

Interviewee: Strozier, Charles (Chuck)
Interviewer: Robin Sellers
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Strozier: All right. So I'm Chuck Strozier and I know that we're being taped and that's fine.

Sellers: Okay, great. Tell me a little bit then about what you were doing in your life when your dad became president of FSU.

Strozier: Well, I have two things; I'll talk about little bit about myself and a little bit about my mother. I read, of course, the interview you did with my siblings, so it's partly sort of bouncing off that. I mean, you know, I won't repeat the stories, for example, of playing jacks with my younger sister which was a high point of our life there in Tallahassee.

Sellers: [laughs]. Oh, no. I'm so sorry!

Strozier: But there were a couple stories that I think are pretty illuminating about my mother, and one is the contrast between the life we had in the Southside of Chicago, in Hyde Park near the University, and then the life we sort of suddenly stumbled into in Tallahassee in 1957. Because we were, you know, just an academic family in Hyde Park and quite poor; it was still the '50s and, you know, my mother used to – she had three kids and she used to sew sheets together. We were respectable academic poverty. It was actually quite a run-down neighborhood; it had reached a bit of a crisis. After we left they did some major urban renewal but it was sort of bordering on a slum, too, around one of the world's great universities. So it was rough, it was hard, it was very dirty, and we lived on the third floor and mother used to have to work very hard to keep it all going on very little money. Aside from sewing sheets, one of the things I remember was she had to haul the laundry down three flights of stairs and then wash it in one of those old tubs where it turns in the bottom of the tub. And then [it] had a ringer on the side and you had to ring each piece of clothing through the ringer separately. Then she put it in a basket and took it out in the back yard and put it out to dry. So she did that at least twice a week, all the sheets, all the clothes for five people. It was a huge task. The image of her with a laundry basket trudging up and down three flights of stairs in Southside Chicago is something else.

And so suddenly we arrived in Tallahassee and there we were in this mansion that was something out of the Old South, with three full time servants, and sixteen acres of land and absolutely in the center of the fish bowl and the first family and all that stuff. So it was a tremendous shock. I think probably — well, it was a shock for all of us in different ways, but with my mother, the contrast — you know, as I think back to this image of her carrying the laundry and sewing sheets to suddenly having to deal with being in this social – in the eye of the storm, and also handle the house, which now consisted of managing three full-time – well, there

were two in the house and then there was a gardener – was quite extraordinary, [laughs] and it was a real shift. And she was anxious. It was hard, I think, but I think she also managed – she ended up managing it very well. But what a contrast! What a contrast!

Sellers: Was there any inkling before this happened that your father was looking to change jobs, or did it just all of a sudden drop on you?

Strozier: Oh, no. There had been a couple of other jobs that he had pursued. They had actually offered him the presidency of a small school in Iowa called Grinnell, and there were several others. He was on the national radar. I mean, people were looking around and he had been in Chicago, he'd already been dean there for ten years and, you know, so he was wanting to take the next step and had been investigating. And I think the thing about Florida State (which I don't think they told you this story) – his dream – and I didn't learn this till later – his dream when he went down there – I mean, I was born in the South, but he was really a Southerner. I mean, our family had been there since 1750s; he was born in 1906 in Georgia, was raised in not rural but small town poverty. There were eight kids and his father died young. In Georgia, McRae, Georgia. And, you know, luckily – the only reason he went to college was because an aunt paid for one kid of all the brood to go to college, and he happened to graduate high school at just the right moment. I mean, they were really poor. They had a cow in the back, and it was really poverty. He had deep, deep roots in the Old South. But he was a very progressive man, and forward looking. And the thing about Florida State at the time was it appealed on many levels. It had, it had come a long way – well, a decade or more since being a girl's school, so it was a full fledged University but it hadn't taken the step from being kind of a sleepy state school to being, you know, on the first tier of state universities. And so that appealed to him in terms of its intellectual challenge.

He was also a politically and racially progressive guy and the image that was presented to him of Tallahassee, which then had 40,000 people, and one side of town had a large white university and the other side of town had a large black university and both were maintained separately under the rules of old Jim Crow. And he was enormously challenged by that in the sense that it represented an ideal opportunity creatively to move toward integration. And he was encouraged in those ideas – and this was actually very explicit in terms of his sort of sidebar conversations before he went there – that the Chairman of the Board of Education was a guy named Jim Love, who was a wonderful, very enlightened guy, and the Governor was LeRoy Collins, very progressive and sensible and liberal. So that was the long term plan, the long term plan when he went there. And I remember him when – I mean, I was all of 13 when we moved down there and I didn't understand the significance of this, but he made some jokes that they're gonna be burning crosses on our front lawn. He didn't live long enough – he lived long enough to make the decisive change, I think, in the intellectual life of Florida State and kind of propel it forward in creative ways, but he didn't live long enough to begin that process of change that would have led to bringing together A&M and Florida State. Ironically, Florida State only got integrated when they wanted to improve their football team, which was many years later. Which is unfortunate. Well, anyway, that's another story. The point is that was a part of his vision, and as I as far as I've gathered from subsequently talking to my mother, that was really quite

explicit. And we were quite close with the Collinses and we knew them. Mary Call Collins was the Governor's wife and she was the one who told me my father had died. I came home from Leon High School and she was the one who was there greeting me. When my mother moved back to Chicago, I didn't want to move back to Chicago, and the Collinses asked me if I wanted to stay in the Governor's Mansion and finish Leon High School. Turns out I did not do that. But it was a very nice offer. I went away to prep school in Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

So that was sort of – you know, the appeal, I think for — you know, my father wanted to take the next step in his career, Florida State represented just a perfect challenge for him on all these different levels. And my mother, you know, she wasn't naive. I mean, she was a very sophisticated woman, and she was very cultured, she was well educated, she had been to – she was herself the daughter of one of the country's most prominent cardiologists and she had been raised in Colorado and my grandfather, her father, had been — when Eisenhower had his heart attack in 1956, I think it was, he was one of the handful of cardiologists consulted. And mother was – I mean, this is another story about their relationship. Mother was Episcopalian, sort of, you know, very WASPy, and very kind of distinguished, into finishing school and college and all that stuff. And I've always said (I mean my mother – I'm not sure she agrees with this), but in my read of the family history and their relationship is that my father married up. And it was, you know, very much a part of his ambitions to sort of keep him going up the social scale, that he married my mother. And he went from being, you know, a small town Georgia Methodist to being Episcopalian. And that's what we were raised in, my brother and I, in Chicago; we were in the choir and all that stuff. And he used to come and listen to us sing in the choir and he used to joke about – with the incense and all that stuff – joke about, “You're sure not singing Beulahland in here.” [laughter]

Oh, I forgot – one story about coming to – when we first moved down there was there was this gardener. He was a full time gardener. I mean, there was sixteen acres of land, you know; there was a scuppernong arbor and there – was I mean, I've never seen so much land in my life. I mean, I grew up with pavement, and there was grass everywhere. Just mowing the thing was herculean, you know. They'd bring over tractors from – I guess it was from the grounds crew from the University and mow. But James, this gardener, had to keep up all the flowerbeds and the arbors; I mean, it was a very elaborate job. But he was he had the world's thickest accent, and my mother — I'm very good with accents and I've learned a number of languages and stuff. In fact, my accent is better than my knowledge of the language sometimes, so that I developed a Southern accent in about two and half weeks when I moved to Tallahassee in 1957. I was determined to get over my – they called me “Chi-car-go” at first in high school, but, boy, I was gonna be accepted! So I quickly became a redneck in 1957 in Tallahassee. And my mother used to – she could not understand a word that James said. She just couldn't understand what he was saying. And she tried, and she didn't want – you know, he would just come and talk to her and ask her questions and she couldn't – so what she did was use me as a translator. It was like somebody coming in, having a servant who was Pakistani, and you gotta get an Arabic translator. So I was the translator with James to keep the grounds up.

Sellers: Now tell me a little bit about when you got here. By telling me your mother's move, you've kind of implied that this was really grandeur in your family's view. What do you

remember about the reception that you got, other than being called “Chicago” in school, and where did you go to school, and who were your friends, what did you do?

Strozier: Right. I went to Leon High School, which is still there, of course. And I had wanted — we were in a school in Chicago which did not have many sports, and I had gotten it in my head two or three years before that, that I really wanted to play football. And I don’t at the time know where I got that from. And so, when Dad said that we were moving to Tallahassee, I was incredibly enthusiastic because it meant I would be able to go to a high school where they had a football team. Now I didn’t even know how good a football team it was, and we were a very good football team.

Sellers: Now how did you know that they even had a football team?

Strozier: Well, I found that out. I probably asked him, you know? I mean, I probably said — you know, he said we might be going to Tallahassee where I’ll be president of Florida State and probably my first question was, “Can I play football?”

Sellers: Did you know where Tallahassee was?

Strozier: No, I didn’t have the faintest idea. It could’ve been London, for all I knew. And, I mean, I looked on a map, obviously, but I had no — as I say, although I had been born in Georgia, I really left there when I was very young and so I had no — the South was not part of my bones at all, nor in my soul. So I really did not know what I was stumbling into. And I think for the first year or so it was very scary. I also skipped eighth grade, so I was a year younger. Thankfully I had matured physically that year, so I was big, I was awkward. I wanted to play football but then I suddenly was thrown into guys who were a year older and had been playing already. And the only thing I really cared about was football, and getting accepted. Getting accepted in a world that was so alien. Different values, different cultural background, different accents, and it was stunningly different. For me it was stunningly different, and it was both a shock and a great challenge. And sort of the way I understand it now, looking back, and I’ve thought a lot about it, I sort of mobilized every resource I had in order to make it in that world. And I always felt — in the process I became very rebellious, particularly against my mother. My mother and I developed a very difficult relationship because I was a bit of a slob and I was — you know, refused to wear anything but jeans, and my hair would be long —

Sellers: No! A fourteen year old boy, rebellious?

Strozier: Yeah, right. [laughs]. But my father was always very understanding. I was also going through a religious sort of crisis, and he used to — before we’d go to bed, we would take walks around the grounds and he’d listen to me talk about God and ruminate on various existential and philosophical questions. And I’m sure the issues I was raising at fourteen were not exactly profound, but he was always very respectful. He allowed me to have space to meditate and probe, and it was very helpful. But in school, for at least a year it was a constant

struggle. I mean, I just had no frame of reference for adapting to that kind of world. But the main thing that started happening to me – by my second year – actually, by the end of my — I was there three years; the first year I was sort of ordinary player, because I was a year younger. The second year I turned out to be a very good player. And by the third year I was – one other guy and I were the best players. And it totally changed my life. I mean, it was all I cared about. My grades tanked, I was completely obnoxious in all other ways, but to have made it, to have set myself the challenge of making it in that world, and then to have actually made it, was hugely important for me. And so my junior year, in the middle of that season, I was being scouted by scouts for Bear Bryant at the University of Alabama. I would have gone on a football scholarship to the University of Alabama. And so, when my father died in April, you know, it completely, radically changed my life and they hustled me off to prep school and eventually I went to Harvard. I started reading again, you know, but it was a very strange world and all I cared about was football. And we would go hunting and, you know, shoot ducks and various things, and, I mean, just very alien activities for me.

Sellers: Who was we?

Strozier: Well, me and my friends.

Sellers: What do you remember about functions that went on in the presidents house, and how did you relate to the people that your mom and dad had to host and hostess and things like that?

Strozier: Well, I was always particularly close to my father. My father was very charismatic, and what I loved to do in all those years was to listen. And he was also very tolerant of – he was much more tolerant of me than my mother – I drove my mother – understandably – drove her crazy. But he would let me, and there were quite a number of very interesting, distinguished people sort of flowing through our living room, and I just - you know, from the former Prime Minister of Britain to Nobel Laureates – you know, they would be whatever, they would give a talk and they'd always end up coming back and having a drink with my father in the living room. And I just remember sitting on the couch listening to these incredibly wonderful conversations and getting totally caught up in them and not participating, so I wasn't intrusive, but he always would let me just sit there and be a part of it. And I have an image in my mind of people, various people like that sort of sitting in a certain chair by the fire place and talking to my father. And they would sit around drinking bourbon late into the evening. It was quite an image.

Sellers: So your dad was a bourbon drinker?

Strozier: Oh yeah. So am I. Oh, no he loved his bourbon.

Sellers: How did that go over, because the person he replaced had been a Baptist teetotaler?

Strozier: Oh, absolutely. The first faculty meeting – there was a little history thing – my sister actually showed me this tape that somebody put together at Florida State on the history of the school, and they had sort of a segment on my father, and they talked about how, you know, sort of beloved he was. But they told this story, which I saw told on that tape, of – and I can absolutely believe it; I can see him saying this. So he’s in his first faculty meeting, and I’m sure everybody’s there and they’re “Who’s this new guy?” and “What’s he gonna do?” and “...this hotshot from the North, he’s gonna turn this place upside down.” So it probably was packed. And, you know, he’s very relaxed and everybody’s talking, and at the end of the meeting he said, “Well, I think we ought to stop now; it’s about five o’clock, and I think it’s time for all of us to have a drink.” And you know, there was sort of a collective gasp, and a great sigh of relief, a great sigh of relief. Because, you know, among the faculty, I mean the idea of being teetotaler was just absurd. It was absurd. And maybe in the town, but — and you know, the town was still dry. And it was a weird situation, because you could drink but you couldn’t buy. I mean having a cocktail party was not illegal or immoral but it was odd in a dry town. So that just instantly – and I’m sure that was calculated. I’m sure he was using that opportunity to indicate, without having to say in so many words, to indicate that he was gonna set a very different tone and was gonna open things up and be a little less straight laced and more relaxed, and, you know, serious intellectuals don’t worry about whether they drink or don’t drink. And I think that was the message. “We’re taking this to a new level; this is not the backwaters of the Old South.” I mean, if people want to have a drink, they can have a drink. And you don’t have to drink, you know, but you’re allowed to drink. And I think that message was what people — it wasn’t so much the drinking, it was the relaxation of the straight- laced, puritanical, kind of ridiculous rules that had prevailed – kind of prissy rules that had prevailed before. That’s the message that he was trying to give. But, he himself was a drinker. He had no intention of being president of a school where he didn’t have a drink.

Sellers: And the more he was here, the more he probably needed a drink! Okay, well, you had alluded earlier to Mary Call Collins being there when you got home from school. Tell me a little bit about — your Dad went off to Chicago to give a talk, and —

Strozier: He was being considered – this guy that was president was about to resign, so they were beginning the process of looking for a new president at the University of Chicago. And again, I didn’t know this until later, but the process was very slowly beginning to consider him at Chicago, so he went off to give a talk at the Standard Club, which was just a talk, but also was the beginning of the process of being considered for the University of Chicago. What I don’t know is whether he felt that his mission at Florida State had stalemated, which I don’t think is the case. You know, Collins was still Governor and Jim Love was still Chairman of the Board of Education, so I don’t think that’s the case. I think it’s just that it was impossible for him to resist the allure of even the possibility of being President of the University of Chicago. I mean, this is one of the great —

Sellers: And he had been in Chicago for a number of years —

Strozier: Oh, years and years. Right.

Sellers: He probably felt an affinity for it that maybe had not grown as quickly as he had expected here.

Strozier: Yeah. And I mean, as I say, he grew up in Georgia, went to Emory, and then he was — from the early '30s, he was teaching in small schools in Georgia and spending summers going and working on his PhD at the University of Chicago in French literature. So he'd go up and come back, and he was teaching French and he created this — he was one of the founders of what is now the University of West Georgia, and I gave a commencement speech there one time, which was fun. Went to the Strozier dorm and all that stuff. But he and six other guys were hired to be the faculty. And his mother, my grandmother, moved in with him in the dorm and was sort of the mother figure — what would you call them, the dorm mother for all the students. And she was apparently wonderful; she loved that before she died. So all that time he was going to the University of Chicago. Then when he then the war came, and he was teaching, he was Assistant Dean, I think, in Athens, at the University of Georgia, teaching French there, and continuing to work on his PhD which got delayed because of the war. When he finally finished in 1945, he had been told for a number of years that Hutchins, the legendary President of the University of Chicago, wanted to bring him onto the faculty and into the administration. But, you gotta have a Ph.D. So literally the day he finished — his dissertation was accepted, he was made, I think, Dean of Students or whatever. 1945. And then he was Dean of Students there from 1945 to 1957. So, you know, he had deep roots. By 1957 he had been at the University of Chicago for 25 years, and had been part of the Hutchins team and part of — the Chicago curriculum in the '30s completely revolutionized higher education. I mean, that's where the idea of a liberal education came in, undergraduate liberal education. So all of those sort of things were deeply embedded in his soul. So the prospect of Chicago was very alluring. And I don't know where he was with things in Tallahassee and Florida State. And of course, this is 1960 by then, we're already five years into the Civil Rights movement, you know, I don't know where ferment is beginning to develop; it's not yet the Vietnam War, but —.

One of the greatest stories I ever heard along those lines is, in 1968 when the students were demonstrating, a guy named Marshall was president, and the students from SDS, the radical students, were all marching around the administration building and Marshall, rather than — he did what a lot of President's did — he snuck out the back door and left rather than come down and talk to them. I'm 1,000 percent sure that if my father had been President, what he would have done is walk down and go out and talk to them. And that's what you do with students who are discontented. And so the students, apparently when they learned that Marshall had snuck out the back door and left, started chanting "We want Strozier! We want Strozier!" This is eight years after he was dead! That's a wonderful story.

Sellers: I wonder how they even knew about him!

Strozier: Well, he was a legendary figure. He really changed the course of Florida State.

Sellers: Can you think of anything else about your experiences in the house itself or — where did you sleep, did you have your own room —?

Strozier: Yeah. On the second floor there was a — there were basically three bedrooms. It was the master bedroom which had a separate dressing room and bathroom, and then there were two very big rooms, and one was my sisters and then one was mine.

Sellers: Now what about Robert, where was he?

Strozier: Robert who?

Sellers: Your brother

Strozier: Oh! Bob! I have a cousin, Robert, too. Where did Bob stay? Bob stayed — there was a bedroom off of — in the Florida room — off of the living room there was a room they called the Florida room, kind of a second, smaller, informal living room where the television was. And then there was — that wing, which as since been demolished, that wing had a guest room with a bathroom. I think he stayed there, but I'm not sure about that. No, I know, at the other wing — on the other side off the kitchen, there was a room — you know, it's funny, I don't know. You got me. He didn't stay in my room. But of course, he was only there for — he wasn't there very much. He didn't live with us; he was out of high school when we went — it was basically my sister and me.

Sellers: I got the impression that he was there more.

Strozier: No, no no. He came home one summer, and then he was — he had been — he went off to — I think the last year — we were there three years — I think the first year he was in India with his friend Geoff Ward, and then he was back for a summer, and then he was off at college for the second year, and then he was in the Army the third year —. He was just in a different stage of his life. I mean, he was older. And he'd been — I mean, it's a long, complicated thing about — his story about why he was in India that last year of high school, but he was, and then when he came back it was time to go to college and —. You know, he's four years older than I am, so when I was fourteen, he was eighteen and, you know, he went off to college for a year and then he didn't like that and went into the Army. So he was just not — he was around much less so. I'll have to ask him; I don't know where he stayed. But yeah, it was this huge, gigantic room. You know, the room was — I'd grown up with my brother in a tiny room at the end of the hall with double bunk beds. I had the top bunk, I mean, that's where I was raised. Suddenly I had this gigantic — you know, not only servants and cooks making me meals, and this gigantic room with two beautiful beds and a great desk and, you know, it was something else. It was something else.

Sellers: Did you ever have friends over from high school?

Strozier: Yeah, yeah, sometimes. I didn't do too much of that. People would come over sometimes but it was not a lot. I'd hang out with friends – they were around. We would go to more — with my friends we would do things more down at the coast. You know, we had — I remember in your interview, my sister told you about the house on the coast, and so we spent a lot of time down there. And once I was sixteen and could drive, I would be able to drive down there, and all my friends would, you know, high school people — and I don't know if they still do that, but hanging out on the coast — because it's so warm anyway, and we spent the whole summer down there and we'd go skiing, water skiing. I did a lot of water skiing. Oh, lots of water skiing! I was very good at it, actually. Loved it, and several of my friends had boats.

Sellers: Those are always useful if you're gonna water ski.

Strozier: It's important to have a boat if you're gonna water ski.

Sellers: It is, indeed. Okay, so when your dad died and you left, you went off to boarding school. Where there any repercussions about being the "President's boy," or being the President's son, or living in the President's house? Did you ever get razzed by your friends or anything like that? Or did they just, because you could play football, just accepted you?

Strozier: Well, the first year was hard. It took a while before I was accepted, and I think people saw me as very different. And what I did in order to be accepted was I sort of – obviously, I played football, but I dumbed myself down, basically. I very quickly developed a thick Southern accent. I dumbed myself down, I stopped reading, I learned how to shoot a shotgun and hang out with the guys, and sort of ostensibly adopt their general values and, you know, find a way at all cost to fit in. And it was a not altogether wholesome path that I was on, but it worked well at the time, and I didn't spend the rest of my life in it and worked my way out of it. Worked my way out of it largely because of my father's death. I mean, personally, it's a kind of redemptive thing, the way I experienced it. I never would have moved forward in my life if he hadn't died.

Sellers: But you never had any problem being teased or anything — because the town and gown was okay at the time, but it wasn't super.

Strozier: No, that wouldn't have affected me. I mean, obviously people noticed who I was, you know, and it was uncomfortable – it took me a while to – I would say the first six months were very hard. It wasn't that I was teased, just was that I wasn't accepted.

Sellers: Okay. But that could have been just because you were new in town, too.

Strozier: Because I was new in school and people obviously did know who I was, but then once I got accepted — no, I don't think the town-gown stuff — I'm sure that was something my father had to deal with, but it wouldn't have worked down to the high school level.

I remember one time in high school, the very beginning of high school (this is when I

was going through my religious crisis) and I had to fill out a card for “Who’s your family doctor?” and “What’s your home phone number?” And in the card, one of the questions was “What’s your religion?” and I wrote down “atheist.” And I remember being called into the office, to the principal’s office, and I’m sure this sort of snotty northern kid calling himself an atheist was not something that was common at Leon High School in 1957. It wasn’t that I was dressed down, but this very officious woman looked me in the eye and she said, “Are you sure you want to call yourself an atheist?” She looked very uncomfortable with me doing this. And I caved; I’ve always felt terrible about that. I said, “No, I guess I’m really an Episcopalian.” I’ve always regretted that I caved in to that pressure [laughs]. Six months later I would have stood up for my own beliefs rather than to be accepted and, you know, to be the good President’s son.

Sellers: Yeah, but right then you needed the acceptance more. Chuck, can you think of anything else about your time here?

Strozier: Nope, nope. I think that those are the stories I was stimulated to think of when I read the interview, so I hope this is of some use.

Sellers: Yes, I’m sure it will be. I thank you very much, and let me ask you once again if we’ve recorded it with your permission?

Strozier: Absolutely.

End