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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Deborah “Deb” Cotter
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

GMOH# 168
November 9, 2009

Brien Williams: This is an oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with Deb Cotter, a management and program analyst in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services of the U.S. Department of Education. We are in the department’s office in Washington, D.C., today is Monday, November 9, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. Deb, can we start with you giving your full name and spelling.

Deborah Cotter: Sure, Deborah Cotter, that’s D-E-B-O-R-A-H, C-O-T-T-E-R.

BW: And the date and place of your birth?

DC: November 7, 1967, New York City, New York.

BW: And your parents’ names.

DC: My parents are Bill and Linda Cotter, from Waterville, Maine, and that’s where I grew up, spent my formative years in Waterville.

BW: So explain how you got from New York to Waterville.

DC: Well, I guess my dad accepted a job at Colby College, up in Waterville, Maine, and he and my mom worked there for nearly twenty years.

BW: But they were New Yorkers.

DC: Yes, sorry, they were from away.

BW: And so give us a little bit more of your family, growing up and so forth.

DC: Sure, we grew up in Waterville, Maine, which is a very small town, that’s how my parents knew Senator Mitchell when he was a federal judge. And I guess I was job hunting after college, and I had this degree in advanced Russian studies, and this job in the Soviet Union at that time fell through because I didn’t have any housing. So a friend and I just drove down here to Washington, D.C., because we had done a semester at American University, the Washington semester program, and so we just started pounding the pavement looking for jobs. And I did an informational interview with Grace Reef in Senator Mitchell’s office, and after a while or so I

was able to get a job as a receptionist in the Senator's office, and that's how I started out.

BW: Good. Let's go back to Maine for a moment. Did you know any of George Mitchell's brothers or family?

DC: I did, but at the time I didn't really know who George Mitchell was. I knew his family, his brothers, because they knew my parents pretty well.

BW: So what words would you use to describe Waterville in the late '60s, or early '70s?

DC: Yes, the '70s, I guess I was there in the late '70s, early '80s really. So, it was a very, for me, coming from New York, from Long Island, New York at that time, it was a very small town which I think for me at that time was very good, in terms of a good place to grow up. There were a lot of woods, especially on the Colby grounds; we had this huge field and stuff behind my house. But whatever you did, everybody knew, so if my brother or I or my sister did anything, it would get back to my parents pretty quickly.

And it wasn't a thriving metropolis, but I guess some people thought of it as the big city, they would come in and they would go to Levine's and go to the various stores there and shop and stuff. And of course Colby College and Thomas College were a big draw, those were really, that and the hospital were the big employers.

BW: What about the high school?

DC: The high school, it's funny you mention that. My sister went to Waterville High, as did my brother. I went to Oak Grove Coburn School, which is out in Vassalboro. I started out in the Waterville schools, but I guess it was really hard because, even though it's a small town, the class sizes were huge, and I was kind of lost in the shuffle. And so that's why I went to Oak Grove Coburn out in Vassalboro and that was a really good fit for me. I know my sister loved Waterville, loved Waterville High.

BW: Were you a boarder, or was it -?

DC: No, I was just a day student.

BW: So how did you get to Wells College then?

DC: My high school guidance counselor recommended it to me, and I went there and stayed overnight, it was part of the college tour I guess, after Hobart & William Smith I guess, that was sort of, we stopped at Wells, and I did a campus tour first and then I went and stayed over when the students were there. And the students were so nice, and the campus was so beautiful, it actually reminded me a lot of Waterville, just because of the beauty of the place, and the ruggedness, too.

BW: And Auburn, [N.Y.], is a small town, too, right?

DC: It's very small, it's much smaller than Waterville, but it was a similar environment in the sense that it was supportive for me I think, as a shy person at that time.

BW: And what clicked on Russian studies for you?

DC: I actually got interested in Russian studies before I went to Wells, and that was probably one of the reasons I went to Wells, was because – I'm not sure if you remember the young woman, Samantha Smith, at the time she was very young, like probably grade school, who wrote to President Reagan and asked, "Why are you calling Russia the evil empire, aren't you getting to know the people?" blah-blah-blah. That really caught my attention when I was in high school, in grade school []. And so that's when I started actually on my own learning the Russian alphabet, the Cyrillic alphabet, to see, and then I just got interested in it and learned it at Wells.

BW: Did they have a large Russian department?

DC: No, no, just one professor. In fact, I think they don't have it any more. But yes, at the time it was nice, it was small but good. There was one professor of the actual language, but then – I'm blanking on her name, a woman who's a Russian historian – Farnsworth, Beatrice Farnsworth, who was a wonderful instructor.

BW: So you graduated, and tell me -

DC: In 1990, I had a boyfriend at that time who lived in Russia, and I was working through him to try and get a job over there, using my Russian language skills. And I had a job that was set up to help do some translation work, but I didn't have the housing that at that time I needed to acquire a visa, so I couldn't go. And as I said, I connected with a friend of mine, Margaret, who wasn't from Waterville but from New York, who I had met at Wells. She had been one of my roommates, and talked with her and said, "Have you found a job yet?" And she hadn't. She had done the Washington semester program the semester that I had gone to Russia, so, I went to the Washington semester program and did peace and conflict resolution seminar, and then the next semester I went to Russia, and that was a semester spent, intensive language studies, and very interesting.

So anyway, Margaret and I hitched up, we drove down in my car, [we] stayed with Wells alumnae, week after week, moving almost every week so that we didn't become a burden to people, and really just did informational interviews, hit the pavement, and that's how I connected with Grace Reef, who had been going to Colby College at that time.

BW: You mean she was a student at that time?

DC: She had graduated from Colby and gotten a job in Senator Mitchell's office, and Sandy Maisel at Colby, one of the professors up there, connected me with Grace and said she might be

a good contact.

BW: So this was 1990.

DC: Yes, yes.

BW: And so you had this interview with Grace and then?

DC: It was just an informational interview, talking about where I could find a job. And one of the things she said to me was, "Keep calling me every week, because there may be openings here. Would you be, even though you have a college degree, would you be interested in doing a receptionist job? I know it's low level, but that's how people start around here." And so I kept calling her, I kept calling her, and she called me one day and said, "Hey, there's a job opening in the receptionist position." And so that's when I did an interview formally with Donna Beck, and I'm not sure if it was with, Mary Mac wasn't there at that time, I don't think, but with Donna Beck, and got the job. I started the next day after they offered it to me.

BW: And you were still living from place to place?

DC: Yes, exactly, we had to find a place to live.

BW: And did your friend also land a job?

DC: She found a job about probably a month afterwards, and it wasn't her dream job, but yes.

BW: So how long were you at the front desk?

DC: I was there for at least a year, and then I moved up to legislative correspondent, which I was a legislative correspondent for quite a while, and that was when I actually had a stroke, in January of 1990. I wasn't on the job, obviously, I was at home.

BW: That was in '90?

DC: Oh wait, I'm sorry, 1992, yes, that's correct. So I guess I'd been an LC for [one year] at that point. But Senator Mitchell and his staff were just so supportive to me, and I spent two months in the hospital, at George Washington University here in rehab, and the first month I think I was completely out of it and I didn't even know what was going on, but then after that I got into the physical rehabilitation part of it and doing, I have vision loss as well, so doing testing with my eyes and such. The staff was so good, in terms of George Mitchell's staff coming over and visiting, and the Senator even spoke about me on the [Senate] floor. That was a real morale booster for me. He put it in the context of, we forget how hard these staffers of ours work for such little pay and long hours, which it was.

And then when I came back to work, Mary Mac and other people, they had hired somebody to

sort of fill in for me, and that young man helped me ease back into the office, because I had at that point forgotten how to use the computer system and such. I don't think it was necessarily a result of my stroke, I think it was just not using the actual system, and trying to figure out, well how do I open a document or – this was back before Word and et cetera.

So I was able to come back part-time, and go to get physical and occupational therapy at the same time, and I would go home and just crash because I was exhausted. But the staff was so supportive, especially, there are sometimes when there's a lot stigma around disability, and a lot of tourists come to the Capitol and they've never seen a person with a disability, they tended to gawk and stuff, so there were days when I just couldn't handle it, couldn't handle the adjustment, and I had to either go home or just sit quietly someplace, and the office was pretty helpful with that too.

And at that point, I had never heard of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and I don't think there was any technology or anything out there that I know of, that would have helped me. You know, like now there's Zoom Text and such and all kinds of different software programs that help people with low vision. Or even, somebody asked me here, there are a lot of vocational rehabilitation counselors here, somebody asked me if I had been trained to type one-handed. And I said, "No, I just kind of learned it on my own," because I went to work I guess it was the Monday after the Friday that I was released from the hospital.

BW: Were you fully ambulatory?

DC: No, I used a cane at that point, so I kind of forced myself to learn to walk, because my parents, I heard them talking with the doctors about reconfiguring the first floor of my house back in Maine and trying to set it up so that I could go around in a wheelchair, and I thought, here I was working for the Senate majority leader, twenty-four years old, with a boyfriend at the time, and there's no way in heck I'm going back to Waterville. I loved it, but this is the new life for me, and that's when I really learned [to walk].

And I remember the occupational physical therapist said, "Well, you need to get up the stairs to your apartment, because you're up on the second floor." And I had my friend, my friend Margaret and Rayellen, my roommates at the time, count the number of steps that it was, it was twenty-six steps up to our apartment, and I finally made it, walking up twenty-six steps in the hospital, and that's when they said, "Okay, you can," they kind of tested me out too, and we went and did a [home] visit and [rode the metro]. But the OT and PT kept saying, "Well you're going to be exhausted when you get home, because you have to go not only up these stairs, but down, and up and down." And I said, "It doesn't matter, I'm going to do it." And at that point my arm was just really high up and not as loose as it is now, so, but yes, I don't have much function in my arm still.

BW: Your left arm.

DC: Yes, but I'm able to walk, obviously, without a cane or assistant device.

BW: And you're fully functional on your right side.

DC: Yes.

BW: And just give me the medical condition, or -?

DC: Sure, it was a stroke caused by an arterial venous malformation, AVM, which is just a congenital birth defect. My dad had to keep explaining it to me over and over, because I had never even known what a stroke was. When you're twenty-four, unless somebody in your family has had one, you really don't focus on it. And fortunately my roommate [Margaret, from Wells,] at the time had seen her dad have a heart attack, so she knew we needed to get to the hospital. But anyway, so I have vision loss, hearing loss, I'm in chronic pain, and hypersensitivity on the left side. But it's fine, I can work now full time, I'm taking swimming lessons, I work out with a personal trainer every weekend.

Thankfully I have this job, so I'm able to afford things. I just moved from a nonprofit to this job about nine months ago and almost doubled my salary. I was working for the National Council on Independent Living, advocating on behalf of people with disabilities.

BW: So your disability really steered you into a whole new sort of career path.

DC: A whole new career, and a whole new life, too, because I met up with these women, a lot of women with disabilities in the D.C. area, and they had been friends for a long time, very supportive group, and I sort of dubbed them, I was the newest one to the group, but I've dubbed them Women Independently Living with Disabilities, so whenever we send out an e-mail about something, we write WILD invitation to a party or whatever. So it's fun, it's [] a supportive group of friends.

And then just coming here was a change in terms of the atmosphere of the federal government and what you need to do. I'm implementing a lot of the things that I was working on, in terms of the Rehabilitation Act, the independent living program, and seeing how that law gets implemented and translated, I guess it really shows me the importance of writing a law as clearly as possible, and making sure that there's some good report language in those committee and conference reports, too. So I think I'd like to end up back on the Hill.

BW: When was that law?

DC: The Rehabilitation Act was 1973, but it was amended in 1992 [and 1998]. And again, [when I had my stroke] [] I had no idea what it was, but it basically changed the landscape of the country, making [] federal programs [] accessible. And then the ADA came along and really changed the architecture of the whole country I think, not just federal facilities [but also public places].

BW: I'm curious; did you and Senator Dole ever exchange words or whatnot?

DC: I met him a couple of times. In fact, I have a photo of me meeting him, and I knew that he was left handed, so I handed him my left hand, which is my weak hand and we kind of, I have a hard time letting go, so I couldn't let go of him and we got tangled up. It was pretty embarrassing, but at least I know how he feels sometimes, and I've heard him say that he felt insulted when people tried to shake his right hand, instead of shaking with his left hand.

BW: Really?

DC: Yes, because his left I guess is his good; [it's stronger than his right hand].

BW: Because people don't realize that he's totally incapacitated on the right, but his left is not fully functional either. I mean, here's a man who supposedly ties his own ties and buttons his own shirts and whatnot, and you must have gone through the same kind of [thing].

DC: Yes, I still have people tying my shoes for me. Otherwise I just wear shoes without laces and such.

BW: And what about restaurants and so forth?

DC: Yes, I get out with my friends, this group of women, and also I have some other – I call them normies – people without disabilities, I don't, that's the n-word.

BW: When did you first meet the Senator?

DC: I guess it was when I was working for him. I don't remember meeting him beforehand. I may have through my parents, but when I really met him I think was when I was a receptionist, and I was introduced to him. I know he used to come over sometimes and do staff meetings in the personal office, but also I remember having to go over to the majority leader's office one day, because Pat [Sarcone] was out, so I had to answer the phones over there, and oh my God, I was terrified, because he was right in the next office, and I had to forward the phones to him. That was frightening. I know it seems silly now.

BW: Were you there long enough to get relaxed in that job, or was it just a day?

DC: It was just every once in a while they would do that, so it was just there, so, but no, I would not want that job for all the world because I think it's terrifying being the front person, right there, in a receptionist position anyway. I'd love writing [].

BW: So you were with him for four years.

DC: Yes.

BW: And the whole time you were in the personal office.

DC: Yes, I moved my way up from receptionist to legislative correspondent to legislative aide.

BW: And when you were legislative, talk about that transition, what did you do?

DC: I was working with Steve Hart at the time, as a legislative correspondent, and also Bob Carolla and it was interesting, I was working on agriculture, which included the fish and lobsters and blueberries, and potato farmers too. Steve Hart was a trip to work for, he was great, and he eventually left to go to the Department of Ag. And I know that was a very short time, but at least I was able to, I was doing a lot of legislative work with him, but also when he left I was the legislative person handling agriculture.

BW: And that, you didn't have any agriculture in your background.

DC: No, no, but I picked it up pretty quickly, and obviously I turned to the constituents to tell me what to do, I mean in terms of what was, I would keep in touch with people and say, "What's going on? How's, are we having some potato blight or something?" And the Maine Fishermen's Wives Club would call and give me information, if there was something about some sort of legislation on the floor, and I would write memos for the Senator on various things. So that was a very short, I think it was only a couple of months or something, but still, I was doing the legislative side of things.

BW: And it was mainly Maine issues that you were dealing with?

DC: Well, I felt like I was reporting to Mainers, because that's who we represented, but it was broader issues. So for example, the Maine Fishermen Wives folks would call about something, you know, gill net fishing, which was in some big bill or some national bill or something, so I would work on that. And the same with the potato farmers, Steve and I were able to get them funds, I can't remember how many millions, but funds to help pay [to fight potato] blight, sort of make sure that they were covered during that time. So yes, it was national issues, but I guess with any senator you're really looking at the whole, you're representing how those issues affect your peeps back home.

BW: And when he became, well he was majority leader the whole time you were there, he still kept very much in touch with Maine issues.

DC: Absolutely, and all of our Maine mail, when I was a legislative assistant, all the mail that we got from Mainers, this was pre-e-mail I think, we didn't really have, we didn't have e-mail yet, at least our personal office didn't, we just had interoffice e-mail, we had a two-week turnaround time for all correspondence from Maine. So if a letter came in, it was dated and you had to get it out of there pretty darned quick, get it approved and make sure, you know. Not a simple task. I don't know how they do it now with e-mail.

BW: And then did you meet periodically with Maine visitors?

DC: Absolutely, yes, and with national groups too, they would come in and meet, and sometimes you'd attend a breakfast or something if the Senator couldn't make it, or just go to a reception.

BW: I was in a representative's office the other day doing an interview for the Library of Congress, and I overheard a lobbyist on health care talking to an LA, and she sort of bombarded this LA with information, information, and I thought, how do you describe what it's like to be an LA, and in particular when you are not the senator, and they would much rather talk to the senator probably but you're the one they're talking to. I mean, how does it -?

DC: You absorb as much information as you can, and I just remember my standard refrain was, "Thank you so much for providing this information, I'll pass it along to the senator." And sometimes on the phone you would say, "We'll keep your views in mind, thank you for expressing your concerns, I'll pass them on to the senator and keep your views in mind." Which seems like a blow off, but that's essentially the polite thing to say, because that's what you're doing. Unless he said something that's pretty clear, you can't really misrepresent him, and you can't say, "Oh, we agree completely," unless it's something he's really agreed upon.

BW: And what about being bombarded by lobbyists, what's that like?

DC: That was pretty bad. Well, it wasn't that bad, but I found it interesting because people would bring so much information, and Steve would sometimes send me and he'd say, "Go meet with these people, I don't want to meet with them." So I'd have to not only apologize for the Senator not being there, but for the real legislative assistant not being there, and then accept all their information. I'd be so concerned, and bring the information back to Steve and say, "Oh my goodness, these trees are dying," blah-blah-blah, because I also handled environmental issues, too, as a legislative correspondent. And Steve, he was so funny, he was like, oh, those tree huggers. And I took things very seriously, it was interesting.

And sometimes some of the lobbyists and such would call for Steve, and this one guy called, Ed Barron, and he said, "You've got to tell Steve that we need to go take some soil samples." And I thought it was really serious, and I told Steve, "Oh my gosh, so-and-so called about getting soil samples," and Steve broke out laughing and said, "That means we're going to go play golf."

BW: How would you, what words would you use to describe the ambience of the personal office?

DC: Oh, I loved it. I feel like I'll never go back to that again. Maybe it was naiveté, but it seemed like a family for me, especially after my stroke, it was such a supportive group of people. Not just in the personal office, but also the folks who worked in committees for Senator Mitchell, it really was a team effort, working for the state of Maine. And I'm sure there were people,

personalities trying to climb their way to the top and such, but I didn't sense that. Maybe I was too low on the totem pole to get anywhere near some of those people, but it was a real family.

And what I appreciated about Senator Mitchell is that he would hire people from Maine who had the qualifications, and mostly college graduated people, and then you would work your way up, from receptionist or mail room staff and legislative correspondent, so he got people who were very well qualified and good writers, and liberal arts background and such, and then moved them up. And they would end up being, people like Martha Pope became the Senate sergeant-at-arms, first woman Senate sergeant-at-arms. She had started out as a receptionist in Senator Mitchell's personal office, so I just that was very egalitarian, at the time.

BW: That's the farm club approach to baseball, I guess. What about the pecking order in the office, and how was it expressed?

DC: Let's see, the pecking order.

BW: Maybe there wasn't.

DC: Yes, and it's funny, because I think I'm just such a positive person that I just don't care. Well, I mean there is a pecking order obviously, and I felt the people in the personal office didn't, at least around me, didn't really – well, there were a few legislative assistants who were holier-than-thou – but for the most part, everybody wanted to hear your opinions, and would give you work and trust you with things. But it was mostly the people outside of Senator Mitchell's office, either on committee staff or elsewhere that, maybe it was just my perception they were higher, like a legislative director and such, he was over in the Senate Majority Leader's Office, and the Democratic Policy Council staff and others were higher in the pecking order.

But obviously Donna and Mary, Mary McAleney and Donna to me were the big poohbahs there, and they certainly didn't, Mary would come in with her Birkenstocks and red socks, you know, wearing the Birkenstocks, she was just very down-to-earth, and she'd listen to everybody. That was just my sense of it, I think, it was much more of a relaxed atmosphere of just do your work and get it done.

BW: In your describing the office, do you think it was fairly unusual, or not?

DC: I think it was fairly unusual, and that's why I say maybe it was my naiveté, maybe it's just my positive attitude, but knowing how people felt in other offices, my friends in other offices, it was much more cutthroat, whereas in, at least I felt in Senator Mitchell's office it wasn't like that, there wasn't backstabbing going on. And again, it could just be me, but I didn't feel it was that way at all, I felt like we were really working for the state of Maine. And that's what Senator Mitchell would say in the staff meetings and such, he'd say, "Listen to the people from home, we're working for them, they're the ones who pay our salaries."

BW: Talk about staff meetings for a moment.

DC: Mostly we had weekly staff meetings that didn't include the Senator, but then every once in a while he came over, which was nice, it was a treat, because a lot of us in the personal office didn't always see him if we weren't legislative assistants running to the floor to work with him. So the staff meetings were pretty, I think about it now, about the staff meetings I have here and elsewhere, and it was more of a touching base than actual, okay, you do this, you do, you know, giving assignments and such, at least that's how I felt.

BW: So the purpose that it was fulfilling?

DC: More to give information, share information. And sometimes I felt that it was good for us as receptionist and the mail room staff, to make sure that we knew what was going on with the legislative assistants and such, because we would get phone calls about things all the time, whether it was health care issues or other issues, and we needed to field questions or forward the calls to them, but still. I was just thinking of Bobby Rozen, one time he said, okay, tell whoever it was that was on the phone, he said, "Tell her I'm not in, but don't lie." So he was a funny, he was a real jokester.

BW: So what prompted your leaving the office?

DC: Well, unfortunately the Senator just announced his retirement, which to me was just my whole world; that was probably worse than my stroke, because my whole world was falling apart. And that's when I moved to the Senate Historical Office, working with the Senate historian and his staff, because I had a love of history. And I remember they wanted to know if I wanted to go work for Senator Cohen, and I thought, I don't want to work where I might lose my job. People might vote this person out of office, or he might decide to retire.

I was very scared, and I really needed job security, thinking about my health care issues, and maybe this was the wrong thing to do, but I went to work for the Senate Historical Office, and really burrowed into the bureaucracy over there I guess. But that's where I got an interest in history and I went to get my master's degree part-time at George Mason University.

BW: Did you answer an ad for the Historical Office, or how did that come about?

DC: No, I think it just came about through, I heard about it from Mary McAleney, she mentioned that there was an opening there, as a research assistant.

BW: So you worked with Dick Baker, or?

DC: Yes, Dick Baker, and then -

BW: Don Ritchie?

DC: Yes, Don Ritchie.

BW: And what kind of research issues were you -?

DC: I was going through, there was one, most of my time was spent in the Senate library, looking at appropriations that funded the Senate, going back from the 1st Congress through the 104th, looking to see how the administration of the Senate changed over the time, from the beginning very new staff and then to this big secretary of the Senate staff and such.

There was also a project I worked on at the National Archives, which entailed helping them with a book that was going to be a textbook for students with facsimiles of documents. So it was an American history textbook, and I remember working on Henry Clay and the Compromise of 1850, and we were going to put a copy of this, facsimile of the actual document into it, to obviously bring history to life for students. I don't know if that ever got published, because I remember they were working at the time on various things like impeachment and such, and then all of a sudden impeachment was thrown out there with Bill Clinton and that became a [] political football, and I think they dropped the project.

BW: So what was it like shifting from being immersed in the daily life of the Senate to taking this sort of long view of things?

DC: It was hard. It was good in the beginning I think, because I learned to write and I learned how to research things and my analytical skills improved. But in terms of socially, man, you really realize who your friends are when you no longer work for a senator and nobody returns your calls. So that was tough, but it was very different. And that's why I think when I started learning about all these great men and women who had worked in the Senate, senators and such and the staff of the Senate too, in terms of the sergeant-at-arms and the secretaries of the Senate, working on some of their biographies and such, that's I think when I realized, I need to get out of here and get back on the legislative side of things, because I'm learning about all these people and I want to become one of these people. Not necessarily a senator, but I wanted to get in the mix of things, back into the issues, and that's when I moved to the American Psychological Association, and basically did informational interviews again and met people, and that's when I talked, went over there and worked on mental health issues, in their public policy office.

BW: It was a good fit?

DC: I think so, for the time, at that time, yes. I was there for about eight years, so it was a pretty good fit. But again, I'll never be able to capture that atmosphere in Senator Mitchell's office. And I don't think it was just that I was young and naive and it was my first real job out of college, I think it was the tone he set, the Senator and his staff, and just the support I got from them, which I don't think I would ever get again from any boss or whomever.

And here [at OSERS] it's really nice, because there are people with disabilities working here, and the whole goal and mission of the office is to assist people with disabilities and make sure that people know they can live independently, having a disability is not a fate worse than death,

it's really having no purpose in life is a fate worse than death, and that's why you should get out there and learn to live independently, and go back to work. So that's why I'm, I'm enjoying working here in terms of learning how things are implemented, and seeing how the monitoring is done of programs and such.

BW: Specifically, what is your role?

DC: I essentially monitor, I help with the, I work in the independent living unit, which is, the Independent Living Program assists people with disabilities, there are centers for independent living, about 350 or so around the country, that are federally funded, they're non-residential centers where anybody can walk in the door. People with disabilities are the ones who are eligible for services, but you can get information and referral, peer counseling, advocacy, in terms of self-advocacy and systems change advocacy. So for example, you're helping people that either get benefits, or these centers are helping people get benefits, or you might be trying to advocate on behalf of getting the bus service to be accessible so that so-and-so can get to work.

So [] essentially, we fund that program, and I help monitor the funds, as well as help people understand their role. So for example, in terms of the stimulus funding that's happening now, I'm helping with the independent living unit to implement that, and we haven't quite gotten it out the door yet, which is frustrating, but we had to go through a whole bunch of hoops to get things [approved]. And now helping people understand various parts of the law, and how long we have to use it, they've got five years, and certain things that people can spend the Independent Living Part-C Program money on, and what they can't.

BW: Much travel involved, or not?

DC: Yes, there's about five weeks of travel every year. In fact, I just got back from New Hampshire, as part of a state review of that program. So my colleagues looked at the VR, at the Vocational Rehabilitation side of things, I looked at the independent living side of it. And again, it's a very different role, but it's fascinating to see how that legislation is interpreted and implemented.

BW: So in this job you don't have occasion to go up on the Hill, or do you?

DC: No, I don't, and that's, yes, as you can probably get the sense, I really miss working on the Hill. Even if I were to go back and work for another senator, I don't think it would ever be as good as it was with Senator Mitchell, because he was so smart, and just fair, I mean the way he implemented things and the way he grew the staff and such. [] Yes, I miss it a lot.

BW: So in a few words, what do you think, what would you say Senator Mitchell's bearing was on your career?

DC: In a few words.

BW: Don't confine yourself.

DC: Sorry, I'm just trying to think. He was just so supportive to me at a time when I didn't know what was going on, in terms of my stroke. I had no idea whether or not I'd be able to work again, and I was because his staff enabled me, I mean, I came back to work one hour a day for a while, so that I could just get back into it and ease my way back into it. Now, that was, the ADA was enacted in 1990, but I didn't know what it was, and I really felt – so he, it was just, it was such a, you know, you can never go home again. It was such a supportive environment, and sophisticated and really, it was just really good, good fit. So I miss it a lot.

BW: How did you travel from home to the Hill, when you were going in for an hour?

DC: Oh, I lived in Alexandria, Virginia, and early on they had told me not to drive because of my vision loss, so I didn't drive in the beginning. Well, I hired a cab driver in the beginning, but then I took public transportation, the bus to the Metro, which was a nightmare. It takes so long to get to and from places, and just getting tussled around on the Metro and the bus, it was hard. But in the very beginning I hired a cab driver to help me out, and take me to physical therapy and such.

BW: And where were your parents during this whole time?

DC: They were in Maine. They came down, my mom came down for practically the whole time, when I was in the hospital, and my dad came down from time to time. They were both at Colby College. But then I pretty much got back to my life, and they stayed in Maine.

BW: How did you hear that the Senator was going to retire?

DC: He had the entire staff, well first, I got a phone call from my parents and they said, oh, we heard – let me back up, I'm sorry. Early in the morning, that day that he announced his retirement, we got a message sent from either Mary McAleney or John Hilley, I can't remember what his name was, the LD, saying there's going to be an all-staff meeting over in the Senate, in the majority leader's office, or in I guess it was the Ed Muskie Room, or Mansfield Room, whatever the room is right near his office. And we were all, my friend Trey Kelleter and I, who worked in the same office, were wondering, trying to figure out, well what's this meeting about? And I remember we came back from lunch and my parents called me and they said, "Honey, the Senator's going to retire." And I said, "What are you talking about? He's not going to retire." And they said, "Yes, we just heard it from one of [his] brothers." And I just burst into tears.

But I recovered, and we went to this meeting over in the Capitol building, and I lost it as soon as he started to explain what he was doing. And I remember, Anita [Jensen] was sitting behind me and she's like, cut it – she is such a, she's a very brusque woman – she said, "Just cut it out, quit crying," she was like, buckle up. I can't remember her exact phrase, but it was essentially like, 'quit whining.'

BW: Who was this?

DC: [p/o] Anita Jensen, I'm sorry. I don't know if you've interviewed her at all, but she used to wear these [] really high heels, run around, chain-smoker, a very strange woman. She was a very effective legislative assistant, I guess, but she was brusque. But she was sitting right behind me at that meeting, and it was very sad. And I remember coming out, and there were camera crews and such, I guess people, obviously the press had gotten wind of the fact that he was retiring, and I remember either reading or seeing somewhere on the news, staff left the meeting, the Senator announced that he was retiring and staff were in tears when they left the meeting, and that was me.

BW: Do you think you were alone?

DC: In crying? Well, I definitely was the most vocal I guess, or the loudest, crying loudly, but I'm sure others were really upset but, yes, stunned I think, because here he was at the pinnacle of his career. My nana I remember, my mother's mom who lived in New York, she just said, "I don't know why he's giving this up."

BW: So I'm curious about, that I think was in May [*sic* March], and of course he was still in office until January the following year, so what was it like? Did the energy just drop out of things, or not?

DC: Yes. In fact I remember one of the big Maine union folks came in, I can't remember his name, big, typical union guy, and he said to Mary, he said, "Mary, I feel like it's the day after Kennedy got shot." This was the day or so after Mitchell announced, I mean he was just kind of a lame duck, in a way. And that's, but I think he could sense, I think he knew that the whole Congress was going to go to the Republicans, and he wouldn't want to be minority leader under that situation, I think he saw the writing on the wall, looking back. The country's gotten so conservative.

BW: That's just a feeling you have, or do you really -?

DC: I think he knew, and I think my parents and my family would probably say that too. My nana was just furious with him for leaving.

BW: So then, just to get the chronology right, when did you go over to the Historical Office?

DC: It was shortly after he announced, but before he actually retired-retired, so it was either May or June. It was pretty quickly after he [announced his retirement], maybe a couple months. I'm just trying to think because I remember he took us, whenever people were leaving the office, he would take, whenever he went to the White House he would take us, not us, but take Mainers, grab any Mainers and get them down there so that they could meet the president. So one time when, I know my colleague Trey was going to go to law school, so it was near the time of his last day and almost near the time of my last day, because I had then gotten the job, or accepted

the offer for the job in the Historical Office, and Trey and I got to go with Senator Mitchell down to the White House. And it was incredible meeting President Clinton, and we got our photo taken with him, and then we came back out and went to the car with Senator Mitchell and went back up to the Hill, it was all wonderful.

I got home and one of my friends later that evening called me and said, "Oh, you were at the White House, talking about health care issues? I saw you, they had Senator Mitchell getting into his car, and you were there, and they were talking about health care." So maybe it was a way for him to say, look at this poor woman, we need to make sure there's health care because otherwise, here she was, able to get almost two million dollars worth of care covered under the federal employees benefit program. I'm just sort of guessing, but it was good to at least get down there, so -.

BW: Describe it a little more, a few more details about being at the White House, what was it like?

DC: It was good, it was really, I was overwhelmed I think, it was incredible, because I loved Clinton at that time. Then I also went with my parents one time, and Mom knew an intern at the, I guess that's a dirty word, but who was working in the communications office, and we got to go to one of the Saturday morning, the radio broadcast, and I think that was Mother's Day of 1992, so that was like several years before, a couple of years before I went with Senator Mitchell. So that was fun, in terms of getting to see President Clinton give a radio address, with my parents and my family, but going to actually meet him with the Senator was pretty impressive. We didn't get to discuss anything because Trey and I had to sit outside in the little, wherever it was we sat and waited to meet, because they obviously had to talk shop first.

BW: That was going to be my next question, what was the occasion for the Senator to be there?

DC: He was talking about health care policy issues, apparently, and I was there.

BW: So you waited in an anteroom, and then when the meeting was over the two of you came in and were introduced to the president, and the photo op.

DC: Yes, and I think that's when President Clinton said, "He's always bringing Mainers over here." I guess every time he went to the White House, Senator Mitchell brought somebody from Maine to go to the White House, because I think he realized it's a great opportunity. And it's a reward, in a way, [to] get to meet the president, something that he could do to give back to people.

BW: Was it a very functional thing, or were you able to chat with the president for a few minutes, or not?

DC: Not really, no, just enough to say I was from Maine, and I think I told him I had a stroke

or something and to pass health care or something, but it wasn't anything, no, nothing substantive, sorry.

BW: I always ask people this question – as history looks back on George Mitchell, how do you think he should be remembered?

DC: As a decent man who is egalitarian and fair, and looks out for everybody, from the front desk staff to the top, the secretary of the Senate. It's not that he treated them all the same; it's that he respected everybody and really knew how to bring a team together in the sense of looking at how everybody fits into the puzzle and making sure that people feel supported. So fair and, I can't put it into one word, I guess, but just a decent, he's just such a decent man, honorable.

BW: Every once in a while people talk about his sense of humor. Do you have any recollections of instances of that?

DC: I don't. I remember some of the staff meetings, he would make jokes and such, but I can't remember.

BW: Any other sort of vivid memories of being with him, or observing him?

DC: Yes, one time, when I came back to the office, on my first day back to the office I had a cane and such, and he welcomed me. I walked over with somebody to the Senate Majority Leader's Office and he welcomed me back, that first day back. And I remember when he said, "You look so distinguished with that cane," and I thought oh, he's trying so hard to be nice. But, you know, because I had that cane with me and I didn't -

BW: How did he greet you? I mean, shake your hand?

DC: Yes, because I had to let go of the cane. He shook my hand, and he may have hugged me, I don't know, I don't remember.

BW: Good. Are we leaving anything unsaid here, do you think?

DC: I don't think so. I just think he was, and I'm sure it's something that other people say too, he was just such a, there really is lacking that type of person in the Senate right now, when our country needs it most.

BW: Good, thank you, Deb.

DC: Okay, thank you.

BW: We wanted to add what you have to say about the Senator in terms of -

DC: Sure, one of the things that I learned from him professionally was that you should always

hear people out. So, even people of opposing views, you should at least hear them out and listen to what they have to say. I remember him with the NRA, and he didn't necessarily agree with certain things they were saying on opposing gun control, but he would at least hear them out. And I remember one time my dad had met with him on an education issue, and my dad said, well, he's so smart, I gave him this argument first – it was probably increasing funding or something – and Senator Mitchell would say, well, I understand where you're coming from, but here's why I can't do that, x, y and z, a, b,c, he would explain why he couldn't do something, and you'd move along. Very respectful way of dealing with people, people of diverse opinions and differing views. So now, I think that's one of the things I'll always have with me is, from Senator Mitchell, is to just try and work things through.

BW: I'm curious, what was your father's field?

DC: He was president of Colby College, so, and my mom worked in the, what's the office, where she helped students get internships and such.

BW: Scholarship, financial aid?

DC: No, sorry, I can't remember. But she did all kinds of things also helping with the admissions office, too, so that's how she knew a lot of students. And it was a perfect job for her, because she knew all the alums too, so she was able to connect students with current alums, in terms of internships and such. Career Development Office I think it was.

BW: And your father, did he have an academic field?

DC: He was a lawyer, and he came, I guess his background was in African American issues, because in New York I think he was president of the AAI, African American Institute. And then somebody recommended him for the job at Colby, and I remember we went up there and it was a whole new world. One of the first times, I remember showing my grade school teacher, she told the class, "Deb's going to be moving to Maine," and she pulled down the map, and the whole entire country's green and then up in Maine it was white, pointing up to Waterville, Maine. And then we went up there one time, I think it was just my mom and me, we watched the fireworks from the back of our new, would-be new house, for Fourth of July. But anyway, I got off the subject.

BW: Did you become a skier?

DC: I did, and actually afterwards, too, I cross-country, downhill, and also we had snowshoes that were in the basement of the President's House, so I would use those too. And then after my stroke, I went to Maine Handicap Skiing and learned to ski downhill and cross-country as well, so that was fun.

BW: You're a real portrait in courage.

DC: Oh, thank you. I try.

BW: Good.

DC: Thank you.

End of Interview