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Interview with Donna Beck by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Donna L. Beck

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Donna L. Beck
(Interviewer: *Andrea L'Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 202
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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College. The date is March 22, 2010. This is a telephone interview from Maine to Florida with Donna Beck, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Donna, could you start just by giving me your full name.

Donna Beck: Donna Lee Beck.

AL: And where and when were you born?

DB: I was born in Louisa, Virginia, in 1949.

AL: And did you grow up in Virginia?

DB: No, I grew up in Washington, D.C. I moved to the District when I was probably two.

AL: And so what was D.C. like during those years?

DB: I was going to say it was starting to change by the time I started going to school, it was a changing neighborhood and I actually lived in southeast D.C., which up until the late '50s was probably a fairly lily-white neighborhood. It wasn't like that by the time I got to high school so I had a broad exposure to different races, and actually enjoyed it. Most neighbors moved out, I felt right at home.

AL: So you grew up in D.C., were you around politics at all? What did your parents do?

DB: No, actually my mother worked at various jobs, she was a single mother of three kids. And she finally went to work at the cafeteria at the Senate, and then she got a job in what was called the Old Folding Room, which used to be in the Russell rotunda, where all of the bulk mail was processed for the senators. So that was my exposure to the Hill.

AL: And so after high school, did you go to college, or did you go right to work?

DB: I went right to work. I was eighteen, and I worked on the Hill for thirty-two years.

AL: Oh, wow, so what was your first job? It wasn't with Mitchell, was it?

DB: Oh heavens, no, my first job was with Everett Dirksen from the state of Illinois, a Republican. I'm one of the few people that actually worked both lines of parties.

AL: Right, I think Mike Hastings is another. So Senator Dirksen, what did you do for him?

DB: I was hired to type envelopes eight hours a day, for gun control legislation, and they used to have an old mimeograph machine and they'd run off and copy letters, "Dear Friend" letters, and send them out. I was hired on a temporary basis, and after six months they hired me permanently.

AL: So what were some of your other responsibilities after that?

DB: Well after that, I was going to say, I went into basically the bulk mail portion of the office. When mail would come in, it would be processed in the mail room, and they would decide whether it's getting a form letter or more personal type letter. If it got a form letter, there used to be these machines, this is all pre-computer so there used to be machines that actually punched holes in tapes and you could print. You could type one letter and then type five hundred names and addresses and run the two tapes simultaneously and get the output. So that's what I did when I was first hired, for Senator Dirksen. Now, I was only there another six months before he died, and then I went to work for Alan Cranston from California.

AL: And what did you do in his office?

DB: I basically did the same thing in his office, except instead of constituent issue mail, I was working with case workers, and the case workers of course were the ones that tried to help people with their pensions or problems that they're having with the government.

AL: Were you there long enough, or in a position to get a sense of Senator Dirksen?

DB: Not, I was going to say not in Senator Dirksen's office, no. I actually only met him twice, and once was at Nixon's inauguration. He came up and said, "You work for me, don't you, young lady?" "Yes."

AL: And so then you were with Senator Cranston how much longer?

DB: I was only with Senator Cranston for another six months. California is a crazy state, and I was doing the same thing except working with case workers. And then I went to work for Ed Muskie from Maine.

AL: Oh, right.

DB: And then I stayed with Muskie until Mitchell took over his slot.

AL: So talk to me about working for Senator Muskie, how many years were you with him?

DB: Oh Lord, I knew you were going to ask me that, I should have looked this up and researched it. Let's see, I went to work for him in '72.

AL: So about eight years.

DB: Yes.

AL: And what type of work did you do in his office?

DB: I did the same thing in his office, except midway through probably the last three years I had actually switched to night work, and I was working four to midnight. The job that you have, as far as the bulk mail stuff, you can actually do at any time, so you just have to convince the office that you're actually doing your job and they work with you to work out your own circumstances so that you can. And then probably a year before Mitchell came, I switched back to day work. My husband had been on night work, and we were like two ships passing in the night, so as soon as he could get back on day work, then I went back on day work.

AL: And so talk to me about the people, did you work with some of Senator Muskie's staff at that time?

DB: Oh yes, Gayle Cory, who was from Maine and just about everybody knows, and Anita Jensen, and Jane O'Connor, and I was going to say, there was just a whole passel of people that worked there, and a lot of young kids. I got to work with some of the interns; they got to help me out. It was enjoyable, I really enjoyed my job. I liked going to work every day. And I really liked the people, all of the people from Maine are just tremendous. Not being from Maine, I really enjoyed it.

AL: What was Gayle Cory like?

DB: Oh, she was fabulous. She was older than I was, she was kind of a mother figure. You could always go to Gayle and talk to her, and she never judged anybody, she was just there to listen and offer advice, if asked for. If you didn't want any advice, she didn't say anything. She was just a very kindhearted person who basically did a lot for the Muskies, so she was kind of their personal assistant to Muskie for a while and was involved with listening to Mrs. Muskie when she called, and dealing with the kids when they called.

AL: And what was Senator Muskie like to work for?

DB: Most of the time, unless you're in a position to deal with him on a daily basis, you don't really see him that often. They'll have a staff meeting where everybody goes in, and other than that you really don't have a lot of face time with him. So, I was always one that, I'm here to do a job, as long as I know I'm doing a good job, it's not important that I be exposed to the leader, so

I was fine with that. As I say, most of the time it was the chief of staff, the personal secretary, and then a legislative assistant or a press secretary, they were the ones that had everyday exposure to the senator. And I truly may not even see the man for three months. I was in the office but he pretty much stayed in his office when he was there, or over at the Capitol, so there really wasn't any interaction between the two.

AL: What was the transition like from Muskie to Mitchell?

DB: Well at the time, it was a little scary. I thought it was done very fairly, I mean Senator Mitchell basically came in and said, "You're all working for me, you all have a job through December, and at that point in time you'll know whether you want to continue working for me, and I'll know whether I want you to continue working for me." And I figured, I do a good job, I don't have any problems. And you never know, when there's a transition, when there's a total turnover, whether they're going to bring in all of their own people, so it's – and I had quite a bit of time in by the time he got there, so, and I was still doing the bulk mail. I did that job in the office, I mean I had at various times thought about changing and doing something more substantive, but I liked my hours, I wanted regular hours.

The Hill of course tends to pull people in and you work outrageous hours for periods of time, and then you kind of slack off. And I'm kind of a steady, this is my job, I know what I need to do, I know how to get it done, I don't want to stay until eleven thirty at night and be back at nine o'clock in the morning. So I stayed in the job that I was in for a long time. And then when Mitchell came I did, at that point in time, try to get the office manager's job. So I'm going from basically a position where it's fairly low in the office to one of the higher jobs. And he had a chief of staff at the time that I thought was kind of hesitant about hiring me because I liked to do things on my own and [I] told him, "I'll do what I think needs to be done, as long as it gets done I'm fine, but I'm not going to wait on you to do what I think is my job," because he was kind of hesitant on certain things. So needless to say, I didn't get the job.

So the next point in time that the job came up, I didn't know anything about it, I had a temporary person working for me from one of the departments downtown who had been liaised to our office. And she was very excited and said, "I know I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm going to be interviewed for a job in the office." And I'm like, "A job? We don't have any openings." And she said, "For the office manager's job." And I said, "Oh really?" So she goes to interview for the office manager's job and comes back, and probably five minutes later I get a phone call on the intercom and David Johnson says, "Just say yes or no, are you interested in the office manager's job?" And I said, "Yes." And he hesitated, and he said, "Oh, okay, I'll buzz you back." So a few minutes later he buzzed back, and I went in and chatted with him for a while. Well Gayle Cory had told him that he better interview me if he was looking for somebody to replace the person that was there, because I had tried for the job to begin with. And he was a little taken aback, I think, because the job of office manager of course would take what they thought was a lot longer hours, which wasn't true, but he thought I would be interested.

So we chatted, and I told him that I was confident that somebody that had that job could do it and

do it in the same hours that I was working, and that we would try that for the first two months and if they weren't happy then I would extend my hours, for the position. Well it worked just fine, and I stayed the hours I was working. I used to come in early in the morning, I was there at six thirty, and I worked until four or four thirty. So I continued working, and I kept saying, I'm not doing my job if the office falls apart when I leave at four thirty, that doesn't make any sense. So it all worked out well.

AL: And what was Mitchell like to work for? You must have had more contact with him -

DB: I did have more contact with Senator Mitchell. And my first exposure to him was, I mean I was introduced to him of course when he was brought in and he interviewed everybody about their jobs, and then when I applied for the office manager's job and David took me into his office and said that I was going to be the new office manager. There had been some problems with the bills being paid under the old office manager, and within the first week of my existence in front of the Senator I got to tell him that phone systems were being shut off in Maine and things like credit cards are being cancelled because they haven't been paid. They just had not been processing the vouchers through the disbursement office for payment. So I literally spent most of my time for the first two months doing nothing but a year's worth of old vouchers, pay the bills that had not been paid. So that put me in good standing, since I figured out all of the debt and paid the bills.

AL: And so who were some of the others you worked with on Mitchell's staff at that time, did you still, you worked with Gayle Cory quite a bit?

DB: Yes, Gayle actually went to the Post Office, to be the postmistress of the Post Office. And there were a lot of people in between, it was David Johnson and Rich Arenberg, and when the Senator first got there it was Jim Case and Eddie Flaherty, I mean there's just so many people that it's really hard to try to keep track. But most of the people that were working for Muskie at the time, now Gayle actually went down to the State Department with Muskie, and Leslie Finn who was the office manager went down to the State Department, and Carole [Parmelee], who was his personal secretary, went down there as well.

AL: Parmelee?

DB: Parmelee, yes. And yes, so when the office first started out with Mitchell, he appointed Jim Case as the chief of staff, and I think Charlie Micoleau had just gotten out of school and was going back to Maine. So I mean there were some transitions, but most of the people were there we knew stayed.

AL: And so over the years, what kind of impressions did you get of Senator Mitchell?

DB: Senator Mitchell was very intelligent. I was going to say he was very fair – there were times when people around him sometimes didn't always care for something that one of his friends was trying to do, or one of his co-workers was trying to do, and we would say this or that

about that person and he would not be happy with us. And a couple of times we had, the intern program is for college students in Maine, and some of the college students would apply and we would know they were this one's son or that one's son, and the Senator would look at us and say something about the sins of the father, 'don't cast the sins of the father on the son.' So he was extremely fair.

He was very easy to work for as long as you did your job. I never had any problems with him at all, as far as work related things. I'd go in with a problem and sit down and tell him what we wanted to do, and that was fine, or he would give us a better idea. I just worked really well with him, and I did not, I still didn't have that much face time with him, I didn't need it to do my job.

AL: Were there examples of people who didn't do their jobs?

DB: Under Mitchell, let me think. Well yes, I mean there were several – are we naming names or -?

AL: No, I'm trying to get a sense of how he, what his protocol would be in terms of somebody not doing their job. With Muskie, you knew that he would yell.

DB: Oh yes, Muskie yelled.

AL: But how did -

DB: One of his [Muskie's] phrases was, "faceless bastards."

AL: Right.

DB: I actually only heard Senator Mitchell yell once. I did the Senator's financial disclosure report every year, and I would always work closely with the Ethics Committee, because they're the ones that process it. And Senator Mitchell had agreed to write a book and had taken an advance for the book and had, I don't know, like the first three chapters done or something. Anyhow, when it came time to do his financial disclosure, I told him that he had to list that as future employment, and he thought I was crazy, so of course he asked Republican leadership and the Democratic leadership of the Ethics Committee if he had to report it, and they both said, "No." So I said, "Okay, well let's, they're two members of the committee so let's put it in writing and it'll be done with," because a lot of members were writing books and taking advances and not disclosing it.

So he hemmed and hawed for a few days, and then he finally said, "Okay, let's write the letter, and then everybody'll be clear, it'll be fine." Nobody wants to change their financial disclosure report; it looks like you're purposely leaving stuff off. And legitimately, he was not. So he had talked to the people and they had said, "No, you don't have to." So all I wanted to do was get it in writing to make sure. Well, the letter came back and said, "Yes," he had to put it down as future employment. So he called me and he called a gentleman named Clendon [H.] Lee from

the Senate Ethics Committee to come to his office, and we walked in and he pulls this letter out and he says, "Clendon, what is this?" And Clendon said, "Well, the committee decided that yes, that would be considered future employment, because you've gotten an advance of monies, and you're going to produce a product to sell to..." Well, he slammed his fist on the desk and said, "Oh no," he said, "all of the other members are going to be mad at me, because now they're going to all have to redo their financial disclosure statements."

Yes, it's little things that get members in trouble, and sometimes it's the silliest of things, like that. I mean, it's not clear on the forms what you should do and shouldn't do, I'm not a lawyer, that's why I worked very closely with Ethics when I was filing these reports, because there are gray areas. And I am pretty much a black and white person, I want enough directions to do it right, so that's why I strongly suggested that we get it in writing. So we got it in writing. It wasn't exactly what some of the members wanted to see, but it was then a clear point: yes, you have to, yes. And he wasn't really, I think he was just frustrated, I don't think he was really angry. But no, he was very easy going. As far as with me and with most of the other staff, I don't think he, I mean he'd get angry, but he wasn't a screamer and expressed his points very well.

AL: Now, did you stay in the office manager role through his time there, or did you move over with him to majority leader?

DB: I stayed in the position of office manager, I worked at both offices, I was Majority Leader's Office manager, and the personal office, office manager, I did both offices, and chose actually to stay in the Russell Building. And then every day I would walk over to the Capitol, and yes, I didn't physically sit over there, the majority of the people that I was responsible for were still in the Russell Building. But I did the payrolls for both, and the office procedures and that kind of thing for both offices.

AL: Now in terms of your work day, how did that work out, was it a lot more hours?

DB: Actually I did a lot of stuff at home. I did do some additional hours when he became majority leader, but after the office was set up and everything got running fairly well, then I was fairly back to an additional three hours or so, and I did work every other Saturday for like eight hours, because my husband worked every other Saturday. So I would just come in with him, and that was always very quiet where you could get everything done, so I would save the more mundane stuff for Saturday, like my filing and stuff that you could actually do any time, there's no time frame on it. So yes, I still continued working about the same hours. There were times, I didn't mind working late when it was a crisis or when something was actually going on that needed my attention.

The problem with the Hill is, everything is an emergency, everything is a crisis. So something that you could deal with tomorrow just as well as you can tonight, because you're not going to accomplish anything tonight, they want it all done. Well, I kind of got to pick and choose my own crises and emergencies. If it was a legitimate thing to work for, then I would stay. And I

did put in some longer hours when he was majority leader but not that much, not that much.

AL: So when you look over his career, what sort of things do you think about in terms of George Mitchell the person?

DB: I think he did a great deal for the state of Maine. I don't have that much exposure to Maine, I love it, I've been up there just a couple of times to visit, but he truly loves the state of Maine. It's kind of hard to say, the position that I was in was more of a daily running of the office, I really did not get into a lot of the politics, and I truly think that that's why I did a good job, because if you get that ground in with the politics then you tend to let things slide into the office that shouldn't be there, a lot of the political stuff that should not be done in offices. It was my responsibility to stop it and say, "No, you can't do that here, that has to do with the campaign," or "that's not an issue that's dealt with in the office," and it was easier for me to do that because I was not really involved with the political part of it. So his issues and political portions of it and the actual issues that were going on in the country, I really didn't deal with and didn't pay a lot of attention to. I know other office managers will cringe if they ever, some of them are very political and that's why some of the members get into problems, because they let things slide in.

AL: And so before we end, I wanted to ask you if there's something that I've missed in terms of your time with the senators over the years, or something I didn't ask that you'd like to add?

DB: No, but I wasn't happy when he told me he wasn't going to run for reelection.

AL: Right, tell me about that, how did that happen?

DB: Well, actually he called me into his office, and he had told a couple of other people, and it was not public knowledge. He called me into his office and said, "I just want to let you know that I'm not going to seek reelection." Whereupon my mouth dropped open and I said, "George, you are kidding me," for personal reasons. And he said, "Well no, I'm serious." And I said, "Oh my God, George, you've got to do the last six years so I can retire with you." I needed six additional years. Anyhow, he said no, that he was going to leave the Senate and get married. And so I told him, I said, "Well don't get married until after the first of the year, because if you do, your wife has to file financial disclosure." Well of course, he got married before the first of the year, and they had to file financial disclosure for his wife. He wasn't happy, and I said, "George, I told you that. You didn't listen."

AL: So, something you mentioned is interesting, you called him George?

DB: I called him Senator, and everybody in the office, not everybody but David Johnson, myself, anytime I'd talk to Gayle, we always referred to him as George. And I call him George now if I see him.

AL: Have you had an opportunity to see him in later years?

DB: I have only seen him, I think I've seen him twice since he left. He called me, my husband passed away in 2007, and he called and we chatted for a while. And he's always, I know that he's there if I need something, but I just don't talk to him often. I hear about him through various people in Maine, and the organization in Maine that -

AL: The Mitchell Institute?

DB: The Mitchell Institute, I get their newsletters and that kind of thing, so I do kind of keep up, and every once in a while I'll see him on television.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

DB: Well, you're welcome.

End of Interview