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Interview with Jan Barrett by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Janet 'Jan' P. Barrett

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Janet P. “Jan” Barrett
(Interviewer: *Andrea L’Hommedieu*)

GMOH# 026
August 7, 2008

Andrea L’Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, the date is August 7, 2008, and we’re at the Ware Street Inn in Lewiston, Maine, with Jan Barrett. And could you start just by giving me your full name?

Jan Barrett: Actually it’s Janet P. Barrett, the P stands for Plourde, which is my maiden name.

AL: And where and when were you born?

JB: I was born back in the late ‘40s here in Lewiston, and grew up primarily here. This has always been home, but my dad was military so I traveled with him and my mother and we lived overseas and in other parts of the country, but always came back to Lewiston-Auburn.

AL: Did you always have a home here, or did you -?

JB: If we didn’t have one, we actually would, our base was at my grandparents’ house, and my grandparents lived in Auburn, and they were the Duponts who used to own Sonny Boy Bread.

AL: Oh, I’ve never heard of that, what -?

JB: Well, they were bought out by Country Kitchen years ago, you know, back in the ‘60s, ‘70s maybe, so they, Country Kitchen took over the bakery and they took over the recipes and whatnot.

AL: Now where in Auburn was the bread company?

JB: It was on Second Street, where the Boys and Girls Club is now. The Boys and Girls Club is actually in that building.

AL: What was Lewiston like when you were growing up? If you look at it today, how was it different?

JB: It was hustling and bustling downtown. The mills were going strong, and it was kind of an interesting place to live in that you had the shoe factories and Bates Mill was really active, but at the same time, in the summer when it was really, really hot and humid, you could smell the

river, from wherever you lived, it was awful. In those days not everybody had, we didn't have air conditioning, so we had to close the windows because of the smell so that the heat stayed in the house and it was just -.

But the town itself was vibrant, and I remember in high school we used to go to the PAL hops and we used to go to the dances at the Y, and it was just kind of a fun place to grow up.

AL: It was very busy then, with all the factories.

JB: Very busy then, yeah, the downtown was amazing. I mean my grandfather used to take me downtown to buy butter and peanut butter, and Mr. Peanut used to be standing on the corner, because where Dostie's Jewelers is now, was Planters Peanuts. And there were dime stores, and the dime stores had eating counters and my mom used to take me to have hot fudge sundaes at the counter at Kresge's or whatever, and there were little, there was a little Chinese restaurant on Park Street, and it was just, if you went downtown you could spend the day just roaming around in the stores and running up and down the street and going to the park and whatnot. It was a lot of fun.

AL: Now what schools did you go to in Lewiston?

JB: I went to St. Louis School, I graduated from there in '61, from the eighth grade, I went to school with the nuns, and we wore uniforms, which was kind of cool, and – I didn't think so at the time but I think it is now – and then I went to Lewiston High School, because my mother moved to Lewiston so we, I went to Lewiston High School and graduated from there in '65.

AL: Now what did you do after high school?

JB: I went to Boston to school, I went to a two-year secretarial school called Chandler School for Women, that was comparable to Katie Gibbs, but Chandler no longer exists and I think Katie Gibbs does. In fact, one of the women that works for me went to Katie Gibbs, too. Yeah, and we were right on Beacon Street, so Boston was fun, we were right next to MIT dorms and, the guys' dorms and whatnot, so it was, there were many, many panty raids and water balloon fights and it was, it was a good time.

AL: So after secretarial school what did you do?

JB: I actually took a job in Boston for a while, and then I had met – my step sister (my mother married one of the former chief of police here and his daughter had moved to Washington and was working for Muskie) [] was going to be getting married and there was a get-together at, I don't know whose house, somebody's house in Washington, and my mother and I were invited – and I met Don Nicoll at that party. And Don and I had a conversation, and I was still in school, and Don and I had a conversation and he told me that when I graduated he wanted me to call him and he would see if he could get me a job on staff. And I didn't, I thought he was talking through his beer, and eventually, about, maybe a couple of months after I

graduated, he called me and offered me a job, very, you know, bottom-line kind of level job. I ended up working for Muskie on the Hill as secretary to the press secretary at the time, and kind of worked my way up from there.

AL: Well, you must have made an impression on Don.

JB: I would suspect so.

AL: And who was the staff person you were related to?

JB: Joanne Amnott, who is now Joanne Hoffmann.

AL: Is she still living?

JB: Yes, she still lives in the area down there actually, and she was a very good friend of Mrs. Muskie's.

AL: So on Muskie's staff you started to work your way up over time?

JB: Yeah, it was interesting because when I was on staff as the assistant press – not assistant press secretary, but assistant to the press secretary – and it was, there was a lot of secretarial work and clipping newspapers and whatnot, but the responsibilities got a little bit more intense when they had the, when Muskie was running for vice president with Mondale, and there was the traveling piece and there was, you know, when I was left behind in Washington I did a little bit more. It was Bob Shepherd that I worked for, and I would do a little bit more, not, I wasn't acting as press secretary but I had a little more responsibility because he wasn't on site. And it was an exciting time in Washington, it really was.

AL: What was, did you have a feel for that campaign even though you worked more in the office?

JB: Yeah, because I would talk to everybody when they would come back and another crew would go out. And it was really interesting, because it was very exciting for everybody, but from one day to the next they really didn't know where they were because they were working all the time. So it was, the traveling was secondary to the purpose, and they weren't experiencing the environment of the cities they were in or, you know, of the action, because they were behind the scenes preparing the senator for the action. So it was, I think it was more fun being on the Hill than it was being in the plane.

AL: Did you have interactions with Senator Muskie over that time period that you were there?

JB: Not a whole lot. He was pretty insulated by the higher level staff. I found that he really didn't know the worker bees in the back, you know, who they were and whatnot. I remember one time I had sent, [p/o] I had requested to be shipped back home, I wanted to come back to

Maine, and it was a time when he was up for reelection and they were going to be sending me to Waterville to work the campaign out of the Waterville office and doing kind of half-and-half, working some campaign stuff and some, you know – this was a long time ago, they didn't pay as much attention to the division between the two in those days. And I had sent in a picture of him, it was a very candid photo, and asked him to autograph it for me, and he did the standard 'Best wishes, Jan' – it was Plourde at the time – 'Best wishes, Janet Plourde, Edmund S. Muskie.' And I lost it. I was so, I was so insulted that he didn't realize that I was his, I was a staff person. And I was so upset that I ended up being taken into his office and he spoke with, you know, he apologized and actually signed another photo for me, a more personal one. And it just blew me away that he didn't realize that I was on his staff. I had been on his staff for a couple of years and I just, it just floored me that he really didn't know who I was, you know, so that blew some illusions that I had, some idealistic thoughts that I had as a young woman. But now I can understand how that would happen, although I found Mitchell to be very different than that.

AL: And what were your interactions with Don when you were on Muskie's staff?

JB: Oh, he was chief of staff at the time, and he was in one of the front offices and I worked way in the back. But it was friendly, he wasn't my direct supervisor so I didn't really work with him, so our interactions were more social in terms of 'Hey, how are you doing?' or whatever. It wasn't, we never talked business really, just because of the relationship that we had had previously and the fact that I wasn't under his supervision. So there wasn't any work related stuff to talk about between us.

AL: Now after the campaign, you came back to Waterville, and did you stay in that office for your time, the rest of your time with Senator Muskie, or did you -?

JB: Yeah, I did actually, I actually quit at that point, because I was getting married and I was moving back to Lewiston and I didn't really, I didn't want to stay on staff at that point because I was ready to raise a family, and so I left staff at that point and didn't come back until they opened, Muskie's staff opened an office in Lewiston.

AL: Do you remember what year that was?

JB: Oh God, no. I got married in 1970, and I had had both of my children so, my daughter was born in '75, I'd say late '80s, I think it was '79 to, I can't remember.

AL: Muskie left the Senate in '80.

JB: Okay, so I went on staff then it would have been '78 or '79.

AL: And what did you do in the Lewiston office, was it mostly constituent work?

JB: Yeah, it was, it was primarily constituent work. It was, well in the beginning I worked with I think it was Charlie Abbott – Charlie, it was Charlie Abbott.

AL: The lawyer?

JB: Yeah, he was field rep and I was the constituent services person. So he would travel with the senator, and when he was up in our area, because we covered three counties, we covered Androscoggin, Oxford, and Franklin. So he would travel and I did the constituent work. And then he moved on, and I can't remember if he moved to one of the other offices or he decided to take a job with the State at some point or, I can't remember how that worked, but eventually I became the field rep and I was doing the traveling and I was still doing constituent work but at a higher level, and it was quite interesting. And then when Mitchell took over, we transitioned.

AL: Was that a smooth transition?

JB: It was. I thought it was. We were at the end, during the course of the transition. When Muskie left we had to, of course, box up all our files and everything was labeled and everything was going to Bates [College]. It was amazing, because where the Muskie Archives are now was a basketball court originally, and the boxes were laid out three or four high in rows across the whole court. I mean it was just; the whole floor was full of Muskie archival boxes from all over the state, from Washington. Because at the time, I was the one in the Lewiston office, I was the gofer for anybody who wanted something out of the files. So I guess, from what I understood, I was the only one who had access to them, so whenever anybody on the Muskie staff needed something they would call me. And they knew the box number and I would go to the future archives and I'd pull it out, and found some really, while I was doing that, looking for stuff, found some really interesting pictures and old stuff that he'd had in his offices. That was the first time I think I had seen the picture of Jack Kennedy that he had taken, Jack Kennedy reclining on the boat, and that was amazing to see that.

But I remember the Muskie Archives before they were the Muskie Archives, it was, that little piece of history. I've been over there to tour since then. It's just amazing what they've done; it's a fabulous piece of work over there.

AL: And a long time organizing everything. So how long were you sort of the gofer for those files, how long a period was it?

JB: Oh God, it must have been about a year, until they had somebody that was really going to be at the archives. But it was really kind of fun knowing that I had access to everything. Of course I didn't have time to look at anything, but that's okay. But no, that was fun, and the transition was very smooth. He [George J. Mitchell] kept everybody that wanted to stay, and I think I had remembered him vaguely from my Muskie years in Washington and, but didn't know him, I just saw him walking around the office. And what really amazed me about him was the smile on his face all the time. The first time he walked into our office he knew who I was. Of course he had been prompted, I'm sure he made it a point to make sure that whoever was driving him told him exactly who was working in the office and which one was which. But he made it a point to know our spouses' names and, you know, about the children, and he really made an

effort to connect with us on a personal level, and that was a nice feeling, I liked that. And it made me I think take more of an interest in him as a person, and I think that's been very rewarding to me over the long term.

And the few times that I had an opportunity to drive him – doesn't converse much in the car but likes to listen to baseball – but just to have him sitting next to me and, you know, knowing that here's this man who is such an incredible man, incredibly intelligent, does everything he can the best way he possibly can, and he gets carsick. You know, he's really human. Even though he's United States Senator George J. Mitchell from Maine, he gets carsick, he's a person, and that was, it endeared me to him. You know, I felt like he was closer humanly, in humanity, in every aspect of humanity, he was closer to me than Muskie ever could have been. So it was kind of, it felt really good working for him because he personalized things.

I once told him, after listening to him speak, "You should have been a college professor," because he does such an incredible job of taking a very complex subject and breaking it down so that anybody, even somebody without a really good education can understand what that topic involves, why is it that he feels one way about it and you feel another. When you come away from that, he may not have changed your mind but at least you understand why he takes the stand he does. And that to me in a politician is, it's key. You know, in order to maintain your position, to be effective in your, in office, you have to have that quality about you, that skill, and he definitely has that.

AL: So how long did you work for Senator Mitchell?

JB: Oh, God, until about a year before he left office. And I, it was a time that my father had passed away, I had taken a leave because I was going down, my father lived in Georgia and I went down to be with him for the last weeks of his life, and then I had to stay to help bring his estate together before I turned it over to the lawyers. And when I came back from that, I felt like I really needed a change and I started getting involved in what they ended up calling Equal Protection Lewiston. It was named for Equal Protection Portland, the gay rights campaign, and getting really involved in that and decided to leave staff to work full time for the campaign. I had always done campaign work as a kid and being on a Senate staff you do campaign work, and I felt like I really wanted to immerse myself in it, I really believed in the cause and I felt like I wanted to immerse myself in it, I had about had it with constituent services at that point, and being at the state level and instead of being in Washington – not that I wanted to be in Washington, because I really didn't – I'm not a big city person, that's why I came home. So I resigned at that point and moved on to the campaign.

AL: What skills did you take from working for Senators Muskie and Mitchell that you were able to transfer to that campaign?

JB: Oh God, diplomacy; being diplomatic.

Telephone interruption

JB: Diplomacy was one of the top ones; how to react or act with people who weren't always pleasant; the people skills, the soft skills that you need to, for any job that you have, or for any social situation that you're in, just how to be with people. And problem solving; the bulk of my work had to do with fixing people's problems with the government, and I became very, very good at that and it transferred into problem solving and creative thinking in terms of what I do here. And I knew basically when I decided to totally change careers, I knew that I didn't need the soft skills because I had already learned those. But I did need the hard skills, in terms of how to run a business, so I went back to school to do that.

I've always had pride, taken pride in my work, but it was nice because Mitchell used to give us feedback. In nice ways, you know, he would, we would send out a copy of a letter from a constituent who was very happy with the results of the work, written to the Senator but at the local office, and thanking him for the work that he did. Of course the Senator didn't know what the heck we had done for him, and staff down in Washington would show him these letters and he'd write a little personal note and send them back up so that we could hang on to those. In fact I think I still have a file somewhere with all of those notes from him, and it's still kind of a source of pride that gee, I really did a good job for this man, you know, I did my job and I did it well.

And some of the ability, or the desire, to do that came from observing him. One of the things that I always knew about him, it was instinctive when I would watch him, and I looked back over his career, he always seemed to tackle whatever it was that he was doing at the time in the best way he could, without thinking of where it would take him. It just, I don't know this for a fact but this is the impression that I got, was that he lived in the moment in terms of his work, did it in the best possible way he could, and as a result of that he was catapulted into these positions that were very well within his means to handle but had he been a different person it would not have taken him there probably. You know, I mean he just, he was amazing in the fact that he was a mentor and didn't even know it. And I've always tried to, because of that perception of him, I've always tried to be that way with what I do, and it's been helpful, it's been helpful.

AL: Now is there anything, I haven't asked you about, with your connections with Senators Muskie and Mitchell that you feel is important to add?

JB: About the senators themselves or about the effect of – I mean it's always been interesting to be on the staff, whether you're on the staff here or in Washington. It's funny, because people who knew that you were on the staff, like family, friends, whatever, just people in town, think that you worked for the Senator, oh my God, you must make all kinds of money. And no, you don't make all kinds of money. You probably make less money than somebody who works in a law office makes. But the prestige involved in working for a man like George Mitchell or Ed Muskie is an incredible hat to wear. You have to be very careful about what you say and do, because whether you're on the job or not you are representing them, and it's amazing to have that kind of responsibility on your shoulders when you're just a constituent services person and not chief of staff or, you know, one of the top level aides in D.C. It's just, there's the positive

piece of the prestige, you walk around with your head held high because you work for this person, but at the same time it's difficult to let your hair down because you're really, everybody knows who you are, and they know who you work for so you have to be really careful.

And I'm finding, too, I have a friend who now works for a congressman up here and she, it's the same situation for her, things haven't changed in all these years, you know, that she has an image to uphold. And she does, and she lets her hair down here with the only person who understands: me. But it's an experience that I think anybody who has an interest in politics, in the inner workings of politics, wants. Not necessarily the campaign piece and how to get to office, but once you're in office, what's involved, I think it's so valuable for a student that is interested in following in these footsteps work on staff and know what's involved. You know, it's not just the campaign. Once you're in office you have to follow through, or the campaign isn't going to work next time.

And it's really interesting to have worked for such incredible men who have such fiber about them. They both have accomplished incredible things for our country, and for the state, and it, I don't know, I'm just, it feels good when people look at my wall of infamy in the den and say, "Oh wow, you worked for George Mitchell," or "You worked for Ed Muskie?" They're always so impressed. And I'm not, but they are, and I kind of shrug my shoulders and say, "Yeah, that was my other life." But they, people are impressed by these two men, and because I knew them I'm not so impressed with the fact of who they are but of what they were, what they stood for, and the big shoes that they have to fill to live up to their standards is an amazing challenge. And I'm hoping in my own little local way I'm doing the best that I can to do that, being involved in the community the way I am. And helping this community grow to the extent that I can as one person is something, I think, that I caught from these two men who were such good leaders.

And they instilled, both of them instilled, and particularly George Mitchell, instilled in me a real desire to make a difference, and I hope in my small way that I am fulfilling that desire. If Ed Muskie is looking down on me, I hope he's looking down on me with a slight smile on his face. And I know that the last time I saw George Mitchell, when he was at Bates speaking for the Growth Council's annual meeting a couple, a year or so ago, it was really, it was nice to see him. And when we connected at that event, he hugged me and that, you know, I mean how many people get to hug George Mitchell, this is cool. So it's really been an interesting life, having come from that kind of background, and it's really kind of prepared me for what I'm doing now, even though it's so different.

AL: Thank you very much.

JB: You're very welcome.

End of Interview