

Joseph Russo



*This is an interview with Mr. Joseph Russo, retired St. Pete TV Director, media personality, Dale Carnegie Instructor and lifelong educator. This interview is being conducted on July 1, 2010 at Mr. Russo's home, located at 1710 W. Ferris Avenue, Tampa, Florida.*

**Interviewer: Jennifer Diaz, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library Systems' Oral History Project (JD):** Good morning, Mr. Russo. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. We really appreciate your participation in our Oral History Project.

To begin, could you please tell us the date and place of your birth?

**Joseph Russo (JR) :** I was born in Brooklyn, New York, on January 2, 1925. It was...I could have been a New Year's Day baby. However, I was born about a minute after midnight on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Consequently, my birthday, of course, made me a January 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday not a New Year's Day birthday boy. However, I went through most of my life until I was married, I guess, thinking I was a New Year's Day baby because my family always celebrated my birthday on January 1<sup>st</sup>. And, it wasn't until my wife proved to me with my birth certificate that I was, in fact, a January 2 baby.

**JD:** That must have been quite a surprise.

**JR:** Yes, it was. It was quite a surprise. I always felt regretful because I wasn't a New Year's baby. But, nevertheless, they celebrated it on the first.

**JD:** Well, wonderful. So, can you tell us a little about your childhood and when you first heard about Tampa?

**JR:** Well, my childhood. I grew up in a section of Brooklyn that was known as East New York. And, uh, we stayed there...We lived, my mother and father and myself; and I had five other siblings. We stayed there until 1941, I believe it was. And then we moved to Flatbush. And I was fifteen at that time, I think. Yes, fifteen. And we were there ... I stayed in Flatbush with my family until I was eighteen. And, uh, went into the service. I was in the United States Navy and served overseas in New Guinea and the islands, Australia, the Philippines, and then came back to the United States and was assigned to the flagship of the Atlantic Fleet. And, uh, came down to Key West, Florida, Miami, Florida. Then I was discharged. Because of my exposure to Miami, I liked the area and all that and had also met a young lady in Miami and thought I would like to come back here.

But, to answer your question, 'how did I learn about Tampa.' This was in Australia that, uh, when I was stationed there. I was having dinner one night, and there were a couple of other sailors sitting next to me. And we got into a conversation and I asked them where they were from. And one said he was from Philadelphia. They were shore patrol people. They guarded the trains that came down from Brisbane to Sydney where we loaded the ships that went up to the islands, New Guinea, and, uh, also as far away as the Philippines because, MacArthur was getting ready to push his invasion of the Philippines. In any event, the second person that I asked, I said, 'Where are you from?' He said, 'Tampa.' 'Tampa? Where's that?' Well he said, 'It's in Florida.' I said, 'Tampa, Florida? Well,

I've never heard of Tampa, Florida.' 'Oh yes,' he said. 'It's the cigar capital of the world.' I said, 'Cigar capital of the world? My goodness. I've heard of Miami and Miami Beach and all that, but sorry, no Tampa, Florida.' 'No, he said. No, it's the cigar capital of the world. Of course, being a non-smoker, neither cigarettes nor tobacco of any sort, I was completely unfamiliar with Tampa. But that was when I first heard of Tampa, and just didn't think much of it. I ran into this individual whose name was Tony Epolito, ran into him again in the Philippines. We were based in Subic Bay, and he was in charge of the warehouse there and I used to visit his warehouse regularly to pick up beer for our tent. And, uh, got to know him better. Of course, little did I know then, that I would eventually end up in Tampa. Uh, that's where I would spend the rest of my life. But that was how I got to know about Tampa through Tony Epolito and through our conversation.

**JD:** So what was your first impression upon arriving in Tampa?

**JR:** Well, this was in the summer of 1946. When I was released from the Navy – an honorable discharge, I might add. When I was released from the Navy, I, uh, since I had already been exposed to Miami and liked Miami and liked that area and met this young lady there that I mentioned earlier, I thought, 'Gee I'd like to go back to Florida.' So I sent out transcripts to the University of Florida, Florida Southern, the University of Tampa. Not anything close to Miami because I was afraid if I went to Miami, I would never get any work done. [chuckles] But, in any event, I got responses from the University of Florida,

from Florida Southern. I decided they were too far away and I liked the idea of Tampa because they had sent me a booklet with the names of students, the enrollment. And, uh, I liked the idea that there were names that I could recognize and also feel that I was familiar with. Names like Santiago, and Mirabella and that sort of thing. In other words, names that either had a Spanish or Italian extraction attached to them. So, I thought, 'They're my kind of people. I probably would fit in well.' So I responded to the university and they then sent me an approval that, 'Yes, that the transcript was acceptable, and that I could enroll in the university.' That was how I got here.

**JD:** Hmm. So what did you think when you arrived?

**JR:** What did I think? [Yes] Well I got off the train and came by ... I came down by train ... and got off the train and hailed a cab. And, as we were coming from the train station through downtown Tampa on, it wasn't Kennedy Boulevard at that time, it was called Grand Central. Here were all of these buildings in the middle of the day, somewhere around two o'clock, three o'clock in the afternoon with this glaring sun. And there appeared to be no one on the streets, and I thought, 'My goodness, they must all be taking siestas.' And I thought, I think I've ended up in Cuba. I don't know why Cuba, but but I thought with the Spanish element here these people need to get their rest. You know, they take their siesta in the afternoon. In any event, I thought, I don't know if I am going to like this. Well when I got to the university; got out of the cab, there was a young fellow by the name of Jimmie Phillips and he was standing on the

porch there and he saw me and he said, 'You must be from New York.' And I said, 'Well how can you tell that?' 'Well, he said, only a crazy northerner and a New Yorker would come down with a heavy wool jacket and wool pants.' So, I knew that, uh, he was right. [laughter] He knew I looked like an outsider.

**JD:** That's fantastic. So, Joe I know you've had an extensive career in radio and TV. Could you tell me about how you ended up working for the first UHF TV station in St. Pete?

**JR:** Yes. I had been ... I had done some radio and my objective was to get into television. Ahh, I was entranced by television. I really liked the idea. However, there was no television in the Tampa Bay area. And, uh, I thought, 'Gee how am I ever going to get into TV? If I want to get into TV, I have to leave this area.' But, fortunately one day I was at the University of Tampa and there was an ad announcing a television program, uh, training course that they were offering at the University of Cincinnati. And, uh, it, uh, seemed to fit my requirements – what I was looking for. So I went ahead and contacted them. They asked me for a transcript. I sent it. I was accepted and managed to scrape together a few pennies to enable me to get to Cincinnati because I didn't have much money. I, took a bus to Cincinnati; and the young lady that I was dating at the time, said, 'Well if you're going to Cincinnati, I'm..' – although she was from Tampa originally, born and raised here. She said, 'I'm leaving and going to Tulane and I'm going to be working on my graduate degree.'

So I went to Cincinnati and went through the program. And, while I was there, I

met – in the same class that I was in – I met the general manager of radio station WSUN Radio. And, that man's name was Major George Robinson. He was a retired English military person, but he was the manager of radio station WSUN. He and I became close friends. We came back to Florida. As a matter of fact, he allowed me to ride back to Tampa with him without charging me anything because I didn't have any money. And, carried me all the way back to Tampa. And, when the television station was ready to open, I went to see him and he offered me a job at \$35.00 a week. And I said, 'I'm sorry Major, but I can't accept \$35.00, I'm getting married.' He said, 'Well, I can offer you \$40.00 a week. So I went to work at WSUN Television station. It was the first ultra high frequency station in the area, and I think, in the entire state of Florida. At that time, all stations were VHF or very high frequency. But this was the first ultra high frequency station. And, we went on the air and were very, very successful because there were no other television stations here. That was the first one, and it wasn't until later, I believe, that Channel 8, which was a very high frequency station, came on the air.

**JD:** So, can you tell me about an interesting story that you worked on?

**JR:** Well, I used to do commercials. [laughter] I used to do commercials for a firm called Fremack's. And, this is a combination of the two owners, Fred and Mack. And, it was a men's clothing store. And, I used to do commercials for them. And, they had ... they specialized in a pair of trousers that were designed to keep your shirt down and your trousers up. Had an inner hip grip

waistband. And, this one night I did the commercial and after it was over, the cameraman and the floor person were laughing. We had gone off the air, not necessarily off the air, but we were into the program. So that they weren't on me live, and they were laughing and I questioned them. And I said, 'Why are you guys laughing?' And they said, 'Well, didn't you hear what you just said?' And, I said no. And they said, 'Well, go on up to the control room. They'll tell you.' So I went to the control room and asked them what had happened. And they said, 'Well, you know your tag line was supposed to be: So, be sure to shop at FreMack's where you'll find the trousers with the inner hip grip waistband guaranteed to keep your shirt down and your trousers up. Instead of saying that, I said, 'So, be sure to shop at FreMack's where you'll find the trousers with the inner hip grip waistband guaranteed to keep your shirt up and your pants down.' [laughter] So that, of course, was a commercial that wasn't easily forgotten. And, one day, one day my wife and I and children were traveling north and we stopped in South Carolina. We stopped to get a bite to eat. And, here was this woman who was looking at me. And I said to my wife, 'I wonder why she is looking at me?' And my wife said, 'I don't know.' And, finally I asked the woman, I said, 'Excuse me, but I notice you looking at me and I was curious as to why. Is there something that I've done that might, that I should be aware of? That I did it incorrectly, or what?' She said, 'No. No, but aren't you Joe Russo?' And, I said yes. She said, 'Well, I remember that commercial you did about guaranteed to keep your shirt up and your trousers down. [laughter] That was an interesting incident for me.

**JD:** That's wonderful. So she had seen it as well. I like that. So, how did your career in television end?

**JR:** Oh, we went from St. Petersburg. We went to Orlando and then we came back to Tampa. In Orlando, I used to do the news and the weather and the sports. However, I came in and it was my job to open up the television station, to sign on, on Saturday morning. And, I walked in and the general manager was there. And, this was at 7 o'clock in the morning. And he said, 'I'm sorry but you won't be able to work today or any more.' And I said, 'But why is that, Mark?' And he said, 'Well you read the story last night about integration at the University of Florida.' I said, 'Yes I did, but I didn't editorialize in any way. I just read the story as it came off the AP wires.' And he said, 'Well, the old man – meaning the boss of the television station.' He said, 'The old man wasn't happy with that, and he decided that you should be released.'

So there I was. My wife was pregnant, and I was terminated. Uh, no termination pay, no nothing and we came back to Tampa. Fortunately, I was able to hook up with, uh, television station WTVT. And I went to WTVT as a director. And, I was with them from '55 through '61. And then, at WTVT – as I mentioned, I was a director – and I was assigned a spectacular during the middle of winter. Tampa, the Tampa Chamber of Commerce decided to put on a winter carnival. And, they brought in just tons of manufactured snow. And they turned Franklin Street into a winter wonderland with a ski slope, with an ice skating rink, with all types of winter attractions. And I was assigned the duty of, or the job, of directing this winter

carnival. And, uh, I was doing it. And one of the managers of WTVT, uh, was there. I forget what his exact title was, but he was one of the upper level people. And, as I was directing the show, he was trying to direct it behind me, over my shoulder. And, I finally got to the point where I gave an instruction to one of the camera people to take one. In other words to take camera one and he said, 'Oh, you don't want to do that.' Or, whatever. And finally, I turned around to him and said, 'Excuse me, but if you want to direct the show you are welcome to directing it; and if not, I'm the director and I'll direct it the way I want to do it.' Well of course, that didn't sit well [chuckle] because he was top management and I was intermediate management or middle management. And, consequently, I was asked to resign. So I left WTVT. Although I did some freelance work after that, but essentially I was out of television and never went back.

**JD:** Okay. Now, what was your career following television?

**JR:** When I came back from Orlando, I felt I needed something to help me along with my self-confidence, with being able to deal more effectively with people. And a former instructor of mine at the University of Tampa, Roy McIlvery, was a Dale Carnegie instructor, and he suggested that I might consider the Dale Carnegie course. So I thought about it and, in spite of the fact that we didn't have any money and the cost was \$125.00, he suggested that I go to the bank, borrow the money and take the Dale Carnegie course. So I did. I went through the basic training, and then they asked me if I would be interested in becoming an assistant...an

assistant to the instructor. And I said, 'Yes I would.' So I became a graduate assistant. When I completed the graduate assistant role, the manager - Buddy Franklin - of the Dale Carnegie course in this area at that time, called me and said. You know he said, 'I've gotten a lot of good compliments about the way you act in class, about the way you help in class, and I've watched you. You seem to have a lot of enthusiasm, and I think you would make a wonderful instructor. Would you be interested in becoming an instructor for Dale Carnegie?' And I said, 'Oh it sounds interesting. Yes, I might.' So anyway, I discussed it with my wife and I, uh, then decided to take advantage. They were going to have a Dale Carnegie instructors training program in Tampa at that time. And, it was the first and only instructors training program they have ever had in this city. And, I was fortunate enough to be included. So, I worked at the television station opening up the station, finished at three. Came home for a short period of time. At five o'clock I was down at the Tampa Terrace Hotel where the training was taking place. And, I did that for fourteen ... fourteen nights. And, uh, then became a certified Dale Carnegie instructor. So I went to work for Carnegie full time then.

**JD:** How long did you work for them?

**JR:** I was a certified Carnegie instructor for 23 years, and I worked throughout the Tampa Bay area. Tampa, St. Petersburg, Clearwater, Sarasota, Ft. Myers, Plant City, umm, Brooksville. All over this area. But it was 23 years. I was aiming for 25. Unfortunately, I didn't achieve that because I ended up, as a result of Dale Carnegie, going to work

for 7-11 food stores as their personnel and training manager and then was assigned to Orlando. So I was working out of Orlando and couldn't commit myself to fourteen weeks. The Dale Carnegie course took fourteen weeks, one night a week, and I couldn't commit myself to fourteen weeks. So I had to give it up after 23 years.

**JD:** What are some of the things you took away from that time?

**JR:** From being a Dale Carnegie instructor? ["Yes"] Well, first off. It enabled me to just .. to meet some wonderful people. I, uh. As a matter of fact, just the other day I was speaking to a local priest and he was talking about a funeral over in St. Petersburg. A fellow by the name of James Rainey, who was a county commissioner there.

*{Commissioner's name may actually be Charles E. "Chuck" Rainey}*

And, he was telling me he was going to be conducting Mr. Rainey's funeral. And I said, 'Isn't that strange, I had Charles Rainey or Chuck Rainey, I had him in a class in Clearwater many, many years ago.'

But, I met a lot of interesting people. It enabled me, where previously I had some mis – I'm trying to think of the words. Some, some questions regarding my own self-confidence. As we all do. [Mm-hmm] But it helped me become a more self-confident person. Uh, a lot more sure of myself. And I just felt it was wonderful training for me.

**JD:** That's excellent. And so you continued after that as well to work as an educator throughout your life.

**JR:** Yes. Yes, I've always felt, for whatever strange reason, and I've tried to understand this and I have absolutely no idea why, but I have two brothers and I'm the only one in my family that every went to college. Uh, my two brothers were able to get into the business with my dad; and they always enjoyed a lot of the normal sports that most people do. You know, they like, uh, they like football, they like baseball, that sort of thing. I've never been particularly interested in sports, but I've always been interested in reading. I carry books with me all the time so that whenever I have a few spare moments, I can go ahead and read. And, I've always been interested in inspirational material. And, I've often wondered, 'Why is it that I never...I never really cared for playing cards, dice, gambling anything like that which my brothers like. And there's nothing wrong with that, but I just never had a desire for that. Uhh, I've always found that going to the library satisfied me more. Or going to Borders and sitting with a book for an hour or a couple of hours is a lot more enjoyable for me.

**JD:** Mm-hmm. To pursue the intellectual pursuits. [Right] That's wonderful. Can you tell us about some of the other jobs that you've had over the years?

**JR:** [sighs] Oh yes. I was a, uh, model. A clothing model for a while.

**JD:** Really?

**JR:** Mm-hmm. I traveled on the road with a fellow by the name of Jack Sanders, or Saunders. And, at that time there were a number of stores in Tampa – Maas Bros., Old Fox, Wolf Brothers. I forget the other stores, but other men's

stores – Fernandez and Garcia, Weill Moss. These were all men’s stores. And, Jack used to handle all of them, and I was his driver. Not that I drove him, but we traveled by car. And I would drive the car from one city to the next, and then I would model the clothing when the buyers came in from the particular city that we were in. I would model the clothing so that the buyers could see them on a person and see how they looked. And, I did that for, uh, for approximately six months. And we traveled Florida, Georgia, Louisiana and Alabama. And in the time that we did this, he sold over two, two and a half million dollars’ worth of clothing. [JD: That’s incredible.] And one evening when I was in Sarasota conducting the Dale Carnegie course, I, uh, mentioned the fact that, uh, enthusiasm is very important. You know, as long as we are enthusiastic about our work, as long as we are enthusiastic about life and so forth, we find that everything goes a lot easier. We are able to enjoy our work. We are able to enjoy life. And I talked about the fact that, uh, this particular individual, Jack, sold two and a half million dollars worth of clothing. And one of the students said, ‘I think I know who you are talking about.’ And I said, ‘Oh really? Who’s that?’ He said, ‘Jack Saunders.’ And I said, ‘You are absolutely right.’ And I said, ‘Well, how did you know?’ And he said, ‘Well, I’ve been in the clothing business and I know Jack; and I know he would be the one person who could do this in such a short period of time because he’s such an excellent salesman.’

**JF:** What an amazing coincidence. [Yes, Yes] So, I know that you mentioned before about your wife going to Tulane. How did the two of you end up

reconnecting since you were in Cincinnati? [laughter]

**JR:** Well, that’s quite a story. I had come back from Cincinnati as I had mentioned earlier with Major Robinson. He gave me a free ride back to Tampa. And, uh, I needed a job. So, because I didn’t have any money. So I ran into a friend of mine and he said ... you know, he said, ‘There’s a finance company that’s looking for help. They want someone to go out and chase down all of the deadbeats. The people who do not pay their finance bills, you know, the finance charges. Would you be interested?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I would.’ So I applied and was hired. They gave me a car. At that time, sixty-five dollars a week which I thought was great. This was before I went to work for the television station; and, of course, I had to go in to some areas that weren’t particularly inviting, you know. And I was threatened a couple of times with guns, and I had to work my way out of that. But, anyway, my wife was in New Orleans and I had attempted – or my, uh, the woman who was going to be my wife, okay. She was in New Orleans and I had attempted to get in touch with her several times, but she refused to answer any of my letters. She refused to answer any calls that I made. And, uh, consequently I felt that I needed to take ..[“More drastic measures.”] More drastic measures, right. So I thought, ‘I’ve got to get to New Orleans and convince her that yes, I’m serious. We want to get married and I love her and all.’ And, I happened to pick up a newspaper, and there was an ad in the newspaper: Wanted. Help to drive to New Orleans. Call this number. So I called the number and it was a fellow that lived out in East Tampa. And, he

was going to New Orleans. He had applied for a job at the, uh, the ship builders in New Orleans. And, uh, he was going out to start work there. So I called him, went out and met with him and so forth. We agreed on when he was going to leave, and I said, 'Yes, I'll be glad to ride with you and drive you.' He wasn't going to charge me anything. I was just going to ride along with him and help him to drive because at that time it took about – since there was only, I believe it was I-10 – it took about fourteen to sixteen hours to drive to New Orleans. So, we made the necessary arrangements, and I met with him and we took off. And we drove and we switched as we drove. He drove part of the way; I drove part of the way. We finally got to about sixty miles outside of New Orleans, and he said to me, he said, 'You know, I don't know if I, if I really want to take this job at the, uh, shipyard.' He said, 'I think I'm going to turn around and go back to Tampa.' And I said, 'Turn around and go back to Tampa? When?' He said, 'Well, right now.' I said, 'Go back to Tampa now?' 'Yeah, that's what I'm thinking. Yes sir. That's what I'm thinking.' I said, 'I don't think that would be a good idea, no.' He said, 'Well, I'm unsure.' I said, 'You know what?' I said, 'I think the best thing for you to do is to go to New Orleans and accept the job; get to working and then decide whether you like it or not. And if you don't like it, go back to Tampa then. However, you may find that you do like it and you want to stay on.' Well, of course, this was all very selfish because I wanted to get to New Orleans.

**JD:** You had your own motivations.  
[chuckles]

**JR:** Right. I was motivated by the fact that if he went back to Tampa, I wouldn't have a way to finish out the trip. So, he finally agreed. And he took me into New Orleans; dropped me off at the house that my future wife was living in at that time, and when I got there, she was of course surprised. This happened to be a boarding house. When I say a boarding house, there were FBI people that lived there while they were on temporary assignment in New Orleans. And, the uh owner of the house, was a lovely old lady – very, very, very elegant. Miss Annie Winstead was her name, and she was tall, elegant. Wore long dresses and every afternoon at four she had cocktail time. And she would preside over this cocktail time with martinis, Manhattans, and she also had a long cigarette holder that she would have as she had her drink. But, when I saw my wife, and Miss Annie said, 'Well, were you going to stay?' And I said, 'Well, I don't know.' She said, 'Well Joe..' she said, 'You can stay here.' She says, 'But Lou ...' My wife whose name was Loulabelle and she called her Lou. She says, 'But Lu will be on the second floor and you will be on the third.' She said, 'But you won't be coming down at night anywhere close to that second floor. If you and Lu are going to be doing any spoonin,' you'll have to do it out on the back porch.' And I said, 'Yes, Miss Annie. [laughter] Yes Miss Annie, I will.' So, anyway, we did our spooning on the porch and decided to get married. [laughter] We came back and, of course, that's when I went to work for the television station because I decided that being in the finance business was not in my best interests. [laughter]

**JD:** Wonderful. So, how long were you married?

**JR:** We were married fifty-six years. [JD: Amazing.] Fifty-six years. We had gone together for five. No wonder she didn't want to have anything more to do with me. [laughter] She figured I have to get rid of this fella 'cause he's not ever coming around to wanting to get married. But, we did get married, and we had a, uh, long and happy marriage. Tumultuous at times, I must add. We had our [still laughing] ...we had our differences of opinion, you know. We enjoyed each other's company. We enjoyed a lot of things, doing things together.

At the University of Tampa, we were both interested in the theater. [JD: Oh.] I had acted in a number of plays at the University. And then, following the University, we uh, along with a former Hillsborough High School teacher, who had been my wife's teacher and a drama coach there, we put together a, uh, a sort of a summer stock company. And, uh, we performed plays in the area in Tampa. We were active members of the Tampa Little Theater at that time. But, in addition to that, then we had the Inner Circle Theater which was our group. And, uh, we performed theaters at—we performed plays at the Tampa Terrace Hotel, at the Ford Harrison which is now the headquarters of the Church of Scientology, at the hotel down in Sarasota. So, we were active in theater and that was how...that was what I thought my life path was going to be – something in the theater. That was what I really liked and something in the theater, radio, television, well, I did end up there. But then, of course being an instructor or an educator, I guess you also have to be an actor. [laughs]

**JD:** That's very true. Well, that brings me to my next question. I know that you acted as the lead in a Cigar City film, *The Flower of Tampa* which was created by the Chamber of Commerce. Can you tell us a little bit about that and how that came about?

**JR:** Yes. There was a fellow by the name of Tony Garcia who was a graduate of the University of Tampa and a colleague, uh, classmate at the University of Tampa. And Tony had become involved. He was the head of the USO locally. He represented USO in this area. And, consequently, worked with the, uh, the Armed Forces; with the Army, the Navy and so forth, providing entertainment for them and that sort of thing. So he, um, he had some connections in show business. And, I was working at WTVT at the time; and he came to me and he knew that I had been an actor at the university and that we also had this private group. And, he said, 'I have a group out of Sarasota, Florida, that has been commissioned by the Tampa Chamber of Commerce to put together a film about the city of Tampa and its roots in the cigar industry. And, they need someone to play the part of this young man. Would you be interested?' And I said, 'Of course.' I said, 'I'll be glad to try out.' So I did. I tried out and won the part. And, Helen Gordon Davis, who later became a state representative, played the part of my aunt. And, another fellow by the name of John – I can't think of his last name – but he was my uncle. And, we started in this. Joanne Guayardo, whose daughter is Gayle Guayardo, Joanne Guayardo is the romantic lead [JD: interest] interest in that particular movie. And, I was known as Ricky. And, we talked about the fact my uncle John

talked about being born and raised in Cuba and how they grew tobacco and that sort of thing. In any event, we completed the film. It was shown throughout the United States. It was sent to all the Chambers of Commerce to promote the city of Tampa and its cigar industry. And, even today, I keep getting comments from people who see me. [clears throat] Excuse me. People who see me, telling me, 'You know, I was watching public television last night and I saw the, the film, the uh, *Flower of Tampa* and saw you in it. Of course, that was when I was quite young. A few years ago. [JD: A few years ago. giggles] Right. Right.

**JD:** So with that, how do you feel that the culture in Tampa has changed? You being here for such a long part of your life and going from sort of reporting on Tampa then and still being here now. How do you feel the culture has changed here?

**JR:** Well, without question, there's been a change. Ah, when I came to Tampa, it was pretty much a, a cowboy town. And, in some respects, we still are. And there is nothing wrong with that. However, we certainly have grown culturally. At the time...in the late forties, forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight.. during that period of time, the Tampa Little Theater was the "big," if you wanted to see a show, you know a theater production, you went to the Tampa Little Theater which was an amateur production, but nevertheless, it was what we had. And, uh, there was no television here at the time. There was just radio. The, umm. Let's stop for just a minute, if we can.

**JD:** So Joe, you were telling us about how Tampa has changed.

**JR:** Right. As I mentioned, we had...of course, at the time, that when I came here, we had radio station WDAE. We had WFLA and WALT. And there was a little radio station I worked at in Sulphur Springs and WALT, those two, and WSUN. But that was about it. But, today you've got all kinds of radio stations and talk radio here. We talked about the, ummmm, Tampa Little Theater. And, of course, a big night out was if you went...There was no University of South Florida. There was no Eckerd College, nothing like that. The University of Tampa was "the thing." And, whenever the university put on a production, you had a pretty good turnout. And, the Tampa Little Theater, for people who were interested in theater and live shows, they did wonderful work. They really did. But, today we have the Performing Arts Center. We don't have to go to Manhattan. We can watch, we can see a show, a Broadway show, right here. And, of course, we have the new Tampa Museum of Art. And, we also have the Historical Museum which was non-existent, at that time. And St. Petersburg has so much to offer us in the way of Dali, and now with the new Chihuly Glass Museum that's going up and the Fine Arts Museum on the waterfront. So there's an awful lot of activity here that a person can spend their time with and doing. And it's a wonderful area because you have, if you want cultural things, you can certainly do that with all of these museums. And, Sarasota, I failed to mention Sarasota. The museum at Sarasota is magnificent. And, also the Ringling. Down in Sarasota there's a little, ummm, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Museum. I don't know if any of you have seen it; if you've seen it. If not, it is just

magnificent. To think that one person spent fifty years, carving all of these figures and all of that. And, just having the, the ambition to do it, and taking the time to do it. I could never conceive of myself doing that – having that kind of dedication.”

But, anyway. It has changed. As I mentioned, we were a one horse town, a cowboy town. I think we’ve become a lot more liberal in our views today. We are a lot more culturally aware. I think we’ve become a lot more, um, respectful of the people that we live with and I think that it’s good.

**JD:** The diversity.

**JR:** The diversity, yes. Absolutely.

**JD:** Excellent. Can you tell us about your experience as master of ceremony for the Latin American Festival?

**JR:** Oh my goodness. Again, this goes back to Tony Garcia. Uh, there was a fellow by the name of Leon Cazin [spells it out]. They pronounced it Cāzin, but, in Spanish. And I think he was – he wasn’t Spanish, but he spoke Spanish and was known in the Spanish community here in Tampa. And, he was a projectionist for the Tampa Theater, the movie house. And, he came up with the idea of a Latin American Fiesta back in, I guess, it was the mid-thirties. And Tony Garcia came to me one day and said, ‘Listen. Would you be interested in becoming a, since you do theater work and you’ve been an announcer and all that, would you be interested in doing work as a master of ceremonies?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, of course.’ Of course, it didn’t pay anything, but that was fine. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed getting out in public and being

able to do it. It was more fun than work. And they say that’s the way to get through life without working. Just enjoy everything you do. And, I had a wonderful time. But anyway, Tony came to me; so I started with the Latin American Fiesta. And every year, I stayed with them for twenty-nine years. And, I was looking forward to celebrating the thirtieth year. And there were a number of times I was out of town, and I would fly back just to participate in the Fiesta because I didn’t want to miss it. My family enjoyed it. Friends enjoyed it. So, I was looking forward to the thirtieth year and I didn’t receive a notice of any of the meetings. So I called and I asked this young lady, I think her name was Cookie Garcia. And I said, ‘Cookie, I haven’t gotten any notices regarding when the first meeting is going to take place for the Fiesta and that sort of thing.’ And, she said, ‘Oh I’m sorry, Joe, but no we haven’t sent out a notice. You know we have a new president and the president decided that he was going to become .. he was going to take over the master of ceremonies’ duties.’ And I said, ‘What?’ She said, ‘Yes, that’s what he said he was going to do.’ I think his name was Simone Canassi, something like that. And I thought, ‘Isn’t that terrible?’ After giving twenty-nine years; serving them faithfully every year; never missing a single year and now he has decided he wants to become the master of ceremonies. And they didn’t even have the decency to call me and tell me. I had to find out because I didn’t get any information. So I was very, very disappointed in what happened. As a consequence of that, I resigned immediately and said, ‘I’m not doing it any more.’ They came back to me and said, ‘You know, you really were very

good and we – this was at a later date – you really were very good we would love to have you back and so forth and so on. And I said, ‘That would be fine if you would love to have me back. That would be great, however, my fee is such and such. [chuckle] Let me know if you are interested.’ I never heard from them again. [laughter]

**JD:** That doesn’t surprise me. Do you still like to attend the Fiesta?

**JR:** No, no. We haven’t. We never went back. My wife and I never went back. We just had lost complete interest in it. I don’t even know if they are still having it. They may still, uh, be having the Fiesta. But, I don’t think it’s as big a thing as it used to be when Cazin was in charge. He was the master. He had good ..he developed good relationships with the Chamber of Commerce, with people in the Tampa area. They knew him as the originator and founder of the Latin American Fiesta and he had a lot of respect in the community. So ...

**JF:** Are there any other events that you enjoy attending in Tampa?

**JR:** Well, I certainly enjoy going...I enjoy visiting the museums. I enjoy that. As far as events are concerned, I enjoy going to the Performing Arts Center to see shows or to Eckerd. My wife and I used to go quite regularly. But since she’s been gone, I haven’t done too much of that. I pretty much stay pretty close to my...I have three daughters and two grandsons. So I pretty much stay close to them, and we do things together. But, most of my time, I enjoy some privacy, reading and doing some gardening, doing a little bit of cooking. Just kind of hanging out. I hang out with my

grandchildren. They are both old enough so that if we decide we wanted to go get a bite to eat and have a beer or something like that we could do that. My girls all invite me to dinner if not once a week, once every couple of weeks. My oldest daughter has me to dinner every Sunday whenever she’s available, if she’s not involved in something else. But, I pretty much enjoy my family and I also keep in touch with the friends outside the area. So, those are the sort of things that I enjoy.

**JD:** Sounds very relaxing, very nice. Well, Joe, thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else you would like to share before we end this interview?

**JR:** No. I, uh, again I can’t believe that I’ve been in Tampa all of these years, but I’ve seen it grow and its become, for whatever reason, I was attracted to the city right after I came here. And, even years ago I talked about the fact that if ever I move from here, I said this to my family, If ever we move from here - and we had opportunities to move from here. We had opportunities to move to Dallas, to Atlanta, to New York – but, because my wife was originally from here, I felt that she needed...her family was here. They had been here from the eighteen hundreds. And, I felt she needed a place where she could feel comfortable. My children...the last time we had a chance to move to Orlando, which is when I worked with 7-11 as their director of training, they wanted us to move to Orlando, and my wife and I both went to Orlando, we decided on a house and all that. And my oldest daughter at that time said, ‘I’m not moving to Orlando. You guys can go but I’m not moving.’ At that time she still had one year of high

school left. So I said, 'Well, what are you gonna do?' 'I'll move in with someone.' And, as a consequence, we turned that move down and remained in Tampa. But I think my children feel comfortable here. I feel comfortable. It's not that, I still have siblings that live in the New York/New Jersey area and I love them very much, but my life was right here.

**JD:** That's wonderful. Well, thank you so much. I really enjoyed talking with you. It's been great and I just really appreciate your time.

**JR:** Well, thank you, Jennifer.

**JD:** It's been a real pleasure.

**JR:** It has, it has. I've enjoyed meeting you.

**JD:** You've been great.

**JR:** God bless you.

**JD:** You, too. Thank you so much.

END OF INTERVIEW