

FNP 61

Interviewee: Louis M. "Skip" Perez

Interviewer: Julian Pleasants

Date: February 22, 2002

P: This is Julian Pleasants and it is the 22nd of February 2002. I am at the Proctor Oral History Program offices in Gainesville, Florida and I'm talking with Skip Perez of *The Ledger* in Lakeland. Give me your date and place of birth.

S: May 30, 1946. Tampa, Florida.

P: When you were growing up, were you interested in journalism at all?

S: Not much. There has always been a strong journalistic influence in my family. My mother's grandfather, his name was Ramon Valdespino, founded the first Spanish language newspaper in Ybor City. The name of the newspaper was *La Traducción*, which translated means, the translation. He would be my great-grandfather, Ramon Valdespino. He would take the English language publications of the day and translate them into Spanish for the Spanish-speaking community of Ybor City. One of his daughters, my mother's mother, her name was Maria Valdespino, was a secretary but she also was a reporter for various Spanish language newspapers in Tampa [during] that era. She just did it as a hobby. I've got some journalistic lineage, so to speak.

P: You went to Jesuit High School. Did you work on the paper in high school?

S: Correct, I went to Tampa Jesuit. That was actually my first experience, writing newspaper stories for the school newspaper in high school.

P: What kind of activities did you cover?

S: Mainly sports. I was on the swim team in high school. I wrote articles about the swim team. The high school newspaper came out intermittently. It wasn't even weekly, I think it might have come out monthly. It was a bare-bones operation but I wrote, primarily, sports stories for the high school paper.

P: It is remarkable the number of people, like Al Neuharth [founder, *USA Today*, vice-president, Gannett Co., Inc.] and Fred Pettijohn [sports editor, managing editor, *Fort Lauderdale News*], who started out as sportswriters. Many of them ended up in management, as you have done. Is there some kind of connection here?

S: I'm not sure, Julian. As a child, I was always interested in sports. I wasn't very good at any of them, but I always played playground basketball. Swimming was really my best sport in high school and I was on the swim team for most of my

high school years. I basically just enjoyed it. I thought it was something fun to do and since I was on the swim team in high school, I wrote articles about the swim team for the high school paper. Later on, when I would have a few curves in the road in my college career, I did come back to sportswriting.

P: Why did you decide to attend the University of Florida?

S: There are so many reasons. I did my first two years in New Orleans at Loyola University. I had a Jesuit education in high school. The Jesuits persuaded me to go to Loyola for a couple of years. I thought I wanted to be a dentist initially, when I went to college. Loyola had a dental school at the time. After one semester of chemistry and physics and all that stuff, I decided that wasn't for me. I wasn't cutting it, it just wasn't me. I changed my major at Loyola to journalism [in the] second semester of my freshman year. As part of the journalism requirement at Loyola at the time, you had to work for the school paper. They had a weekly school newspaper that was fairly good. I covered a variety of things, but mainly sports for the *Loyola Maroon*. When I got into my second year at Loyola, I was really getting serious about journalism. I was doing well in it, I enjoyed it, I liked it. They were grooming me to become sports editor of the Loyola newspaper my junior year. For a variety of reasons, I felt that I really needed to come back to my home state. The reputation of the University of Florida College of Journalism was and remains among the best, top ten journalism schools in the country. I knew that was a strong program. Some friends of my parents in Tampa, who were UF [University of Florida] alums, who had gone through the journalism program, were urging me to have a look at it. I knew I wanted to do sports and one of my age group swimming coaches, a fellow by the name of George Levy, who is a member of a fairly prominent family in Tampa, big Gator alums, was trying to persuade me to come to Florida. The private school in New Orleans was getting too expensive and the wild party atmosphere of New Orleans was taking a toll on my young body. [I transferred to the University of Florida] for a whole variety of reasons. I would like to believe today that all my reasons were noble to come to the University of Florida College of Journalism. It proved to be a wise decision.

P: You ended up getting a degree in journalism, correct?

S: Correct, yes.

P: Among the faculty members you worked with, who had the most influence?

S: Probably the [professor who had the] most influence on me was Buddy Davis [editorial writer, *The Gainesville Sun*; professor, College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida]. I'm sure you've heard many stories over the years about Buddy from other students. He brought to his classroom a

passion and zeal, just [an] energy level to his courses, that had a profound influence on me and my decision to make this a career. Particularly his editorial writing class, which was something that I eventually ended up doing. While I was in journalism school, I also worked for the *Tampa Tribune* as a sportswriter, as a correspondent. [It] was very helpful to me while I was in college, to be sending stories back to one of the major newspapers in the state about the activities of the football team, covering basketball games and that sort of thing. That gave me a leg up on a lot of my colleagues in journalism school, because by the time I graduated, I had many, many newspaper articles that had been published in the *Tampa Tribune* [and the old *Tampa Times*].

P: I understand Buddy Davis was a demanding taskmaster.

S: Yes, tremendously so. He pulled me aside after the second week of the editorial writing course and he gave me a pretty strong lecture about my not really working to my abilities, so to speak. I was so consumed with working and writing stories for the hometown newspaper that sometimes my studies weren't as much of a priority as they should have been. Buddy pulled me aside and said, if you expect to graduate from this college, you need to start reading that textbook and doing better on those tests. I did. He got my attention. I thank him for that to this day.

P: In his editorial course, I understand he really emphasized that when you write an editorial, you need to take a strong position and make sure that editorials are read.

S: Buddy had a favorite saying about editorials. He said the ideal editorial should pass the three-P test. A good editorial should be pungent, parochial, and [personal].

P: He managed to adhere to his own advice, most of the time.

S: Absolutely. I was a great admirer of his style. I'm proud to say that I got an A in his editorial writing course. He was very demanding. You had to write one editorial a week in that course and you had to research it. After a few days you would go into the journalism school library and put those big old reel-to-reel tape recorders and headphones on. There would be a tape with your name on it and you would listen to him verbally critique your editorial. He didn't hold anything back.

P: That's the way to learn.

S: That's right.

P: When did you get interested in working for the *Alligator*?

S: When I was working in college for the *Tribune*, the people from the *Alligator* came to me. They had seen my bylines in the *Tampa Tribune* covering Gator football and doing features on other aspects of the athletic program here. The people from the *Alligator* approached me and said, we'd like you to do some stories for us as well. Sports stories, primarily. I said that would be fine. If I'm covering stories for the *Tribune*, I can redo them, recast them and also give you a version as well. We had a good relationship in that respect.

P: Who came to see you and what was your specific position?

S: I was a correspondent for the *Tampa Tribune*. I was the sports correspondent in Gainesville at the time. The only one, while I was a student here. I think it might have been a fellow by the name of Andy Moore, who was the sports editor of the *Alligator* then or the managing editor. I forget. There was another individual by the name of Bob Menaker who was involved with the paper then. There was another reporter by the name of Jamie Jobe. Actually Governor Haydon Burns's [Florida governor 1965-1967; mayor of Jacksonville, 1949-1964] son, Bill Burns was a correspondent for the *Florida Times-Union* in Jacksonville. He and I became friendly covering the Gator football program while we were students.

P: So it was not too unusual for people who work for the *Alligator* to also be a stringer for another paper?

S: Correct.

P: Doesn't that take a huge amount of time?

S: Well, it did and that's why my studies sometimes suffered. We were out there every day at the practice field during football season. Ray Graves was the head [football] coach during that era. We would go out to the football practice field every afternoon about 4:00, 4:30 or so, and hang around for about an hour and the coach would give us an update on the usual topics of concern. Then we'd all go back to our bureaus here and file stories by the old teletype machine. Yes it did [take a lot of time]. I would frequently not get home until 7:00 or 8:00, maybe later, in the evening after being at the practice field and sending my stories every day. It imposed a discipline on me about journalism and the demands of daily journalism to work quickly.

P: They had an interesting quarterback during that time.

S: Absolutely. Little did I know that Steve Spurrier [Washington Redskins football coach, 2002-present; University of Florida head football coach, 1990-2002;

University of Florida football quarterback, 1964-1966; Heisman trophy winner, 1966] would win the Heisman Trophy my first year covering him. It was quite an experience to be part of all that in 1966.

P: What did they pay you at the *Alligator*?

S: They paid me a piece rate and I'm going to recall that it might have been \$5 a story. I'm hazy on that point. I recall vividly the *Tribune* paid me \$60 a month to send them numerous stories, particularly during football season. Things slacked off a bit after football season. But during football season, I was doing six or seven stories a week for them.

P: They got their money's worth on that.

S: Absolutely.

P: How long did you work at the *Alligator*?

S: I worked off and on at the *Alligator* for about two years. I'm going to say it was primarily 1966 and 1967, thereabouts.

P: When you were working at the *Alligator*, did you have a faculty advisor who worked with you?

S: I didn't spend a lot of time at the *Alligator* offices. I would deliver my hard copy stories to them and drop them off. I would see them in the paper the next day or a couple days later. I wasn't really involved much in the politics of the *Alligator*. I was never an editor of the *Alligator*, I never was a supervisor. I simply did stories for them.

P: You worked for the *Alligator* when it was not independent. Do you recall any times where the administration restricted what the *Alligator* could print or any conflicts between the *Alligator* and the administration?

S: I don't recall any, but I know of several because I've heard the stories about Benny Cason over the years at various functions. He went on to become a distinguished editor at the *Washington Post*. He was several years before my time. Dave Lawrence, of course, was one of the editors. He's several years older than I am. I heard about all those controversies. I forget specifically what they were over. During my several years working for the *Alligator*, I can't recall any major, major feuds. But again, I wouldn't have been aware of them because I wasn't involved in the management of the *Alligator*.

P: Did you get any class credit at all for working on the *Alligator*?

S: No, not to my knowledge.

P: When you look back at your time in journalism school, do you think that a journalism education is essential for being effective in the newspaper business?

S: I do not. I have seen, over my many years in this business, many talented people—reporters, editors. Many of them do have journalism degrees and many of them don't. I think it's really an individual thing. If you don't major in journalism, if you major in history or political science, I think it's important that you do work for the school newspaper while you're in college. Learn the journalistic techniques that are necessary, if you're interested in going to work in journalism. It will give you a leg up when you graduate. For me, I think it was extremely important to go to journalism school, personally, because I had the opportunity to be influenced by four or five wonderful professors. Buddy Davis, who we've already talked about, was a tremendous influence on me and his passion and zeal for journalism really persuaded me that this was a good career choice. Hugh Cunningham also was a tremendous motivator as well. People like Joanne Smith, a wonderful teacher on the history of journalism and journalism law. Jean Chance [professor, University of Florida, 1970-present], who I worked with as a reporter when she was a *Tribune* bureau chief here, was a strong influence on me as a co-worker, primarily. After I graduated, she joined the journalism faculty. She was a tremendous influence. Finally, and maybe most important, I never had him as a professor, but Rae Weimer, the journalism dean [1949-1968], was a powerful influence on me because he kept me in school. I was on the verge of flunking out a couple of times. I went and talked to Rae and begged and pleaded with Rae to give me a second chance. Rae was the most forgiving, compassionate man I've ever known. I appreciate that as well.

P: What was the most important, long-term impact of working with the *Alligator*?

S: It helped. It was another element of my process of becoming sure that this was how I wanted to spend the rest of my life. There were a variety of elements in my college experience. First was at Loyola, working at the school newspaper and changing my major to journalism. The second was making the decision to come to the University of Florida and being exposed to this great journalism school and faculty. The *Alligator* experience as part of that and being around people who care deeply about journalism. Working for the *Tampa Tribune* while I was a student and being forced to learn the discipline of writing stories quickly and under deadline and sending them. They all were very important aspects of my learning process here and trying to figure out what I wanted to do after I graduated.

P: What was your first job after graduation?

- S: Actually, I didn't go to work for a newspaper. I had this exalted opinion of my abilities after I graduated and thought that perhaps the *Miami Herald* or the *Palm Beach Post* or one of the major state newspapers was about the only suitable place for someone of my abilities. I went down and interviewed with them. Actually, I got two job offers. One from Miami and one from Palm Beach. My wife at the time, my first wife, was in a Ph.D. program here at the University of Florida in the English department. She had two or three years to complete her doctorate. We decided that we needed to stay in Gainesville, for her mainly. But I was agreeable to that. I went to work at the College of Education working for Bert Sharp, who was the dean of the College of Education at the time and the assistant dean, a wonderful man by the name of Emmet Williams, who I worked more closely with than the dean. My title was assistant to the dean. All I did was write press releases and put out a little College of Education newsletter once every couple of months. I got tremendously bored with that after about eight or nine months. I called Buddy Davis here at the J school [journalism school]. I told Buddy, I'm getting bored with this, I need some advice from you. What should I do? A few days later I got a phone call from Ed Johnson who was the editor of *The Gainesville Sun* at the time. Ed had seen my work in the *Tampa Tribune*, not just the sports stories. Later, by my senior year in college, I moved over from writing sports to covering general campus news. That's when my sportswriting career ended. It was a tremendous opportunity for me because it broadened my experience in terms of covering hard news and campus controversies and that sort of thing. That's what got Ed's attention, reading the *Tampa Tribune* and seeing my bylines on a lot of stories about controversy on campus. Ed called me and offered me a job to go to work for *The Gainesville Sun* in May 1970. I took it and went to work covering county government for *The Gainesville Sun*.
- P: Talk a little bit about some of the dramas and conflicts that you covered on campus.
- S: There were two memorable ones. One was the Pam Brewer affair. She was a campus co-ed, maybe an off-and-on student here, who had a boyfriend by the name of Bill Killeen who published an off-campus magazine. Killeen was always pushing the envelope. Killeen persuaded Pam to sneak into the stacks at the graduate research library or whatever it was [called] in that day and disrobe. He took a bunch of pictures of her up there and they ran a Playboy-type photo spread that by today's standards is probably pretty mild. Did a big, shocking, nude pictorial. The campus was just shocked, stunned, appalled. All the adjectives you might think of. They couldn't do anything to Bill Killeen because he was off-campus and he wasn't a student. But they went after Pam Brewer. It became a big state story and I covered that for the *Tribune* with Jean Chance as well. They had hearings and the hearings were packed in the University Auditorium. I can't really remember what the final outcome was, but there were a bunch of lawyers involved on both sides of the controversy. It was a pretty

fascinating story as you might imagine. That was one that got me a taste of the controversy aspect of journalism. The other one which is definitely much more significant was the one concerning a black law school professor from Africa. I think his name was Fred Kanali. Kanali was a visiting professor at the law school from Africa. He had been here for about three or four months. He had encountered racism in the community, discrimination, etc. He packed his bags and his family and they left and went back to Africa. I got a tip that all this had happened. Some professor at the law school, I think, called me about it. It would have been around 1968 thereabouts, because I graduated in March of 1969. I think it was my senior year. I got a pretty interesting story out of all this and sent it to Tampa, to the *Tribune*. They played it very big. I think maybe on the front page. There were all kinds of repercussions and as you might imagine, demands from the law school faculty for investigations and that sort of thing. Fred Kanali never came back and I think it was one of the many events of that era that forced people to re-examine attitudes in the Gainesville community toward minorities. We have a lot of work to do, we still do today. But back then, that was one of the wake-up calls. That was an important story for me because it won me a national [William Randolph] Hearst [Foundation] Award, the national news writing contest for college journalists. I submitted that in the breaking news category because I had basically one day to write the story. I won third place in the national Hearst contest. [I won a] \$300 cash award, which paid for my honeymoon. Our team from the University of Florida that year included about five or six other journalists who had done well in the monthly national competitions. Our newswriting team won the national Hearst award for the College of Journalism that year for all our work.

P: Later, the *Florida Alligator* becomes independent. How did that change how the *Alligator* operated and what impact did it have on what they covered and wrote about?

S: By that time, I was on the staff of *The Gainesville Sun*. I wasn't covering that controversy, a fellow by the name of Cliff Cormier was. [He] was the education writer for *The Gainesville Sun* for many years. Covered public schools and the university system. He also was the city editor later on. A great man, wonderful fellow. I learned a lot from him because he was my city editor and then when he became city editor, I succeeded him in his beat of higher education. Then we split off the public school beat to another reporter. Cliff was a great mentor. He covered most of that for *The Gainesville Sun*. I was still covering county government at the time. As I recall, there were all kinds of questions, mainly financial I think, about whether the *Alligator* as an independent entity would be able to support itself financially because the university was such a big part of their budget. The obvious concern [was] that if the *Alligator* reporters wrote stories, which they frequently did and still do I assume, critical of the university administration that they might pull all their advertising and try to exert financial

pressure on the newspaper. There was a big debate about that. To their credit, they went ahead and did it and managed to survive under the able leadership of Ed Barber [general manager, *Alligator*], who makes sure that they keep making money to pay all those student journalists. Back then, they paid me \$5 a story, maybe today they're paying \$6 a story. I don't know.

P: Your job was to cover the county government. What specifically did you do and how long did you do that?

S: I covered county government here for about three years for *The Sun*. The Alachua County Commission met in the old courthouse administration building. Back then, they were all in the same building downtown. That was my primary beat. Some of the commissioners of that era were Sid Martin, who was a great source and a friend as well. A hardworking commissioner, Jack Durrance. Perry McGriff, who is now a state legislator [2000-present], was a county commissioner. G.M. Davis, Ralph Cellon from Alachua, Jon Wershow, who is now an attorney. Ed Turlington was also a member. Basically, I wrote stories about issues affecting county government and that sort of thing.

P: When did you start writing editorials?

S: About the end of my third year. I was talking to Ed [Johnson] about becoming an editorial writer. Ed said, why don't you start writing a couple a week for me from home and I'll pay you extra for it. That sounded good to me. I was starting a family about that time, and was still covering county government. Ed's only guideline to me was that I couldn't write editorials about county government because I was covering county government as a reporter. A couple days a week, at night usually after work, I would go home and pound out a few editorials on topics of local interest, and bring them into Ed to look at. He published ninety-five percent of them. I think he paid me \$20 per editorial. That was another \$40 a week added to my paycheck. I needed the money so I was pretty consistent about doing two a week. That lasted for about three years. That was very helpful to me. It persuaded me that [it] was what I really wanted to do in this business, but it took me a few years to get there.

P: How did you decide what to write about?

S: I read the paper very closely. Buddy, being a mentor of mine, even when I was in college, I tried to read all of Buddy's editorials in *The Gainesville Sun* just to get a feel for the kinds of topics that he would tackle and his approach to editorializing on things. The research and his class on editorial writing was indispensable, as far as learning the process of having opinions. I would just try to be aware of current events. Every now and then I would read magazines and that sort of thing.

P: Did you write about mainly local issues?

S: I think primarily local [issues]. Every now and then I'd write an editorial about marijuana. I would periodically write editorials about de-criminalizing marijuana and what a tragedy it was that we were sending so many young people to prison for marijuana violations, particularly [for] small amounts.

P: With Buddy writing about race relations and you writing about decriminalizing marijuana, *The Gainesville Sun* got the reputation of being a very liberal newspaper.

S: Absolutely. I heard this years later, [that] Buddy was not happy with my editorials about decriminalizing marijuana. But Ed apparently agreed with me because Ed made the final decisions on what we ran. I think at one point, Buddy wrote a lengthy rebuttal to one of my editorials that appeared in the *Sun*, taking issue with most of my arguments about why decriminalizing marijuana was a good thing.

P: You would also have gotten letters from other people. What was the response from the community?

S: On marijuana, I really don't recall there being a huge response here. There may have been several, I'm sure there were several. I don't recall.

P: What makes a good editorial writer?

S: I think you have to be passionate. You have to feel strongly about things. You obviously have to have a certain style of writing that draws people into the editorial. One of Buddy's great skills, among many, was his ability at the beginning of the editorial to draw the reader into what might have been a very complex, boring topic. Buddy taught me that the first three or four paragraphs of the editorial were the most important because if you don't get them by then, they're going to turn the page. Buddy had a way of doing the anecdotal entry to the editorial, which was a very valuable lesson to me. I'd always try to figure out how to weave in a story, or a quote, or some incident that would be somewhat interesting to somebody and they might want to continue to read. You don't want to belabor that. Sometimes it's tricky, but that segue is important. That was pretty important. He also taught me that naming people's names in editorials is extremely important. If you say the Gainesville City Commission is on the verge of an important zoning vote and they ought to vote a certain way, you should name all the commissioners. It's much more powerful and much more effective to put people's names in editorials who you are asking to vote a certain way or if you are being critical of them. It's part of that pungent, [personal] thing.

- P: Also, you learned to do thorough research before you make your final decision as to what your position will be.
- S: Absolutely. Reading and researching. We didn't have the benefit of the web or the Internet back in those days. Maybe that's a good thing because some of that information is suspect. Having been trained as a reporter, I think it taught me that sometimes a little independent research [is critical], not just relying on everything that might have been in a magazine or newspaper. Sometimes making a few phone calls is very helpful.
- P: At any time when you were writing editorials, did Ed Johnson or anybody else reject an editorial or try to persuade you to change your mind? You indicated ninety-five percent were published.
- S: Yes, I was thinking when that five percent might have occurred. I'm not sure. It was a long time ago. I'm not recalling any. I'm sure there were, but I'm not recalling that they were substantial.
- P: You decided in 1976 to go to *The Ledger* to be the editorial pages editor.
- S: Correct.
- P: Explain why you took that job.
- S: I think it was about 1975, I figured out that I wanted to do editorial writing full time. At *The Gainesville Sun* I had been a reporter covering county government, covering higher education and a variety of other topics around Gainesville and the county and writing feature stories and all that. I tried my hand in a lot of different things. Then as I said, I got the opportunity to write a couple editorials a week at home, make a little extra money. I did that. I really wanted to specialize in editorial writing. I talked to Ed about it and Ed said there wasn't much of a likelihood that the *Sun* would have a full time editorial writer position opening up any time soon. Buddy was also writing editorials for the *Sun*, as their main editorial writer and I knew that wasn't going to change since he had won a Pulitzer Prize. I started putting some feelers out about that time. I was invited out to Riverside, California to work for a week during that period to write editorials for them. They offered me a job but I turned it down because it wasn't as much money as I thought I deserved to live in California.
- P: Although Riverside would be a nice place to live.
- S: Yes. I spent a week out there. Inland in the valley there, they do have a bit of a smog problem. I think at the time I was expecting \$20,000 a year from them for the job, which would have been about 1975. I think they offered me \$19,000 or

something [like that]. I told them that I just needed more money. They weren't willing to meet my numbers. I came back to Gainesville, put some feelers out. There was an opening at the *St. Petersburg Times*. I went over there and interviewed and wrote some editorials for them as well. I was told I was a finalist for one of their editorial writing positions, but a fellow by the name of Don Pride got that job. He had been a speech writer, press secretary for former Governor [Reubin] Askew [Florida governor 1971-1979]. I was getting kind of discouraged, wondering where my career was headed after six years in the business or thereabouts. Then lo and behold, the editorial page editor at what was then known as *The Lakeland Ledger* left the paper. They called me. Since it was a sister paper, part of the *New York Times* company, they were very interested in me. Ed Johnson was a strong advocate for my applying for the job. They put me through the paces, they asked me to write five or six editorials for them, not for publication, but editorials that they could review. They gave me the topics. If they asked me to do six, maybe they gave me three topics and asked me to come up with the other three. They gave me a week or so to do them, which I did and turned them in. Ended up being hired by *The Ledger*. I went to work down there in July of 1976.

P: Exactly what does an editorial page editor do?

S: At the time, at *The Ledger* in 1976, the editorial page editor's primary responsibility was writing the daily [editorial], seven day a week. It was [an] afternoon publication at the time. [I was] writing the daily editorial which represented the newspaper's institutional viewpoint on topics of interest of the day. Usually local issues. In addition to that, [I was] overseeing the letters to the editor that were written in, that appear on the editorial page. Editing those and screening them. Also selecting the opinion page columnists, writing on political and public issues of the day, selecting which ones we would run. We would get far more than we could use for the amount of space that we had. I tried to select columnists that represented diverse points of views, conservative, liberal, moderate, that sort of thing.

P: How many would you have?

S: At the time, we had all the *New York Times* people because we're a *New York Times* paper. We subscribe to their news service. We had James Reston [executive editor, *New York Times*; columnist; winner of 1945 and 1957 Pulitzer Prize], we had Tom Wicker, we had Anthony Lewis [*New York Times* columnist; winner of 1955 and 1963 Pulitzer Prize]. C. L. Sulzberger, who wrote on foreign affairs at the time. I bought some, I changed some when I got there. I added George Will [columnist; commentator for ABC, 1981-present; winner of 1977 Pulitzer Prize], who at the time was a budding young conservative columnist. I added him to our page. On the other side I added Mary McGrory [columnist;

winner of 1975 Pulitzer Prize for commentary] who was a very liberal columnist for the old *Washington Star*. I made a few changes. I added Ellen Goodman [columnist; winner of 1980 Pulitzer Prize for commentary] to the mix. At the time she was doing a different kind of op-ed column which didn't just focus on public issues. She was one of the first young women, kind of feminist women's issues columnist. She would write about family issues and that sort of thing. I added her to the page as well.

P: Did you have a black columnist, such as Carl Rowan?

S: I don't think we ran Rowan. We ran someone but I forget who it was.

P: This was before William Raspberry [Washington Post columnist, 1966-present; winner of 1994 Pulitzer Prize for commentary], I guess. Did you also have Dear Abby?

S: Those appeared in another part of the paper. Those didn't appear on the editorial pages.

P: Did you have an editorial cartoonist?

S: No, not a local one. We bought several syndicated cartoonists. I added Jeff MacNelly [editorial cartoonist] who at the time was at the *Richmond News Leader* who was an up and coming young columnist who ended up winning three Pulitzer Prizes [for editorial cartooning, 1972, 1978, 1985].

P: That was a good pick.

S: Yes, he was excellent, you could tell immediately that he had talent. He did a lot of work in college for the University of North Carolina student newspaper. We had about five or six editorial cartoonists at the time, but they were all nationally syndicated. Don Wright [editorial cartoonist; winner of 1966 and 1980 Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning], who was then with the *Miami News* and now is with the *Palm Beach Post*. He had been around quite a while. He was a well known cartoonist. A fellow by the name of Pat Oliphant [editorial cartoonist; winner of 1967 Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning] who was with the old *Washington Star* and a variety of others.

P: How have the editorial cartoonists changed over the years?

S: I'm not sure that they have. I don't see any striking differences in the ones of today and the ones of thirty years ago. I think some of them have a sharper edge than others. Their drawing styles are somewhat different. I don't see any major differences in their ability to do wonderful work. Of course, when I was

doing editorial pages, there was no *Doonesbury*, [by] Gary Trudeau [cartoonist; winner of 1975 Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning]. He led the editorial political opinion genre in a different direction with the *Doonesbury* strip. That's probably the biggest change there. He's a special case.

P: I talked with Don Wright not too long ago. He said that he thought the new wave of editorial cartoonists are too interested in being amusing and tend to talk about more trivial things and aren't as careful about dealing with important issues.

S: I don't disagree with that. The society we live in today, with its focus on entertainment and popular culture and all that sort of thing, there's a lot of that to deal with too. If they're interested in mocking some of the excesses of modern society, there's certainly plenty of material there. When you do that, you're not doing as much on campaign finance and Israeli-Arab relations and that sort of thing.

P: How did you choose which letters to the editor you printed and how many would you normally print?

S: We tried to print as many as we could. Readership surveys for the past thirty years of newspaper readers' habits always show interest in letters to the editor on the editorial page or [it is] in the top ten reader interest items. We know from that standpoint that they bring readers to your paper and give readers a sense of connectivity with the paper. That's important for [the] relationship we try to have with our readers. The best letters, in my view, are the short letters. They make a point very quickly. They don't belabor it. They've got a strong point of view. In many ways, they're like good editorials. They don't wander. The beauty of a short letter is that the more short letters you get, the more letters you can run. We typically would run just about every letter we got unless it was so long and incomprehensible that we would send it back to the writer with a note that said please reconsider submitting this in a shorter form or we can't use it at this point. We use a lot of letters. They're important.

P: Did you edit any of the letters?

S: Sometimes I would make them shorter if I thought I could shorten the letter without altering its meaning or content. I really did prefer to send them back to the writer to have them redo it. If it was going to require a major editing job, I just didn't have the time to spend doing major surgery on a letter.

[End of side A1]

P: Did you ever answer any letters in an editorial?

- S: I may have done it several times. It wasn't something I did [often], but [I may have] if it seemed like it was a natural kind of thing to do. It might have not been the form of an answer. If I received a letter that was particularly timely and the point was very well-made, very occasionally I would run the letter as I ran an editorial and I would refer to the letter on the page as perhaps making a good point or one worth exploring. I would very rarely, if ever, dispute or criticize a letter in an editorial. My feeling generally was to let them have their say unless they were saying something that was just totally inaccurate. If it was a fact error or something, very occasionally I would run a letter to the editor saying Christopher Columbus [explorer, discovered North America] didn't do this on such and such a date, it was another date.
- P: In dealing with these letters to the editor, did you try to get a balanced perspective in terms of a particular issue?
- S: Absolutely. I think that's important to do. It's important also to remember, say you wrote an editorial on sex education and the local public school system supporting it. You received a hundred letters on it and ninety letters were in opposition to your point of view and ten were in favor of it. I think it would be unfair to simply run one letter in favor of your editorial and one opposed to it. It would be better to have the letters be proportional to the number that were received. The number that you publish should be proportional to the weighting of the number that you actually received.
- P: How have letters to the editor changed in the years you've been at *The Ledger*?
- S: Probably the most significant change is the way that people send them. About half of our letters now are received by e-mail which makes them much more timely and our ability to get them in quicker makes the pages much more topical. That's the biggest change. They're easier to deal with and process. That way we don't have to re-input them. I don't deal with that anymore. The editorial page editor of the paper handles that and he has an assistant who processes the letters for him. My guess would be that they're better. They seem to be better. They're more legible. In the old days a lot of the letters would come in hand-written and they would be hard to read. I would spend maybe a couple of minutes trying to read a letter and if I couldn't read a hand-written letter I would return it asking them to type it or print it. My sense is that today very few handwritten letters to the editor appear, unless they're extremely short and easy to read. Most of them come typed, faxed or e-mailed. I think e-mail is the preferred way of receiving them. I noticed that the *New York Times* recently, after 9/11 [September 11, 2001, date of terrorist attacks], was printing many, many letters on their editorial pages that they received the day before. Over the course of that three or four month period in the fall, they were printing many letters they had received the day before because they were sent by e-mail.

P: Do you get just as many letters as you used to?

S: I think we're getting more now. We're a larger newspaper than we were when I went to work there. When I went to work at *The Ledger* we had probably 35,000 circulation a day. Today we're close to 75,000 to 80,000 daily.

P: The Sunday paper's circulation is about 98,000.

S: That's from *Florida Trend*. We're close to 100,000 Sunday and about 75,000 to 80,000 daily. So our circulation has more than doubled since 1976. I don't know that our letters to the editor doubled, but we've probably grown our letters' numbers by at least fifty percent in volume.

P: Do people read editorials?

S: I think it depends. I don't think they read boring editorials. I think they read short editorials more than they read long editorials. I think they like to see an occasional light editorial that might be whimsical in some respect, not so ponderous and serious, although you do need the serious ones as well. I think a good mix of editorials is important to the editorial page. People can pick and choose. Some people are referred to as grazers in the newspapers. [They] turn pages and look at stuff, [and] if they're busy and in a hurry, they're more inclined to read short material than long material.

P: Would you sometimes have three editorials on the page instead of one?

S: In my era, very rarely because I was a one-man show. We would occasionally have three. Usually, we would have two, one that was of moderate length and then one that might have been a little bit shorter. Maybe five or six paragraphs. I really prefer the short model.

P: Did you write all the editorials then?

S: Initially I did. Then after I had been doing the editorials for about a year, I was able to hire a staffer part-time to write a couple of editorials a week. He's now a full-time editorial writer. He's also a grad of the J-school here. His name is Lonnie Brown. He's been working at *The Ledger* for probably thirty-one years now. He was my part-time editorial writer after I had been doing it for about a year. He was very helpful because he grew up in Lakeland.

P: Did you take editorial positions on elections?

S: Absolutely. In my view, an important aspect of a newspaper's leadership role in the community is to endorse or recommend candidates for public office. We

recommended candidates in just about every public office locally, unless it was an extremely small town and we didn't have time to spend looking and talking to the candidates.

P: On major offices like governor, how would you determine who to endorse?

S: We would usually interview the candidates because they're all coming through the community during election season. We would spend an hour or so with each of the candidates for major office. If it was a less significant office, maybe thirty, forty-five minutes with them. We would actually have face-to-face conversations with all the candidates. [We'd] ask them about their positions on a variety of issues and then read the news stories by the political correspondents around the state.

P: Who made the final decision on who to endorse?

S: The final decision, when I was running the editorial page and to this day, [is made by] the publisher of the newspaper. The publisher is the chief executive of the newspaper and all the department heads at the newspaper report to the publisher. That's his decision.

P: Is his decision based on the editorial board's recommendation?

S: The publisher is a member of the editorial board, but his vote is the one that can overrule all the others. Occasionally that happens.

P: Is that normal?

S: I would answer the question two ways. It's not normal on most day-to-day editorial decisions. Publishers are very busy dealing with a whole variety of things in terms of the newspaper's presence in the community, the business community, the revenues, which are extremely important. Making sure we're profitable [and] not only that we're profitable, but that we're growing profit every year. Meeting the corporate goals for profitability, which is one of the publisher's primary responsibilities. He doesn't really have time to be involved. There are exceptions, but most publishers, in my experience, don't have time to be involved in the day-to-day, nitty-gritty of reviewing what the editorials are going to be about. Periodically, on major decisions like the endorsement of a governor or president, a publisher will be served. Some publishers and editorial page editors have been known to disagree about that. The publisher always wins.

P: Who did *The Ledger* endorse in the presidential election of 2000?

S: We endorsed George W. Bush [U.S. President, 2001-present; Texas governor,

1995-2001].

P: And the reasons for that?

S: The primary reason was that the publisher wanted to endorse George W. Bush.

P: This is John Fitzwater [publisher, *The Lakeland Ledger*, 2000-present, vice-president, *New York Times* Management Services].

S: Yes. I was not involved in that process. We have a model now at *The Ledger* that's followed by most major newspapers in the country these days where the editorial page editor reports separately to the publisher. As executive editor of *The Ledger*, I run the newsroom which is about ninety people. The news-gathering function is my responsibility. I report directly to the publisher as well, but I have nothing to do with the editorial page decision making process. I am not on the editorial board. I did it for six years in Lakeland and I know what it's like. I hired the current editorial page editor. A couple of years later, it was strongly suggested by [the] *New York [Times]* that the major newspapers in the company needed to adhere to the *New York Times* model, which is as I described it.

P: The *New York Times* is considered to be a liberal paper. They endorsed Al Gore [unsuccessful Democratic presidential candidate, 2000; U.S. Vice President, 1993-2001]. Did they have any influence at all over your editorial decisions at any time?

S: Never did. The *New York Times* at one time owned about thirty-two or thirty-three newspapers around the country. Today it's more like twelve to fourteen newspapers around the country that the *New York Times* owns. They represent the entire political spectrum, ranging from Gore to Bush to all over the block. I suspect if you did a survey of all the *New York Times's* papers endorsements in the 2000 election, you'd probably find something approaching a 50-50 split. It might be slightly tilted to Bush, maybe 60-40. I've never known or heard of the *New York Times* getting involved in local editorial decision making.

P: When you wrote your editorials on a particular election, how much impact do you think your endorsement had on the voting public?

S: It's hard to say. I think clearly our influence in local elections is much more significant than in a presidential election. I think people's minds are pretty well made up based on the intense media coverage the presidential and governor's races get. People can get a lot of information from a variety of media sources about governor and president for instance. When it comes to a county commission and city council and school board, of course, our local coverage is very good and in-depth. I think sometimes in local races, particularly if it's a

close race, an editorial can make a difference.

P: Such as in the case of a judge who the people don't know much about.

S: Absolutely.

P: In 1981, you became the executive editor. Have you been in that position for the last twenty years?

S: Correct.

P: Describe a typical day.

S: A typical day for me is that I get to work about 9:30. I spend a lot of time in the morning reading the newspaper. I probably spend close to two hours every morning reading the paper very carefully and making mental notes. Sometimes notes on a little scratch pad about things that I like and don't like about that day's paper. Raising questions about stories that we might want to explore further, in a little more depth. We have a 10:00 meeting with all the top editors in the newsroom that lasts about thirty minutes. We talk about what they have coming for the next day's paper, for the various sections. [The] sports editor is involved in that meeting. The managing editor is my chief deputy [and] a [University of Florida] Gator grad, Lenore Beecken [Devore], [who] worked at Gannett for most of her career before she came to work for us about five years ago. She runs those meetings, but I'm actively involved in the discussions as well. The metro editor who oversees the local reporters is involved. His assistant is there and the chief photographer, our design editor, sports editor, business editor, etc. All the editors of the various sections are there. We talk about what they have coming for the next day's paper, whether it needs to be illustrated in a special way, whether it could benefit from the use of a chart or graphic. Whether there are any questions I have in terms of my longevity in the community about things we ought to ask or put in the stories' background or how to make the story better. Sometimes all my questions are answered, but usually they're not at that point. The managing editor will have many questions as well. That gives them the rest of the day to meet with the reporter who is writing the story and talk to them. The photographer might say we don't have a picture, we need to go out there and get a picture. The art director might say, we could use a graphic showing how the company's stock went up or down over the past ten years. It gives us a little jump on the next day's paper at 10:00 in the morning.

P: Do you make the final decisions on any controversial issues?

S: Yes. I [do], or the managing editor. She and I work very well together. We have good simpatico for where we're headed. She and I talk frequently during the

course of the day about various things that might come up. She talks to me frequently about questions she might have. She'll try to sway me, sometimes I'll try to sway her. It's either me or her making the final decision. If it's something really, really important, I'm usually involved.

P: What happens after that meeting?

S: After the 10:30 meeting, I'm on the phone talking to people, returning phone calls or calling various people in the community. Sometimes if I hear something, I'll pick up the phone, since I've been here for twenty-six years or thereabouts. I'll call people and ask them if they've heard about something, if there's anything I need to know. I'm still a reporter at heart in many ways. I go through my e-mails and messages. The e-mail explosion, it's a curse, I think for all of us. I'm the kind of person that I have to look at every one of my e-mails because there might be a little jewel among all that rubbish. You never know. Once every couple days, I get an e-mail, unsolicited, that has the potential to be a great story, locally. I do that. Some days I take lunch and some days I don't. When I do have lunch it's usually with some news maker in the community or somebody that I think might be a source for a good story or some project we're working on. [I'm] back in the office 1:00 or 1:30, just going through my mail and thinking about where we're headed. I think an important part of my job is that vision. Whether we're continuing to do the kinds of stories that are important to the community, in terms of making my community a better place to live and focusing on public issues. Education is very important to me, the public school system. I have three children in the public school system these days. I'm aware of how important that is.

P: What is the status of the public school system in Lakeland today?

S: It's very conflicted. The newspaper just helped fund a massive study of the quality of public education in Polk County. It's about a \$150,000 study. *The Ledger* kicked in about \$16,000 for its share. The business community funded the study, a group called Polk Businesses for World Class Schools. The World Class Schools organization is an international organization that business around the world have used as a device to try to influence public education and improve the quality. The final report [by the School Match group] was submitted about two weeks ago. The executive summary of the report was pretty much that Polk County has some of the best schools that our site team from School Match had seen. They said they'd seen some of the best schools they'd ever seen in Polk County, but they had also seen some of the worst schools they'd ever seen. That's my concern. We have some outstanding schools in my community. We have an International Baccalaureate program in Bartow. It's part of Bartow High School. We have the Harrison School for the Performing Arts, which is part of Lakeland High School. Both are outstanding schools with national reputations.

Their students do extremely well. We have pockets of inferiority that need more attention. I think we have a reading problem. We're on the verge of starting a series in March, I hope, on illiteracy in the county and what can be done.

P: What's the answer to providing better schools?

S: This is a purely editorial opinion, but I think in our county it's getting rid of the antiquated system of selecting our superintendent of schools, which is electing him. Polk County is the largest county in the country that continues to elect its school superintendent. We have been lobbying and advocating for that. You asked earlier about editorial influence and whether people care about things. Sadly, that's one example where our editorial opinions have not persuaded the electorate to change from electing a superintendent to conducting a nationwide search and finding the most qualified person to come in and lead our school system.

P: Is the process too political?

S: Yes, that's part of it. People don't want to give up their right to vote. We've had some good school superintendents in our county over the years and the current school superintendent is certainly a dedicated and hard-working individual. I'm afraid that we're not getting the best talent available because we're limiting ourselves to a geographic boundary, which is Polk County.

P: When you are working as executive editor, do you have referee problems between various editors? Is that one of the more difficult parts of your job?

S: Yes, that's part of it. The group that I have is very good. They've been with me a long time. I think they figured out a long time ago that I'm not going to referee their squabbles. They are professionals, they are adults. I have a high regard for their abilities and I expect them to resolve their differences. If it gets to the point where it's really irreconcilable, I want the managing editor to take the first stab at settling the dispute. That's her job. They report directly to her. Very occasionally, and I can't even recall when the last time was, she'll come to me and say, this one has me stumped, these two people, we've got to do something. More typically there is [a problem such as] a reporter who is not producing. A supervisor will go to her and say, we have a problem with this reporter, she's not up to it, not cutting it. We need to do something and I get involved in that situation, generally and we talk about it to make sure that we all have the benefit of each other's thinking on the situation. Somebody might have a different solution that is better than mine. Somebody might say, you make a good point, maybe we ought to try this. Maybe we ought to put her in a different beat. We had a situation like that recently where two reporters needed to be moved. They weren't happy about it but we did it.

- P: One of the criticisms of the *New York Times* newspapers and Knight-Ridder and Gannett is that the bottom-line has become critical and that newspapers are not as responsive to current events, they don't do as much investigative journalism. It is said that they simply do not provide the coverage or the same quality newspaper they did in the past. How do you respond to that?
- S: First of all, I'm confident that if you compared my newspaper today to *The Ledger* of twenty years ago, there would be no doubt in anybody's mind, who is objective and fair-minded about comparing the two newspapers, that today's version of *The Ledger* is vastly superior to what it was twenty years ago or thirty years ago. We have more space, which we call news hole, in the business. We have more people, we have better quality writing and reporting, our photography is much better. All across the board, we're a far superior newspaper than we were twenty years ago. That said, of course we've all been affected by the worst newspaper recession in many, many years that we experienced in 2001. I had to lay three people off in 2001. It was probably the most painful thing I've ever had to do in this business. Additionally, I have seven positions that have been frozen that I wasn't allowed to fill. They disappeared in my 2002 budget. Overall, I lost ten positions coming into this year, which means that you are covering less. You have less ability to cover the stories that are kind of on the margins that would be good, but maybe not essential to have. That does affect the quality of the newspaper, in my view. By nature I'm an optimist and I've been through these periods before where we've had to tighten the belt. Typically, we come out of it. This year, financially, we're having a pretty good year. Much better than last year, so I'm seeing some light at the end of the tunnel. There is pressure, no doubt about it. Bottom-line pressure. There's also bottom-line pressure in companies that are independent, that are not part of chains. There's pressure there, sometimes more significant than in the large chains. Large chains have the ability to spread out their losses. There's some strength in numbers in the large chains sometimes. I have a brother who works for the *St. Pete Times*. I know they're highly regarded, they're a great newspaper.
- P: They're independent.
- S: They're an independent newspaper, they don't have stockholder pressure. They have been suffering through this downturn. They cut back on some of their bonuses last year that they had given out for many, many years. Every staffer in the building was part of their profit-sharing plan. They got quarterly bonuses. They put a freeze on those and I think the freeze is still in effect.
- P: What caused the downturn in newspaper business?
- S: I think it was a variety of things. 9/11 [September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States] was part of it. Part of it was the decline [of] the economy,

particularly in the job area. A huge component of newspaper classified is help wanted ads, what we call in the business, recruitment ads, basically it's help wanted. With companies doing less hiring, they cut way back on their recruitment advertising. Newspaper classified advertising is a big component of our overall revenue. That was way down. That was a big part of it. Typically, it's the advertising decline in the economy.

P: Is the cost of newsprint an issue?

S: Actually, it was not last year. Newsprint declined a bit in 2001. Newsprint moves around pretty dramatically in terms of price. I think the last couple of years, newsprint costs have been fairly stable. I think the economy, the Internet bubble bursting, the stock market being way down last year, all combined to lower advertising revenues for the industry.

P: Does the *New York Times* give you a set profit margin that they expect?

S: Yes, they do. Our corporate office for the regional papers is in Tampa now and they oversee all that. There are negotiations that go on with all the publishers and the regional newspaper group. Those discussions are usually held with the Tampa corporate office. The president of the company is a fellow by the name of Lynn Matthews, who is a University of Florida graduate who played on the football team. He's getting ready to retire at the end of this year. He was an all-American defensive end for the Gators during the Spurrier era. He's now located in the Tampa corporate office. He's the president of the *New York Times* Regional newspaper group. Yes, to answer your question. It doesn't come down as an edict on what your margin is going to be. I think they suggest a percentage and then it's up to the individual publisher to persuade [the] corporate [headquarters if] that percentage is too ambitious. Most publishers will not argue for a higher profit margin.

P: Carl Hiaasen [writer/columnist, *The Miami Herald*; author] told me that Knight-Ridder required the *Miami Herald* to make about a fifteen percent profit. In an average business, that seems like an extraordinarily high profit margin. Are you in that same category?

S: We're much higher. Typically, there's a reverse relationship between the profit margin percentage and the size of the paper because larger papers have a much higher expense base. Their salaries are much higher and they produce more newsprint because they have more circulation and all that. I don't know what the *Miami Herald's* profit margin is. I can tell you for most *New York Times* regional newspapers, profit margins are closer to twenty [or] twenty-five percent.

P: For a business, that's pretty high, isn't it?

S: Absolutely.

P: That's one reason you would have to lay off ten workers. Does that impact the amount of investigative journalism you can do, which is an expensive process?

S: That's part of it. I don't feel that my hands are totally tied because I do know that if I have a particularly interesting or provocative investigative project I want to do, I can do it. I can find the money to get it done. Something else might have to suffer. I might have to pull a reporter, say my county government or city hall reporter for Lakeland, off for a month or two to look at something, [and] therefore my coverage of the city hall or county government will suffer because I don't have another backup reporter to put in there. It's all a question of tradeoffs. I don't feel like I couldn't do that if I really wanted to. We've done enough good journalism, even in the wake of this downturn, that I'm proud of, that we figured out a way to do.

P: Give me some examples of some important investigative journalism that you've done.

S: These days we're looking at the Lakeland electric department which is part of the city government or municipal utilities. We have never done a thorough review of how they conduct their business. We just completed a series of articles, [which] ran over four or five days, tracing the history of Lakeland Electric. Why it's an important aspect of local government. How much money they contribute to the City of Lakeland's general fund. How their profitability contributes to keeping property taxes low in Lakeland. Also [discusses] some fairly significant missteps that they've made in recent years, particularly in trying to expand their reach into non-traditional areas like satellite dishes and some other things vis-à-vis telecommunications and that sort of thing that really turned out to be huge financial mistakes. That whole debate about to what extent should a subsidiary of city government be competing with the private sector for business. It's all a very interesting debate.

P: I talked with Diane McFarlin, who is the publisher of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. They've really gone into the communications business rather heavily. Have you done any of that or considered that?

S: No, we're really waiting to see how the Sarasota experiment plays out. We're letting them be the guinea pig. They have done a tremendous job. I have to hand it to them over there. The buzzword in our business is convergence, converging print with Internet with broadcast, with TV, etc. They have a TV operation now in the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* newsroom called SNN. They're doing a good job of it. The big question mark at this point continues to be, can they make an adequate profit? Thus far, I think they've been struggling after five

or six years of this noble experiment. The best example of that in the state is in Tampa where Channel 8 and the *Tampa Tribune* are both owned by the same company, so the TV station and the newsroom have been combined. They're constantly sharing stories and using each other's material and putting reporters on television and that sort of thing. They're owned by the same company, so that makes it a lot easier. You'll probably see more of that because the Supreme Court ruled a couple of days ago that the old rules about cross-ownership in the same market were no longer valid.

P: Rupert Murdoch [media proprietor, owner of worldwide newspaper and magazine publishing and television empire] may end up owning everything.

S: That's right, yes.

P: Now when you took over as executive editor, were there any specific problems that you faced, such as financial problems, circulation, management, that you had to deal with?

S: There were several issues relating to our circulation in the eastern part of the county. Winter Haven was a challenge. We weren't selling as many papers in the Winter Haven region, which is fifteen miles east of Lakeland. [It is] still our market area, still very important. We concluded that if we were ever going to become the primary news medium in Polk County, we needed to do something about the hole in the doughnut in the Winter Haven area. There was a newspaper, [and] continues to be a small daily newspaper, that at the time was family-owned. We began a strategy to increase circulation over there which primarily entailed giving them a separate section every day. At the beginning it was five days a week. Monday through Friday, we gave them a separate free-standing section of the paper that the Lakeland readers did not get. We call them zoned sections that have news of their community and special stories. We hired five or six reporters and a photographer and a bureau chief over there to oversee that operation. We bought a building and renovated it and made a strong statement in the community that we were there for the long term. That has been very successful. The *Winter Haven News Chief* has lost large numbers of circulation. I think at the time they might have had 16,000 a day or thereabouts. Now they're down to about 8,000 a day. What they have lost we have pretty much gained.

P: Who is your major competitor? The *Tampa Tribune* or the *St. Petersburg Times*?

S: St. Petersburg does not circulate in Polk County. Tampa has pulled way, way back so they're not really a major competitor any more for local news. They sell about [5],000 a day in our county. When I moved to Lakeland in 1976, they were probably up in the mid-20s or low-20s. I would say our major competitor today

for advertising is the *Winter Haven News Chief*, since they have quite a bit of local advertising. They have a small news staff, but they do a decent job of covering the Winter Haven local news.

P: Comment on Loyal Frisbie [owner, publisher, *Polk County Democrat*] and the Bartow paper. That's a weekly paper and they do a lot of county advertising.

S: Absolutely, they come out twice a week. They have the *Polk County Democrat*, they also have the *Fort Meade News-Leader*. Fort Meade is about fifteen miles south of Bartow. It's a great little newspaper. Loyal is getting up there in years. I still see him around Bartow. I live down close to Bartow, so I do most of my shopping and business in Bartow. My kids go to school in Bartow, so I see him moseying around downtown Bartow. I still look at his column occasionally that runs on the front page of the *Polk Country Democrat*. His son S. L. is still as energetic and as hard-working as ever. He's pretty much running the paper these days.

P: Four generations of the same family have owned that newspaper. It's surprising that some corporate entity hasn't snatched them up.

S: I haven't seen their bottom line so I don't know how profitable they are.

P: I talked to S.L. Frisbee and he seemed to think that they were doing pretty well, mainly due to the county advertising. They have a separate paper they put out which just deals with the county announcements, legal ads and that sort of thing. He said that sustains them.

S: They do what we called job printing, on their presses. They don't just do the newspaper, they do special printing projects for local companies.

P: When you took over as executive editor, did you make any vastly different changes when you took over?

S: Nothing vastly different. My first order of business was to hire my successor as editorial page editor, which I still count as one of my biggest successes. His name is Dave Schultz and he was an outstanding Tallahassee correspondent for a number of news organizations over the years. We had known each other through the editorial page editor's organization and persuaded him to come as editorial page editor and he's still there. He's now his own department and independent and doing a great job for us. He's covered probably nine or ten governors and has a tremendous background on history on the state of Florida, political issues and that sort of thing. Basically, I'd never run a newsroom before. It's mainly going by seat-of-the-pants and instinct. Being the editorial page editor of the paper for five years gave me a good grounding on what some of the

more important issues were, locally. I was always interested in public policy and investigative stuff, and exposing public corruption has always been very important to me. People who violate the public trust, as my staff knows, is something that we don't take lightly and [that] we give a lot of attention to when we have suspicions that [it] is occurring. We needed to get some young reporters in there who were aggressive and hard-working, [and] raise the difficult questions. [It] was important to me to upgrade the quality of the reporting staff and to write more stories about people in the community. I thought it was very important that we do more stories about what makes Polk County that rich tapestry that every community has, the people that make the community up. We need more people in our paper.

P: What are the most important functions of the newspaper?

S: It's a long list. I like to describe a good newspaper as a tremendous buffet line that has appetizers and the main courses and the desserts. A variety of choices depending on what your taste happens to be that day. We range from the substantial to the frivolous. We can't forget that one of our functions is to entertain and to have people want to read. Ben Bradlee, [executive editor, *The Washington Post*, 1968-1991] the great editor of *The Washington Post*, once was asked, what makes a great newspaper? He said, it's a newspaper that people want to read every day. I tell that to my staff frequently. The reader is our judge. We have to keep asking ourselves what about our paper will make people want to pick it up. Obviously, for a paper our size and our market, we should never forget that local news is our bread and butter. We have to constantly be thinking of ways to localize national stories, state stories, etc. At the same time, we have to be covering those local stories when they're just simply local stories. What is the local angle? I'm always asking that question. If it's a story about Medicare, I want to know how many Medicare recipients we have in Polk County. A story about Social Security, I want those numbers in that story. I want people to know that we've got 100,000 military veterans in our county. Those numbers are easy to get. They help us, as editors, make news judgments about the significance of stories about Medicare and Social Security and veteran's benefits and that sort of thing. You have to have a curiosity level that is almost insatiable about your community and issues and people, that sometimes can drive reporters crazy and editors as well. There's always one more question that can be asked. At some time we have to cut it off. The questions are extremely important and I think the watchdog role of our newspaper is extremely important in terms of writing about corrupt public officials. I'm very proud of what we've done in that regard, too. Based on our aggressive reporting efforts in the late 1980s, our reporting resulted in a grand jury that forced a sheriff to resign mid-term.

[End of side A2]

P: So the grand jury used the evidence from your reporting?

S: Correct. In the late 1980s, a man was elected sheriff of Polk County who had never held public office before. He had been in office for several months when we started getting an unprecedented number of phone calls from people that worked in the sheriff's office or had dealings with the sheriff's office or had friends there who were saying, you're not going to believe what he's doing now, you're not going to believe that, etc. Finally, I said, this is an incredible situation, I've never heard anything like this before—just the number of complaints. I went to the publisher and I said, I've got a situation here that really sounds pretty serious. I've got one police reporter and he can't cover all the crime news going on and still spend time investigating the sheriff. I said, I need another reporter. The publisher said, I'll give you one for eighteen months. It was Lynn Matthews, who is now the president of the regional group. He said, I'll give you a second police reporter for eighteen months. Let's see what you come up with. At that point, that was a godsend. We got the second reporter just to focus on the sheriff's department. The two police reporters actually worked together in tracking down all these leads. They were excellent, did a tremendous job. They did a series of stories, appearing off and on for probably about twelve months, that exposed incredible incompetence and wrongdoing and bid rigging, all kinds of corrupt activity that got the state attorney's attention. The state attorney had the grand jury look into it. The grand jury subpoenaed a lot of people who worked in the office. The grand jury issued a report that referred to the Polk County Sheriff's Office as the laughingstock of the state and that he was incompetent, that sort of thing and concluded with a recommendation that the sheriff either resign or be removed by the governor. The sheriff had been in office, at that point, about two years. He concluded that he should resign based on the wording of the report. I think he knew he was probably going to be removed by the governor. He resigned and that was probably one of the biggest stories that we covered in my era.

P: Were there any criminal indictments?

S: No criminal indictments, no.

P: How have reporters changed since you've been at *The Lakeland Ledger*?

S: They're much smarter now than they were. They're coming to us much better prepared because we're a larger paper and we can pay them somewhat better. We're hiring more reporters with experience. Typically, a reporter that we hire has two to three years [of] experience rather than in the old days when we were hiring most of them right out of college. We still do hire some out of college, but not as many. Obviously, when you hire someone with a little more experience, they come to you better prepared, [especially] if they came from a good

newspaper where they had a good editor. [In] many ways they seem more interested in moving on. I don't know. Maybe that's not the case. I think it's always been that way with young reporters. I was that way and most are. They come to work for a medium-sized newspaper like *The Ledger*. They see themselves there for two, three [or] four years, then want to move on to the major metros. Some do and some don't. They're fun to work with. Most of them these days we hire are younger than my oldest son.

P: How is the newspaper audience different today?

S: That's a good question because twenty years ago we didn't have CNN, we didn't have all these cable networks [with] twenty-four hours a day of news bombarding you. Everything [including] Gary Condit's [U.S. Representative from California, 1989-present] latest dalliances with Chandra Levy [former intern for Federal Bureau of Prisons, suspected of having affair with Rep. Gary Condit, found dead in 2002]. The audience is much more aware of what's going on today than they were back then. Maybe they're aware of all the wrong things, [things] that aren't really important. I think they have much less time, particularly in a state like Florida, where people have so many opportunities to be outside twelve months a year. Everybody loves this state because you can fish or play tennis or golf. There's so much competing for the newspaper reader's time, not just television, that stories have become somewhat shorter, which is probably a good thing. It's forced us to think harder, because of the television influence, about how we visually display stories, to make stories more appealing to readers. We call them points of entry in the newspaper. A good story should have multiple points of entry. A photograph would be a point of entry that might draw a reader to a story, [or] a chart with some data in it, a map, those sort of things, a nice, appealing design. Television and *USA Today* have forced all newspapers to do better work at displaying their content.

P: It's not just adding color maps, it's more sophisticated than that.

S: Absolutely. Color just for the sake of color [isn't enough], while we have great color reproduction in our paper and color capabilities. It's certainly pleasing and all that. You need more than that, we've moved beyond just color photos. It's maps and charts and interesting little devices for readers to look at. They may look at that material before they even decide to read the story. Typically, that could entice them to read a story that they otherwise might not have been interested in.

P: What's your assessment of *USA Today*?

S: I think it's a very good newspaper. I don't read it every day. Typically, I read it when I'm traveling. They have mastered the informational graphic, [as] we call it

in the business. They're the pioneer in using informational graphics to really enhance stories. Their sports section, I think, is widely regarded as the best in the country in terms of covering nationwide sporting news. It's been widely copied by many big city newspapers across the country. I think it's a very good newspaper.

P: Critics refer to it as McNews.

S: Because so much of it is in short bites. News on the run, fast-food news, that sort of thing. Yes, there are a lot of short stories, but there is a lot of content there. Typically, in one issue of *USA Today* there will be a couple of stories that will have some depth to them.

P: Actually, they do quite a bit of investigative journalism.

S: Yes.

P: How do you compete with television news like CNN?

S: Our main advantage over CNN is [that] they don't cover Polk County news. We have to remember that constantly. In our daily news meetings and discussions, we always push for at least one local story on the front page, if not two, and some days we have three. Some days we've had five local stories on the front page of *The Ledger*. What gives us our unique personality is that we have news in our paper that no other publication, no other cable network, no other television station is going to have. We have a lot of it. It's not just on the front page; it's spread across every single section. Our business section typically has one or two local stories on its front about a local business or issue relating to the business community. Our sports section is heavily laden with news of high school athletes or local athletes performing well for college teams or pro teams. Our features section has one or two stories on its cover about local events and the museum, or local actors or actresses who are doing well. Our local section is totally dedicated to local news. Local news is our mantra. We hammer at it constantly. It's our main issue.

P: Tom Fiedler [editorial page editor, *The Miami Herald*] said that while CNN could report what was happening, newspapers had the opportunity to give some detail, some depth, some analysis of these events that were happening so fast and put it in some context. Do you see that as part of your function?

S: Absolutely. [After] 9/11, the disaster in New York City, newspaper readership during that period was at all-time highs. Even though we had those horrifying images on the television screen for days and days after the tragedy, people were flocking to newspapers for more stories, more information. A lot of the time,

television just whets the appetite for people wanting more information, more analysis, more context. It's a popular term in our business, let's give all this context and explanation and stories about these people and their families.

P: How do you get young readers to read the newspaper?

S: I don't know. There have been studies in our business for thirty years on the young reader problem. I'm not sure I've seen any analysis that has the eureka, I have found it, conclusion. We have to write about things that interest them. We have to have people in our newsrooms who are young and understand what young readers want. A great advantage of being the editor of a paper the size of *The Ledger* or smaller, [is] that we hire a lot of young people. We have turnover, we have more turnover than a lot of big newspapers. We have the ability to keep young, fresh ideas coming into our newsroom, challenging the older guys like me about whether such and such rock star needs to be on the front page or not because he committed suicide or whatever. We had a great debate in my newsroom about Kurt Cobain [lead singer of band Nirvana, committed suicide April 5, 1994] some years ago. We ran his photo on the front page when he killed himself because I was persuaded that he was an important enough figure to run his photo, but I didn't want to run the story. I took some criticism from my younger staffers about that. They may be right, I don't know, [it's] hard to say. It certainly forced me [to think differently], that kind of discussion in the newsroom. I like to use the [phrase], we're a work in progress, whenever we have problems or [are] just trying to sort our way through a problem or solution. We always have the next day to do better. Certainly, all these discussions and debates we have in newsrooms about news judgments and decisions are very healthy. We're kind of a laboratory. It has certainly been good for me to rethink some of my opinions and preconceived notions about things like that. Frankly, having children, younger children, has opened up my eyes a bit to their friends and what their interests are. Making sure that we cover some of the stars of their generation. Britney Spears [pop singer] comes to mind. She had a big concert in Tampa or Orlando. Frankly, it was me who said, she's huge. She's setting all kinds of records and selling out concerts right and left. She's going to be over here in Tampa this coming weekend, what are we doing? People hadn't really thought of it. We have an excellent music writer here and we have some great photographers. Let's get over there and get a picture of her and get the story in the paper the next day. We did and it all worked out well. I think being tuned in to what the younger readers are interested in [is important]. Defining younger readers is tricky too. You've got to keep talking to them is the main thing.

P: How has Lakeland changed in the time you've been there?

S: It's changed dramatically. I moved to Lakeland in 1976 and it was still pretty much a small town, it was highly dependent on several big industries. Namely,

Publix Supermarkets and the phosphate industry [were] major area employers. The citrus industry was a major area employer. Historically, Lakeland has been more or less the heart of the citrus industry, with the Florida Citrus Commission located there. Florida Citrus Mutual, the largest growers organization in the state, [is] headquartered in Lakeland. They've just been rolling along, things were going well and all of a sudden in the late 1970s or early 1980s we got hit by a one-two punch. One was some devastating freezes back-to-back that really knocked the citrus industry on its back. We had a large Piper aircraft plant that employed about 2,000 people that shut down. They moved their operations, or some of those people, to the main plant in Vero Beach. That forced some people in the business community to start thinking about diversifying the economy. We had all our eggs in one basket or two or three baskets. The Lakeland Chamber [of Commerce] formed a group called the Lakeland Economic Development Council to persuade more diverse industry to come to the community. They've been highly successful in doing that. Geico [insurance company] headquarters [is here] and State Farm Insurance regional headquarters [is] in Winter Haven. They've done a terrific job of diversifying the employment base of the community. Better jobs, more jobs, been very helpful. In that era, Polk County's unemployment rate was up 17 [and] 18 percent sometimes. Always highest in the state and sometimes in the top four or five in the nation. Today we're closer to the state average, between 5 [and] 6 percent unemployment rate. All those business recruiting efforts have been very helpful. When you bring in companies like Geico and more white-collar, clean industries, [with] good paying jobs, you diversify the community not just in terms of the job base, but in cultural outlook as well. Bringing people from different regions of the country has really helped with things like the Polk Museum of Art which is a great facility. The corporate donations that result from some of these Fortune 500 companies has certainly helped. The downtown area has blossomed, with an antiques district and boutiques and that sort of thing. It's all been very healthy.

P: How important has Florida Southern [University] been to the community?

S: Florida Southern is always going to be important to the community. In my early years there I think they were remiss in not promoting the Frank Lloyd Wright [architect] aspect of that campus aggressively enough. In recent years, they've gotten a lot better about seeking federal and state grants to restore those Frank Lloyd Wright buildings, which is the largest one-site collection of Frank Lloyd Wright buildings in the country. They have Frank Lloyd Wright meetings there once a year, where lectures are given. It's an important part of the community, they produce many fine graduates. I have friends whose children have gone there and they've been very satisfied with their children's education. It's a good school.

P: Are there any examples of advertisers, some of these corporations, pulling

advertising because of a story you've written or an editorial you've presented?

S: Yes, that comes with the territory. It doesn't happen frequently, thank goodness, but it does happen periodically. Realtors are one example. Again, it hasn't happened lately. In my years at the paper, periodically we've written stories that have angered a certain interest group. The realtors group comes to mind. Realtors absolutely hate stories about people who sell their own home without a realtor. Imagine that. What we've tried to do over the years, and we've gotten better about stories like this, is to try to present a balanced view of stories like that. When you have an unsophisticated reporter writing about a topic and they happen to believe that something is a good idea, they'll write about it but they'll only quote one side. Why doing for-sale-by-owner is such a wonderful thing [is] because you don't have to pay a realtor's fee. Understandably, the realtors are upset about that because it doesn't present a balanced view of the situation. I've learned my lesson over the years, and hopefully so have my editors at the paper, that there is a way to do this story, and it's better to present all sides of the issue. If you're writing a story about for sale by owner, certainly there are some advantages to that, but there are disadvantages as well. We typically try to call the local realtor's president and say, this is one point of view, what's your point of view? Typically, they'll say, there's another side to it, there are some pitfalls that people need to be aware of. That sort of thing. Balancing stories. Even when we do that, they're still not happy because they perceive it as hurting their business. At least we can look at them with a straight face and say the story is legitimate, it has news value. Your view was represented in the story. The other view deserves to be represented as well. We've had boycotts from realtors over the years. They haven't lasted very long because, as I told my realtor friends, you're not spending money with us because you like us and you think we're nice people, you're spending money with us because we get you results. If we're not getting you results, you shouldn't be spending your money with us. You're buying our audience of 80,000 readers a day. You're not buying our news columns and our editorial positions and our news judgment point of view.

The most interesting boycott we had was when Matthews was my publisher in the mid-1980s. A major automobile dealer in town, the Chevrolet dealership, who was spending a lot of money with us, was getting customers into his business by luring them in with a mailing that was highly deceptive. Basically, it said that Dr. Pleasants could come in and get a \$2,000 discount on his new Ford if he brought [his dealership check] into the dealership. He would have a check in his mailing at home. He'd bring it in. One of our readers figured out that scam fairly quickly because he went down to the dealership and he said his name wasn't Dr. Pleasants. He said his name was Tom Smith, and he wanted to buy a new Chevrolet. He didn't have to present the check, that was part of the scam. The salesman would say, nice to meet you Mr. Smith, here's what we have. He negotiated down a price and he said, that's sounds good. Sit in this other room

and I'll talk to my supervisor about this price. They had a database in their computer system of all these checks they had sent out. They would go and check for the name of the person that was trying to negotiate the car deal. They would find out that so-and-so had gotten a check. The salesman went into this database and couldn't find Tom Smith because he had given him a false name. He came back to him and said, I really can't deal with you on this. He made up some excuse. As it turned out, this amounted to consumer fraud. We got the state attorney. We wrote about it because we figured out what they were doing. They weren't honoring these checks that they were sending out. We wrote several stories about it and the car dealer was obviously furious because the mailings did not come from his dealership, they came from a fictitious name [with a] P.O. Box. We searched the county records and determined the fictitious name was registered to this local car dealer in town. The car dealer pulled his advertising and he was one of our biggest advertisers. The publisher was supportive. He just wanted to make sure that everything was accurate, fair and balanced. I read that story probably ten times before it went in the paper, just to make sure that we had all our bases covered. The car dealer was out of the paper for about four or five months. Within a year, the car dealer had been indicted for consumer fraud by the state attorney's office. His general manager at the dealership had been indicted for consumer fraud. Chevrolet had put him on notice that they were withdrawing his ability to keep the dealership. They all pleaded guilty and the new dealer was back in the paper.

P: You can't stay mad too long, if you are in the automobile business.

S: Right, the salesmen were hurting.

P: How have the place of women in the newspaper business changed over twenty years? You mentioned that you have a female managing editor.

S: Correct. I have a business editor who is female. I have an assistant metro editor who is female. In the old days, when I started at *The Gainesville Sun* in 1970, we had a section called the women's section. Margaret Warrington was the editor. They wrote about society news and fashion news, supposedly all these topics that were of interest only to women. I believe *The Washington Post* was probably the first major newspaper to break out of that mold and start what they call their style section these days. Any time a paper like *The Washington Post* or the *New York Times* does something different, everybody in the industry takes notice. That started the transition from women's sections to life sections or lifestyle sections or living sections or style sections or whatever, which certainly touch on topics of interest to women, but [are] of interest to all readers. Heck, we know women represent half of our readership. I'm sure that's been the case for many, many years. Having a female managing editor is really important to me because she just brings a different view to a lot of things. If we're talking about

stories for the front page, a story about the latest mammogram research, [which is] a women's issue, but really a health issue, [as] husbands are certainly concerned about mammogram issues as well, I really value her input on whether that's significant enough to be on the front page or not. Women are certainly extremely involved in our community, all aspects. Public life and education and child-raising issues. Extremely important.

P: What about the hiring of African Americans and other minorities?

S: We have to keep minorities in our applicant pools. We have to search for them, seek them out. [It is] extremely important to producing a complete newspaper that raises questions that wouldn't occur to some of us who were not raised in that culture. We require that for every opening we have, a minority candidate is interviewed. Sometimes it's a telephone interview. Our most recent hire is young African American from the paper down in Charlotte County, south of Sarasota. We concluded in *The Ledger* newsroom in Lakeland, that because of a series of events in the past year or so, we were losing too many minorities and we needed to pick up the pace.

P: It is hard to keep qualified minorities, is it not?

S: It's hard but we've had some success, we have a sportswriter who has been with us for twelve years now, who is a graduate of Florida A&M [and] covers college football for us. He's been with us. The larger papers are always looking at us and papers our size for the training ground for their minorities.

P: You are on the board of visitors for the Florida A&M College of Journalism. Are they not producing enough journalists?

S: I'm not sure. In terms of the demand, they're not, certainly. Every newspaper in the country is looking for qualified minority journalists. They are producing very good graduates out of that journalism school who are very well prepared and do a lot of internships. I think the dean at [the University of Florida College of Journalism], Terry Hynes, is tired of my constant sermon. Actually she's not, she's been terrific about it and she's a great dean. She constantly hears me say that the internship program requirements of the [University of Florida] College of Journalism need to be incorporated into the curriculum somehow, because at Florida A&M they are constantly hammering those kids that they need good internships. It's not uncommon to have a graduate of the Florida A&M Journalism School come out with three internships. Sometimes four. [If] they don't have two, they're embarrassed. This school [UF], which I so dearly love, just doesn't seem to figure out how to push internships hard enough. I can't figure out why. Maybe because they're not offering credit for it. I don't pretend to understand the intricacies of how many hours you need for graduation and all

that. Terry seems to be open-minded to pursuing some new thinking about requiring kids to do at least one [internship]. And [having had] one [internship] in this job environment, I've got to tell you, is not all that impressive because I see so many kids with two or three at a variety of newspapers. They've got references. You call two or three editors who have worked with the young person right out of journalism school. They all tell you that kid was great. You talk to one editor at a small weekly or something that says that kid was great, you're probably going to go with the one that's got the most internships and the most references.

P: How important is it for publishers and editors to get involved in community activities?

S: I think it's much more important for publishers to do that. We have an activist publisher who is very involved in organizations like the Chamber of Commerce and the museum and the symphony—a whole variety of civic organizations, not just business groups. One of the publisher's many roles is to be the goodwill ambassador for the newspaper and make sure that the business climate in the community is healthy. If the business climate is not healthy, the newspaper is going to suffer financially. That's an important part of his job as CEO of the paper. Editors have to be very careful about their involvement. I don't believe much in absolutes. I think there is always going to be an exception to some policy that you have to keep an open mind about. I have been very careful about involving myself in groups. Perception is just as important as reality. We know [that] if you belong to the Rotary, and the Kiwanis sees a story about Rotary in the paper, most of them are going to think that Rotary is getting preferential treatment because you're a member. Whereas that may or may not be the case, they're always going to think that. I try to tell people who ask me to join organizations that I can do them much more good by not being a member of the organization, because they can call me anytime and pitch their story and I'll put it in without regard to whether I'm a member or not and without regard to whether a competing group might think they're getting favorable treatment.

P: What has your relationship been with the Florida Press Association over the years?

S: I've been more active in the Florida Society of Newspaper Editors [FSNE] which is the editors group. The Florida Press Association is mainly the publishers and the editors of the weekly newspapers. The daily newspaper editors have a separate organization that works very closely with Florida Press, called Florida Society of Newspaper Editors. I was president of that organization in the early 1980s. I served two different terms on the board of directors of FSNE, which is a great organization for editors to share ideas and help with our annual convention which we do jointly with the Florida Press Association.

P: You served two times, in 1994 and 1995 as a juror for the Pulitzer Prize. Which category did you judge?

S: The first year it was the spot news category, breaking news, which was a lot of fun because you get to review the best work of newspapers who have covered the big tragedies of the year. Typically, it's an earthquake or fire or major plane crash or something that all the newspapers across the county have had on our front pages. You get to see the best work of those newspapers. [The paper] where the event occurred is typically the best coverage. Not always, but usually. The second year I was in the feature writing category, which was much more difficult because the volume of entries in that category is much more voluminous than the spot news category.

P: Who else was on the panel with you in 1994 judging spot news?

S: The first year the chairman was Sandy Mims Rowe [editor, *The Oregonian*, 1993-present; president, American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1998; executive editor, *The Virginian-Pilot*, 1983-1993] who is now the editor in Portland. She had been editor of the paper in Norfolk, *The Virginian-Pilot*. She was the chair of the committee and there were four or five others.

P: Were they all newspaper people?

S: I believe so, I believe we were all newspaper people. I think occasionally they have an academic in the group. It's probably 95 percent newspaper people.

P: What process did you go through in deciding who won the spot news category?

S: You go to Columbia [University] in February, unfortunately. You arrive on a Monday morning, typically at the great room in Columbia University. There is a room dedicated to Pulitzer, who I guess heavily endowed Columbia or the Pulitzer Foundation, which is administered by Columbia University. There's this huge room with this huge portrait of Mr. Pulitzer up on the wall with all these big tables and stacks of entries. You know before you go what your category is going to be. There's generally some introductory remarks and welcome by the President of Columbia. You're told what group you're in. The chairman pretty much sketches out the procedure, which is [that] every juror is expected to review—sometimes the term review is subject to interpretation—every entry. So you sit around a table in your category with six or seven jurors in your category and you pass around these entries. Some of them are huge documents prepared by a professional PR [public relations] firm. Newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, in those days at least, must have had a lot of money to spend on marketing. They were very impressive. Other entries come in, look like they might have been put together by a seventh-grader. You

do try to give those equal weight. Sometimes those entries are more impressive than the ones people put a lot of money into.

P: You don't automatically assume that the *New York Times* is going to have the best entry?

S: No. Absolutely not. I always declare that I have a possible conflict when it comes to the *Times*. Typically, my fellow jurors will say, that's okay since you don't work for the *Times* newspaper. We'll take that into consideration but there are seven of us. You review all the entries and it's what we call the weeding process. On the first day, Monday, you try to eliminate those that you know clearly just are not going to make it. [They] might be tackling a topic that is routine or their coverage was just so-so. [For] the Pulitzer, you're really looking for exemplary, outstanding work. Not just good work, but great work. When you go through that process, the first day, you're going to eliminate about two-thirds of the entries. You're looking at all of them, you're seeing the ones [that are] great work. Put it aside. This is so-so, it's out. Boom. Those big entries hit the floor. All over that room, stuff hitting the floor. Boom, boom, boom, boom. People have written stories about the process in journalism publications that are pretty funny about all the noise and all the money that is spent on some of these entries. In twenty [or] thirty minutes they're relegated to the trash heap. The second day, it depends on the volume you have in the category. My first year in spot news, by the end of the second day, everybody had a chance to read most of the material which had made the final cut, which might have been ten or twelve entries out of fifty or sixty. We had some opinions and we have a civil debate about what the best three are. You submit the best three in no order, they repeatedly emphasized the board makes the final decision. The juries are just recommending groups.

P: Who is on the board?

S: The board is ten or twelve people who have long, distinguished careers in the business. The administrator [was] Seymour Topping [now Sig Gissler], who is the former managing editor of the *New York Times*, now he is the administrator for Pulitzer Prizes at Columbia. He's one of them. Maybe the chairman of Dow Jones Publishing Company. Sandy Rowe, [the] editor in Portland. She's on the board, I think. Andy Barnes who is the president and CEO at the *St. Petersburg Times* is on the board. A variety of journalists who have been in the business for many, many years.

P: Are there any restrictions on nominations?

S: I don't think so.

P: Can you nominate as many or as often as you want for different categories?

- S: I might be wrong about that. It needs to be a newspaper. They don't consider magazines. They don't give awards for magazine journalism.
- P: One paper could nominate maybe two people for spot news, one for editorial, and one for features.
- S: Right, correct. But there's a cost. If you're a small or medium-sized newspaper, [that could be limiting]. I forget what the cost is per entry, maybe \$50 or something. That's a self-limiting deal. You do too many, it's expensive.
- P: Buddy Davis's entry was submitted without his knowledge or his approval. Is that usually the case?
- S: No, I don't think so. I think that was probably unusual. My impression is that most people whose work is submitted for [the] Pulitzer know about it.
- P: Do they have some say into exactly what is submitted?
- S: Yes, we do. We usually submit one entry a year, maybe two. Having been a judge myself, I try to avoid burdening the judges with just good work. I want it to be something truly exemplary.
- P: What won the spot news in 1994?
- S: In 1994 it was the bombing, the first World Trade Center bombing.
- P: In 1995 you did features. How do you deal with a case like the Janet Cook [reporter for *The Washington Post* who won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, which was later rescinded after it was learned that she had made up the story] case? I don't remember what year she was.
- S: It wasn't that year. That was probably the most embarrassing thing that ever happened in *The Washington Post*, in its history, at least [in the] modern era. I guess she was in features. They made their [nomination] and the board approved it and she got the Pulitzer. Within a week, all hell started breaking loose because somebody checked her resume and determined that she hadn't gone to the college that she claimed to [have attended]. When you submit a Pulitzer Prize, the paper has to prepare a bio[graphy] on the candidate, the reporter. I think she [claimed she] went to one of the Ivy League schools, [or] Vassar. Somebody called up there and they had no record of her graduating. That was the first step in the process. *The Post* thought that maybe there was something funny. The name of the article was "Jimmy's World." Supposedly about a young man, maybe twelve, thirteen years old who was a heroin addict. They started questioning her about who Jimmy was and where he lived. Eventually, after a

several day period of interrogation by editors at *The Post*, she finally admitted that she had invented Jimmy. Jimmy was a composite character. I don't know if *The Post* withdrew the Pulitzer or if the Pulitzer Prize board [did]. *The Post* would have, I'm sure, after doing that investigation because of their reputation for integrity and all that. They fired her.

P: If you had a case like that with Mike Barnicle [reporter fired by *The Boston Globe* for plagiarism/fabricating stories].

S: There was somebody else prior to him being gone. There was a black female columnist who was fired for fabricating some character.

P: Is that the standard for newspapers? Would you do the same thing if you found a reporter that had manufactured quotations?

S: Unless it's clearly a whimsical column.

[End of side B1]

S: Mike Royko [columnist, Chicago Tribune; winner, 1972 Pulitzer Prize for commentary] used to have a character in his column that he would write about every few weeks or so, but it was clear from the context of the story that he was just a made up character.

P: Do you anticipate the end of the newspaper in its physical presence and that soon everybody will be on the Internet?

S: No, I don't. I'm bullish on newspapers as we know them today. I think the great Internet dot-com meltdown has reminded us that the business model for websites and Internet business was flawed. It was a classic case of a feeding frenzy and elevated stock prices and companies that really had nothing to sell other than a name and access to information. I think change is good for any business. You can't get too comfortable with how you've always done things. I think competition from Internet websites and different businesses has forced us to re-examine a lot of the things we do, why we do them and how we do them. [We need to] remember that our customers are extremely important to our future and we need to be creative about how we respond to what it is they want in our newspapers. Maybe fifty years from now, but I still kind of doubt it. Newspapers are so portable, so convenient, easy to navigate, using an Internet term. A lot of websites are difficult to navigate. Portability is still a big problem for people getting news through PDAs [portable digital assistants] or whatever. I don't pretend to be an expert on that, but just from my limited experience. I know you can download a lot of stuff through your Palm Pilot and that sort of thing and take it with you. But reading that information on a small screen that's not very well lit

is still a pretty big strain on the eyes.

P: When people sit down to have breakfast, they like to have a paper they can read. How would you compare yourself, *The Lakeland Ledger*, with other newspapers that have similar circulations? The Daytona paper is a little bit bigger. The Pensacola paper, the *Tallahassee Democrat*, are fairly close.

S: I think we all probably do a good job of covering our local communities. I don't read those papers every day, so I can't really give you a fair analysis of how well or poorly they do, compared to *The Ledger*. I can tell you that what we do, and I've said this several times earlier, is give our readers a good mix of the major news stories of the day, international, national, state, and particularly local. Local [news] is what brings people to *The Ledger*. If we didn't have a healthy serving of local news in our paper, people would read the *Tampa Tribune*, people would read the *Orlando Sentinel*, which are both available in our market. They're not as easy to get as *The Ledger* because they don't have the distribution system that *The Ledger* has anymore. We deliver our paper throughout the county and the *Sentinel* and *Tribune* don't any longer. You have to go searching for it [in a] single copy location. We just have a very, very good distribution system for getting the papers delivered to people's homes and that's important.

P: Somebody I was talking to the other day said that a lot of things have changed in the newspaper business but that hasn't. You still pick papers up, put them in the back of the truck and carry them to the subscriber.

S: It's waiting there and people call when they don't get it and they're mad and that's probably a good thing. If they stop calling we're in trouble. They want it, they want it bad and they're mad when they don't get it. I try to tell the people in the newsroom that when they get those angry calls, don't be mad at those folks. They're our friends, they're our customers. They feel strongly about their local paper. We're their hometown paper. If they weren't mad and angry about not getting that paper, then that would mean that they didn't care about us and didn't want us. So look at it from that standpoint. At the end of the conversation, thank them for being a customer of the paper. All the papers you mentioned are good papers. Perhaps because of the fact that we're a *New York Times* Company newspaper and we have access to a lot of resources from New York and the tremendous legal staff they have, enables us to be aggressive in our reporting and demand things from local agencies that sometimes don't want to give up information. Getting a call from a lawyer from the *New York Times* after I have a conversation with that lawyer that same day is helpful to my reporters in getting information and helping us with threats of lawsuits and that sort of thing because of our aggressive reporting. All in all, being part of that great *New York Times* family is a tremendous asset. We have other members of the *New York Times* family in Florida as well. The company stands for everything, in my mind, that is

right and good about journalism, what I was taught to believe.

P: What would you like to accomplish in the remainder of your newspaper career?

S: My major goal and I think the goal of every journalist would be to win a Pulitzer Prize. That is certainly the golden ring for journalism. Our parent company, the *New York Times*, has the ability to hire the best journalists in the field and spend a great deal of money on major projects, and that is the historic pace-setter in winning the Pulitzer Prize. That [is] a dream that I think is achievable, if you have the vision and the ability to see something that other people don't see, a story or situation that has that kind of potential to develop and investigate. Beyond that, to keep overseeing a newsroom that is inquisitive and passionate and loves coming to work every day. It doesn't happen because of one person, it happens because of an ideal and a culture that exists in a place that people truly enjoy coming to work and feel like they can make a difference. They're motivated and happy, feel like they're performing and feeling like their work is greatly appreciated. I think it's important to tell people every day what it is you love about their work. It's important to tell people every day what it is about their work that you think they might have been able to do a little bit better [of a] job at. Let them know they're appreciated, but that maybe they didn't do as good of a job in some area. It's not the same person every day, obviously. You have to spread it around. That's important, as I said earlier, to keep editing a newspaper that people like to read every day.

P: Rick Bragg [columnist, *New York Times*, *St. Petersburg Times*], in an interview we have, said that he wanted to be in a newsroom when somebody gets a good story they do a high-five, and that when a guy writes such a wonderful sentence he gets so excited he has to get up and walk it off.

S: That's good.

P: That's Rick Bragg and his unique perspective.

S: He's something.

P: Skip, is there anything else that we have not covered that you would like to talk about?

S: I don't think so. I kind of think we've covered a long period here. One spot where we cut a little short was the [typical] day and I think we ended with my going to lunch or something. Let me just back up there to that. The afternoon typically is spent [in] conversations with editors about various aspects of stories, and my reading some stories perhaps that are headed for the front page or stories that I'm particularly interested in. Then at 4:00 in the afternoon we have

another meeting with all the editors, kind of a follow-up meeting to the morning meeting to talk again about whether those stories are still in shape for the next day's paper. Based on the information that those editors have gathered [in] the previous four or five hours, [we determine] whether those stories still look like they may be headed for the front page. The wire editor, the person who handles the front page, by 4:00 in the afternoon has had a chance to go through the wires and check on the major national and international stories. He or she comes into our meeting. He or she is not there in the morning because they work late. We have another discussion at that meeting with all the editors again making their offerings. The wire editor makes recommendations on stories that ought to be on the front [page]. The metro editor or the city editor makes his recommendations on which local stories should be on the front. At that point, we pretty much agree on about five stories for the front page. They all leave. The managing editor and I hang around and we talk about, [stories] we ought to look at. We're generally in agreement about four of the five. I may say, I really prefer that one over this one. Why don't you take a look at it? I just heard about it, I looked at the first paragraph. Take a look at it and see what you think. If you don't think it's good enough for the front, then that's fine. [I] hang around, look at pictures, see what the strongest stuff is for the front and then I usually head home about 7:00 or so.

P: What time do you put the paper to bed?

S: The first press run is at midnight. That's the single copy paper that goes to the convenience stores and the news racks and all that. Our second edition starts up about 1:30 or so.

P: Is there anything else?

S: No.

P: That's great. This concludes the interview. Thanks very much for your time.

[End of the interview.]