserk. They hate publicity. We just wrote every little nuance of the case and put a big story in the paper. It was great. I was just dirt. They wanted me to just go. But, it did cost \$56 million. This is all public knowledge now. It wasn't for a long time. It was kept secret. But that's what we eventually had to pay. We had to borrow money from the Poynter Institute. The paper had never had any debt. That's one thing. Poynter almost lost the paper because they had some corporate debt. Big corporations have a lot of debt. The *Times* has no debt, zero debt, but we went into great debt to pay off Bass and make him go away because it was a very dangerous situation.

B: If you could sit down with one person who has been in the industry at any point in time and pick their brain, who would it be?

F: Dead or alive?

B: Yes.

F: That's a good one. I wouldn't mind talking to Walter Cronkite [former *CBS Evening News* managing editor] just about the nature of news. I might like that. I might enjoy that. Edward R. Murrow [pioneering CBS broadcast journalist] would be interesting. These are broadcasters but they were newspaper people before they went into broadcasting. I once had dinner with Eric Sevareid, who was one of Murrow's guys. It was a funny dinner. It was at a conference at the University of West Florida in Pensacola, and I was on a panel with Edna Buchanan [*Miami Herald* reporter] and some other people. I don't know why I was there. But there was a dinner, and we went to the seafood restaurant. It was a relatively noisy place, and so you couldn't really hear very well. I sat next to him, and he had a very soft voice, so he and I had a private conversation. Everybody else was trying to get involved, but they couldn't hear anything. We had this private conversation, and he was brilliant. He was there when the bombs were dropping on London [during World War II]. Dave Barry [*Miami Herald* humor columnist].

B: He's great.

F: I met him, too. I jammed with him. He's married to a woman I hired out of the University of Miami, Michelle Kaufman, a sportswriter. They were having a sports editors conference in St. Pete and she was coming, and so I called her and I said—she worked for *Detroit* [*Free Press*] and now she works for the [*Miami*] *Herald*, and she is a friend of mine, and I did a lot for her career. I said, Michelle, I could put a band together for the final night of the thing, do you think Dave would like to bring his guitar? [She said,] would he? So, he came, and he played, and I played with Dave Barry. It was really cool.

Then Mitch Albom, who is a sports writer in Detroit, who wrote *Tuesdays With Morrie*, was there. He plays the keyboard, and he is phenomenally good, and then his wife got up and sang all these old Phil Spector hits. It was an unbelievable evening. But, I'd like to talk to him. He would be an interesting guy. I mean, I voted for him for president. I did. I wrote his name down. I'm not being facetious. I'm just telling you there's a wide range of people. I am a great admirer of Dave Barry because he makes people laugh, and that's an amazing talent.

B: What do you think of columnists? More difficult? Something you just fall into after . . . ?

F: You don't fall into it. Writing a column is hard, hard work if you are any good at it. I read a lot of them. I mean, I read the *New York Times*. I love Maureen Dowd [*New York Times* columnist]. I like columnists, for the most part, especially very opinionated columnists, whether I agree with them or disagree with them. I listen to Rush Limbaugh [radio commentator] on the radio from time to time because he's so good at what he does, he is so talented. I read the *New York Times* columnists, of course. I have always been a big fan of Maureen Dowd because I was in New York for the convention some years ago. I wasn't covering it. I was there with a friend who was a TV reporter. I saw Howell [Raines]. He was the bureau chief for the convention, and they had a big headquarters in the hotel. We were sitting talking, and she came up. This was when she was just a reporter, and I was tongue-tied in her presence. She is really a very attractive woman. So, I am sitting there in jeans and sneakers, and she's wondering who the hell her boss is talking to. He introduces us and says, I used to work with him in St. Petersburg. [She said,] you're an editor? I thought you were one of the pages, I thought you were one of the kids running around here. I said, God bless you. I have loved her ever since. But I think she's got enormous talent because she pisses people off. She provokes people. Bill Maxwell for the *St. Petersburg Times* is the same way. He's a black man who writes about black people in way that sometimes pisses off black people. Other people write about white people [in a way] that sometimes pisses off white people.

[Interruption in recording]

B: Is there anything I didn't ask you that you think is important?

F: Maybe two things. One, what is the biggest story I ever was associated with? That was when the Sunshine Skyway was run into by a ship in the rain and fog early one Friday morning and tore the center span out. It was 165 feet above the water, and you could not see far enough in front of you so that when the cars came up to this gaping 100-foot wide nothingness at the top of the bridge, they couldn't stop, and so they went into the water. Thirty-five people died, including twenty-two on a Greyhound bus. Then the last car, the one that actually stopped, stopped fourteen inches from the edge, and the poor guy just kind of crawled back. It was a phenomenal story, a national story, just to-die-for story.

We did twenty-three stories just that day, and I was in charge of the whole thing.

The executive editor was busy writing a speech for something, and the managing editor said, you take it and you run with it. So, I did. I did all the photo assignments. I did all the sending people out on the stories, all the angles—you write this, you write that. And I thought it was brilliant journalism. It was fabulous. That was the biggest deal I've ever written about. So, that's that.

The other thing, now I've forgotten. Maybe I've said it, but I couldn't have imagined doing anything else than be involved in this, first, the business, of course, where I got enough knowledge, and now the sharing of what I've learned, the teaching of it. I can't imagine a better way for things to work out. I've been real, real lucky from the very beginning. I worked hard. I was always afraid. Fear was my great motivator. I was more afraid of Buddy Davis than I was with the people I interviewed with. I was more afraid of my city editor than I was with the people I dealt with in the cities I covered. I was more afraid of not having a story or coming up cold. I often feared that the worst was going to happen, and it never did. The variety of things that I've done and the number of interesting people I've talked to and the interesting things in the places I've gone, the information that I've learned is just phenomenal. I just can't imagine a better thing to do. I just can't imagine a better career. So, I think that's the other thing, [and] I would like to make sure it's on the record somewhere. But that's it.

B: Okay, great. Thank you very much for your time.

F: My pleasure. You asked some really good questions.

[End of the interview.]