

Oral Memoirs

of

Jackie Caolo

An Interview Conducted by

Frank "Chip" Ford

October 20, 2012

HIS 5067 Oral History Project

University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida

University of Central Florida Public History Center

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Interview Histories

Interviewers: Frank “Chip” Ford

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES of Central Florida Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

RICHES of Central Florida is an umbrella program housing interdisciplinary public history projects that bring together different departments at UCF with profit and non-profit sectors of the community.

Central Florida has often been associated with large-scale, commercial tourism and housing development. While those aspects of Central Florida are important to the economic growth of the region, much of its history has remained unnoticed and under researched. The Public History program at UCF links many projects under one initiative to promote the collection and preservation of Central Florida history. By facilitating research that records and presents the stories of communities, businesses, and institutions in Central Florida, RICHES seeks to provide the region with a deeper sense of its heritage. At the same time, the initiative connects the UCF students and faculty with the community and creates a foundation on which Central Floridians can build a better sense of their history.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Jackie Caolo is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on October 20, 2012.

Abstract

Ms. Caolo or Miss Jackie taught people in the Sanford area how to swim for over fifty years. In the 1950s and 1960s she crossed the color barrier to teach young African-Americans how to swim at her backyard pool. Miss Jackie has become a Sanford institution due to her dedication to her community and her commitment to water safety.

Jackie Caolo

Oral History Memoir

Interviewed by Frank “Chip” Ford

October 20, 2012

Sanford, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Ford Hi my name is Chip Ford. I’m with Jackie Caolo. It is October 20th, 2012. and we are at Jackie Caolo’s home. Jackie, um, where are you from originally?

Caolo Actually born in Texas, raised in Florida, then travelled for 20 years with the Navy with my husband.

0:00:35

Migrating to Sanford

Ford And, well, when did you move to Sanford?

Caolo Actually 1956.

Ford Uh-hum.

Caolo My husband was transferred here with the – the Naval Technical Training Command.

Ford And what was Sanford like back then when you moved here in 1956?

Caolo Wonderful. it was just wonderful. It was really a Navy town. And most everybody here was – that you talked to – was from the Navy. And, uh, a nice place to raise children. Wonderful teachers in the schools. We just always – we picked Sanford. Uh, my husband was able to pick his own, uh, place of deployment. So we were here for a year, and then we had to go to Texas for a year for, uh – and then he retired there. And then we settled down, came back to Sanford, and stayed here the rest of the time.

0:01:32

Why Caolo started teaching swimming lessons

Ford So, uh, what were some of the factors that got you into teaching people how to swim?

Caolo Well I had always been a swimmer when I was a young girl. And one of my friends won the swimming and diving championship in Berlin[, Germany] – Catherine Rawls[sp]. And I was always so proud of her and I always wanted to kinda be like her. But, uh, also, I thought everyone knew how to swim and when

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I found out they didn't know how to swim I thought *Well it's...* Uh, I went out to the Navy base actually to get my children started in advanced swimming. And the teacher there needed assistance, because her husband was, um, in a squadron in, uh, Vietnam. So I offered to help her and that's how I really started teaching – assisting her in 1956 and '57. So...

0:02:40

What the swimming lessons were like

Ford And what were some of your experiences with those early lessons? Do you remember, like how they were set up or...

Caolo Well, you – you mean the, uh – my classes?

Ford Um-hmmm.

Caolo Well I always felt it was important to teach water safety, because if you teach them how to swim, but don't teach them the water safety – so that was always emphasized – was water safety. how to behave in and around the water. And, uh, just as long – and I felt just as long as they were happy doing that, that they would learn faster. Which they did. And...

Ford Were you nervous at first?

Caolo No. not really. I always just had – I knew that I could reach anybody at any, uh – because I knew I was young and agile. And I could get from one end of that pool to the other in nothin' flat. Uh, so I had classes on the hour, every hour, from eight in the morning to nine o'clock – 10 o'clock. And hopefully just 10 to a class, but quite often people would say, "Well, we brought our neighbor over. Is that all right if they swim?" And I couldn't help but say, "Okay. Go ahead." And, uh, I just kept right on with the classes, until, uh, adults came at night, of course, at eight o'clock and nine o'clock. And it was a hard time getting them out of the pool. They had such a good time they never wanted to leave too, so we just had a good time.

0:04:25

Swimming students

Ford And you mentioned adults. Uh, who – who were some of the people you, uh – you were teaching to swim back then? Did you teach all ages – adults, kids?

Caolo Oh. All ages. yes. The older children of course came earlier. Uh, I'd say the adults I taught actually – Emory Blake brought his children, Jeff Blake and his sisters and brother. And, um, also I taught, um, a little girl named Dana Morosini. In fact, her father's letter is in my folder. But Dana had her swimming lessons here, and I didn't realize that later she had married Christopher Reeves[sic]. And, uh, I saw 'em on television, so I called her mother in New York and I said, "Is that my little Dana?" And she said, "Absolutely. Sure is. So be sure an' watch it this weekend. They're gonna have a big program about it." So I saw her on television.

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Then unfortunately, Chris died. Then her mother, Helen [Morosini], who was my good friend – she died from elective surgery. Uh, and then later on, Dana also did, but she was one of my students here that – a lot of people’ve[sic] grown up to be pretty famous. They weren’t famous when I knew ‘em, but they got famous when I got through. [laughs]

0:06:05

Teaching African-American children

Ford Ah, so – and, uh – so what were your experiences like teaching African-American children how to swim back in the 1950s?

Caolo Well, uh, they were just so anxious, because they never had the opportunity to go swimming. And they didn’t know that the water was wet, and they didn’t know that if you jump in, you were gonna go to the bottom. but it was fun teaching them to learn to understand the water and to learn how to enjoy it. And I learned that they – the black children – learned just as fast if not faster, because of their – they’re so anxious. And, uh, I thoroughly enjoyed it and got to know a lot of people. And a lady they used to call Mother Wilson – everybody in Sanford knew her, because she used to take care of, uh, people out in a nursing home. So she came to watch on a patio one day, and I was real pleased. She came to the edge of the pool and she put her finger up. She said, “I see that they learn more than just to swim when they come here.” And I was very flattered with that. She was right. The children learned early that I said what I meant and meant what I said. and they listened to me and I listened to them. So we got along just fine.

Ford Did you have any negative experiences?

Caolo Well, yeah. The – not really. One little girl came, and she told me – she says, “You’ve got a yucky pool. Yucky, yucky, yucky.” She didn’t want to swim. [laughs] But she did. But that was her – I couldn’t help but laugh at her. But, uh, I think that there might have been some people that felt at first that the children were – they didn’t think they could understand in mind. Well, children understand in mind very well, if you say what you mean and mean what you say. Yep.

Ford Uh...

0:08:28

Swimming poem

Caolo I told you about the poem that I wrote. So they all learned how to say that poem first and then we’d go on the swimming sidewalk. You don’t go near the swimming sidewalk when you have your clothes on. You wait until you – until you’re in your bathing suit.

Ford You want to say that poem for us?

Caolo Oh, sure. I’d love to. I’d say:

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Sit down first and look around,
'Cause we're the smartest kids in town.
Never, never swim alone,
Practice 9-1-1 on the phone.
Big black clouds will spoil your fun,
And pretty soon here comes the sun.
Lots of laughs help learning too,
Underwater—I see you.
Underwater hear me sing,
Swim and turn and do your thing.
Safety first and safety last,
Say the whistle, get out fast.
Attention friends,
Now have some fun.
I love you,
You're number one.
Yay!

Ford [laughs]

Caolo Also there are mirrors underwater, that's—when they're underwater, "I see you"
—that's when they'd go underwater and look at themselves in the swimming,
uh, mirror.

0:09:40 **Locations taught at**

Ford [laughs] So did you teach at one location or did you go all over Sanford and
Seminole County to teach people how to swim?

Caolo At first, I went all over, until we built the pool here. And, uh—and I went
wherever they, uh, went—downtown at the downtown pool. But that does
remind me, the downtown pool was, uh, like a two-story pool. And they asked

me if I would teach down there. They gave me nine mornings to teach in the swimming. And I said, "Well, I'm so free. I would..." "Well that's all the time we can give you."

So the children would come and there were just dozens of them in the class. And they would go upstairs, but the parents were made to stay downstairs. But upstairs, I had to ask – I went to Seminole High School and asked volunteers to help me, because the children couldn't touch bottom there. So it was difficult teaching 'em swimmin' when your feet won't go down. So I had a group – in fact, one of the mothers that [sic] helped me way back then is still – she went in to teach swimming herself. and she's still teaching.

0:10:57

Drowning at Crystal Lake

Caolo

Uh, nut one day, after the swimming classes, they all left and there was a whole group of children. And later on that day, the mothers – two of the mothers took five of the children out to Crystal Lake in Lake Mary. And they sat on the – way up on the side of the hill and they let the children go in the – in the pool, not realizing the children would swim, then they'd would stand up and take a breath. They could not pass – they hadn't done enough to pass their test. And one little boy would swim and then he'd stand up. Then he'd swim and stand up. And swim and stand up and then disappeared. And he parents did not have enough time to go out in the water and get him and he drowned. I was – that was so that many years ago. I was so upset when I heard about that. and that's when I decided that the parents needed to learn as much as the children. So the parents were always allowed to pay attention in. But that was – that was a terrible thing.

0:12:10

Teaching methods

Ford

Um, so what were some of the methods that you used to teach children? Did you like get them all in the pool and then you jumped in there with them? Or...

Caolo

No. Uh, the children – when they would do their safety walk around the pool – and the reason you do that, when you have a pool, there could be a snake in the water, and you could get in trouble. One time there was a opossum that had fallen through the screen, and it was hangin' on underneath a chair. So you did your safety walk first, and then you listened to directions. Swim up, swim back. Swimmers up, swimmers back.

And they learned that you just don't go out and just jump in. And then, um, they would sit down and they'd do their kicking on the side of the pool. and then they would learn to turn over on their stomach and slip in the pool and monkey around to the step. Monkey around – you let your hands take you around the pool. And I had my pool built so that a young child – there's a little ledge on the bottom where their feet could touch. When they feel like they could touch, they'll

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feel more secure. So they would walk around and let their feet touch and they would swim over to the side of the pool. And then one at a time, they would jump out to me. And when they would jump out, gradually they'd let 'em get a little wetter and a little wetter, and then turn around and swim back to the step. That was their first—"to jump out pick a bale of cotton. jump out turn around pick a bale of hay. Jump out pick a bale of cotton." That's the way the children learned—sing their little song happily and do their swimmin'.

Ford So you mentioned that the pool was here at the house and you gave lessons here. What'd the neighbors think?

Caolo Well, at first, they didn't mind so much [*laughs*]. But when it got so there were dozens of cars—but they never really complained. I felt that my neighbors were very, very tolerant. And they realized what I was doing was to benefit everyone in town.

And so nobody ever stopped me or ever complained, uh, except when I brought in the Head Start [Program] children in. At first the chief of police, at that time, didn't think I should do it, but he was a good friend. He never stopped me. I continued teaching and—right up until I actually saw him years, years later. And, uh, when he saw me, I was at a private party. And, uh, when he saw me and gave me a big hug and thanked me for all the work. So he wasn't against it he just wasn't used to it, you know?

And one young black man told me—he said that the first day when they let him sit at the edge of the pool downtown and stick his water[sic] in that wonderful cool water—he said it just felt like something he had never ever experienced before. But they knocked down the pool and that was the end of that and the only place you could take swimming, uh—and teach the black children was to come here. They knew that then and they know it now. We'd go out there today if we could [*laughs*].

Ford [*laughs*] Now, so you've been involved in teaching swimming now for basically 40 years...

Caolo Fifty years.

Ford Fifty years.

Caolo Fifty years with the American Red Cross Water Safety. The entire fifty years from start to finish.

Ford So how—how did your curriculum or style of teaching change over the years from the—from beginning to when you retired?

Caolo Actually, I would say it's never changed. There's[sic] some techniques that I'm not very fond of that I hear that other—they fall in the pool. they're supposed to

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roll over onto their back. Well, I had people bring their children here who had been through that technique. And they roll on their back and their face is gettin' all wet. They're gurgling and sputtering and cryin'. And I like to teach my children, if they fall in, you turn around and go back to the wall. I don't want you to turn over on your back and stay out in the middle of the pool. Somebody's gotta go get ya. So I – my technique really never changed much.

0:17:00

Water safety

Ford So what were some of the factors that made you concentrate on water safety as the focus of swimming instruction?

Caolo Well, you know, the – you know, the, um, American Pediatric Association would say that you should never teach your children how to swim before five years old. But what they really, um, should say and do say now is, uh, you should start teaching your children water safety from the time they're babies. You start in the bathtub and let them learn that the water is wet, and how to splash their little hands.

And, um, the point I was gonna make was, uh, their safe – their water safety, as opposed to – yeah. You teach water safety, and teach them how to love the water and understand the water from the time they're – well, actually six months is – is a good time to start. You can start earlier in the bathtub, then you play around 'til they're six months old, and then you can start lettin' 'em fall off the sides and into the water. My grandson at four months old, he was able to fall off the step and turn around by himself and get to the step at four months old. But he just – I've been teaching him since – well, the doctor says he can get wet at three days old. So into the pool – into the bathtub actually, not the pool – into the bathtub. And you want to learn that water is wet. So many people, uh, prevent them.

And you start teaching the actual swimming strokes and swimming lessons possibly at four to five years old. And that's when swimming lessons, such as the overarm crawl, American crawl, breaststroke, backstroke, when they're five. But you certainly start teaching water safety long before then.

Ford So when did, uh – when did you start teaching children five and under how to swim? What made you decide that that's where you wanted to focus as well?

Caolo Well, actually, uh, whenever anybody ever brought a baby here, I'd say, "Well, let me – let me get 'em used to the – I guess, show them how to let them go into the bathtub and get started." And then when they were old enough, to bring 'em here. Age never made much difference to me. The only thing I did was teach the older children, you know, at eight in the morning, before they went to school perhaps. And, uh, I took the babies as soon as they were born.

Ford How many babies do you estimate that you taught how to swim?

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Caolo Thousands. Thousands. I, uh – it’s almost unbelievable to, uh – when I say thousands, I mean thousands. But sometimes I’d have a hundred children a day here for all summer long. And, um...

0:20:20 Miss Jackie and Sally Seal Water Safety Video

Ford So what were some of the factors that made you decide to do the “Miss Jackie and Sally Seal Water Safety Video”?

Caolo Oh, actually that was kind of accidental. On my birthday, they were gonna have a surprise birthday party for me at the [Sanford] Civic Center. And they’d made arrangements with the school of dance and arts to bring their dancers, and the singers to bring their singers. So they – my son sent over a photographer – an underwater photographer – and a young lady that did the typing. So they made the tribute, which is at the back of the, uh, video. But that was the first thing we did.

And, um, with the leftover film from that, my son took it to a photographer – uh, producer – in Dallas[, Texas], and said, “What do you think we could do with this?” And he said “Well, I think you got somethin’ there.” So I put together the video. And that video later – uh, it’s been used all over Miami, uh, Sanford, even in Holland. Um, when I was over there travelling with my daughter, um – but, um, the video was submitted, without my knowledge actually, to, um – um, to a safety-for-children program. It took first place and I got a wonderful, uh, – it’s equivalent to an Oscar. Uh, it’s called a Telly, I think. And I’ve got it here somewhere. It’s a beautiful bronze statuette that we took first place for safety on the video for children’s safety. Not necessarily water safety, but all safety for children. I was proud of that.

Ford Do you feel like you’ve – you’ve kind of expanded your teaching methods through the use of the video out to more and more kids?

Caolo Absolutely. yes. We – my son founded a children’s water safety organization. And whenever he has the opportunity – need be[sic] – he sends the video to help when there’s been a problem somewhere in, uh, another state. He sends a letter and the video to have them, uh, help with that. Yes. I think it’s expanded a lot.

0:23:00 Staying in touch with students

Ford So out of those thousands of children that you taught, do you stay in regular contact with a lot of them?

Caolo Absolutely. yes.

Ford Like who?

Caolo Like who?

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Ford Uh hmmm.

Caolo Well, one little boy – the – Brady Sapp. He was one year old when his mother brought him. And he swam the length of the pool before he was two years old and the pool's the – the long pool. Well, Brady, he will – every year, I have a joint birthday party and have a lot of my friends. and Brady will be there. He's now over 30 years old – maybe 35. And he will be at the party with his children and grandchildren. And, uh, is mother brought him every year, until he was five years old, when they started going to kindergarten. They would come here until five and then they'd go off to kindergarten. And by then, they were such good swimmer, they'd either need to go to competition or just more swimming. And, um – but Brady will be here and his own children will be there too. Their mother is very good at teaching, 'cause she spent so much time here watching and helping me with the books. I never charged anything. Only enough to pay for the electric bill and the chlorine expenses. I didn't even like charging even then, but you have to charge to continue what you're doin'.

0:24:38 **Memories of being a swimming instructor**

Ford Hm. So, if you could tell me only one time in your experience as a swimming instructor, what would be that story?

Caolo Oh my. well, I'm afraid I...

Ford How about any several stories? Anything that like – that really stick out in your mind that you really want to convey?

Caolo Hm. Well, lemme see. When it comes to the – the children, I guess the things that stick out in my mind is Brady, for one. To know that it's possible to swim that well, which is a 38- foot pool, uh, at two years old – before he was two. And then later on, before he was three years old, he swam underwater the length of the pool. He's just one little child that I remember.

And I also told you about the little girl who came that was terrified to get her eyes wet. And she came, after listening to – watching the video for two weeks. Her parents and grandparents brought her. And before her hour was up, she had – this three year old – had swum the entire length of the pool just exactly like she learned on Miss Jackie's video.

0:26:13 **Accomplishments**

Ford Well, Miss Jackie, is there anything else you'd like to add to our interview, before we wrap things up?

Caolo Well, anytime you can use the video to help other people, um, it would just be – would make me feel real good. And, um, I would do it all over again. I have a little bit of sun damage, but other than that, *[laughs]* it's, uh, been very exciting.

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Ford Do you—I know you’re very proud of your accomplishments and—and such around the area. Um, re you proud of the children that you got to teach, both African-American and white?

Caolo Absolutely. absolutely. I learned to understand people a little better than I did before. And I always admired the people that went out of their way to put all kids and their neighbors in the car and bring ‘em over here. I gave ‘em credit for wanting their children to learn to swim.

0:27:34

Jeff Blake

Caolo And, I think I told you, Jeff Blake, who came as a two year old—when he grew up, he went to meetings with me to build a new swimming pool. And, uh, that’s—the result of that was that well’re[sic] building that wonderful pool, which is being used constantly at Seminole High School for the young people. Of course, I think that all the children should know how to swim before they graduate high school. And in some states, that’s the case, but not in Florida. But, uh, they do their best to teach as many as they possibly can. And now Jeff’s son—he’s now retired as a football player and his son is one of the big players today. So...

Ford Um [*clears throat*], you were telling me a story about Jeff Blake’s family earlier that was really, really interesting. Would you like saying that—would you like telling that story again?

Caolo Well, yes. Um, when Jeff Blake was a baby, his family would take him out to Wekiva Springs for some—there’s a little place where you can stand in the sand and you can play. But his aunt stepped off the ledge, and was in the process of drowning, when her sister, who was Jeff Blake’s mother, jumped out there to save her and threw her back to safety. And everybody was so happy to see her and so intent on watching her, they failed to look around and realize that Jeff’s mother was in trouble. And she did drown that day at Wekiva Springs, which was a terrible, sad day. And then, um—so the father brought Jeff as a baby for swimming and we’ve been friends ever since.

0:29:39

Breaking the color barrier

Ford Mmhmm. Uh, One final question and then we’ll—we’ll go ahead and stop the interview. But what were some of the factors that made you decide that you were going to go ahead and teach African-American children how to swim? Like because—what were some of the...

Caolo Well, there was never any decision to be made about it. But being Navy, of course, I was accustomed to swimming, uh—they were always permitted in the Navy base pools. But, um, I realized they didn’t have the opportunity. that’s the reason they couldn’t swim. Their grand—their mothers would tell them, “Don’t

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you dare go near that water. I'll spank you good." So they were always, uh, told to be frightened of the water. So when they came and found out how much fun it was and how fast they – and they – they can learn absolutely, one child against the other.

In the video, you'll see. There's, um, some black children in the video that dived off the diving board. But what's so amusing to me about that is those two were older children. They had never dived off the diving board, because they were gonna be on film. They wanted to get up there to [laughs] – and they just got on the end of that diving board and stuck their heads down and fell into the water [laughs]. It didn't bother 'em, because they knew they were gonna be saved. I have the reaching pole, which is – every swimming pool should have a reaching pole that you can reach out and pull them in and teach them how to do that. So I have to laugh every time I see that video and see those children. I've forgotten their names, but I knew them well at the time. 'Course they're all grown up now.

Ford All right. Well, Miss Jackie, I'd like to thank you for myself and on behalf of the [UCF] Public History Center for granting us this interview. Thank you so much for your time.

Caolo You're so welcome. thank you so much.

Ford Thank you, ma'am.

End of Interview