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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Heather Mitchell (2)
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

GMOH# 198
March 2, 2010

Brien Williams: This is an extension to the February 5, 2010, oral history interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College with Heather Mitchell. Today is Tuesday, March 2, 2010, and today we're talking by phone. Heather is in New York City, and I, Brien Williams, am in Washington, D.C. A little bit of bookkeeping here, I need for you to tell me that you understand that this interview is being recorded by phone, and that you give permission for its recording.

Heather Mitchell: Yes, I do understand, and yes, I do give permission.

BW: Thank you. What I realized after our former interview was that we hadn't really talked much about life in Maine, and so I wanted to ask you a few questions about that. And I thought I'd start by asking you, growing up in Quebec, did you have any connections with Maine?

HM: I did. We went to Old Orchard Beach when I was a child a fair amount, I don't remember exactly how many trips we made, but I was quite young and I think we went every year or every other year to the beach, it was kind of the closest sandy beach to Montreal, believe it or not. I remember the cold water very well. But I never ventured any farther west in the state until, of course, I went up to Mt. Desert Island for the first time with George.

BW: So other than that earlier time, your next introduction to Maine was with George, is that correct?

HM: I had gone to Portland a number of times, I was involved in a, I think I had mentioned to you earlier that I was involved in a skating, a number of skating projects, and I went up to Portland for a skating event, or an exhibition with a number of skaters, so I remember visiting the city then and loving it. And then the next time I went was with George, or I met him up in Mt. Desert Island, he was still in the Senate and we had agreed to meet up there. I was staying with some mutual friends and he was still in D.C., and I was to go up a day in advance and get in a little bit of hiking, and I had my first visit to Acadia National Park and did a major, major hike. And then he flew up that next day and I just, you know, I fell in love with the place.

BW: How did he introduce you to his favorite spots and whatnot?

HM: I think he was a little bit nervous about my reaction to Maine, it was a little bit like meeting the parents for the first time, although his parents had been long deceased when we met,

there comes a point in any relationship where you got to meet the parents and hope that your intended is going to love the parents, and vice versa. And so I think he wanted me to love it, and he was afraid that I may not. I don't know why he thought that, I'm a Canadian girl, but I had been coming from Europe and spending all my summers in the south of France, and I don't think he, you know, he wasn't too sure what my reaction would be. And of course the minute I got to Mt. Desert Island I said, "Oh my god, this is so beautiful, so beautiful." And as I mentioned a moment ago, I had this fabulous, fabulous marathon day-long hike and when I saw the rocky coast and these just glorious mountains, I fell in love right away, and he knew very quickly that I sincerely loved the place. It feels a lot like home, I was born not that far north of the border.

BW: And did he at that time own property there?

HM: No, no, he was unable to spend a lot of time there because of course he was in the Senate and had no time off, so his visits up there were just very rather infrequent and for very short periods of time. And then after he left the Senate and we married, then we started renting a house, the first summer we rented just for a couple of weeks, and the next year a month, and the year after that the whole summer. And we rented for a number of years, and then realized that we really wanted to own a place and started looking, and it wasn't that easy to find what we wanted. And we finally were able to find a piece of land that we could build on, and we did just that, we bought land and we built a beautiful home.

BW: Wonderful. And so then how have you incorporated Maine into your lives, particularly since your marriage and then with the children?

HM: Well as I said, we spent almost all summer in Maine right away, as soon as we were married, we would spend just longer and longer periods of time in the summer. And once we built our home, which is about, I think we purchased the property nine years ago and the house was completed, I think we're on our sixth year now. And we spend the entire summer, the second the kids get out of school we head to Maine, and we stay there until literally the night before they start school, just after Labor Day. So we have a really long, a good solid chunk of time where we're in Maine. And we don't just stay on the Mt. Desert Island, we visit George's family in Waterville, there's a lot of family there, and one of this brothers has a lakeside camp where many of the members of the extended family meet, you know, the kids have the lake experience, and certainly the Waterville family experience. And George's daughter is in Portland, so we're in Portland a fair amount, and we get around the state a little bit. George has taken Andrew on father-and-son fishing trips at Moosehead Lake, and they're kind of out and about in the state.

BW: Do you have some particularly vivid recollections of times up there?

HM: Oh, of so many, I mean just too many to count really. It is our home away from home, and we're all very connected to the place, it is so special, you know, we count the months, or 'counting our way to Maine,' like the title of the famous children's book. As soon as October sets in, it's 'how many more months until Maine.' And it's a very different life there than our

New York life is during the year. Kids are in school and we live just a very different life than our summer life, and I think that's true of everybody when they're in their summer mode. But it really feels like a throwback in time, there's never a security or a safety issue that we worry about. There's a certain amount of freedom that you don't get obviously in big urban areas. Just being outdoors from the second they wake up in the morning until the second they go to bed is wonderful.

We have a "no screen" policy in our home in Maine, so we have no television or no DVD or no screens of any kind, and it's a really nice, it's like living in another era. Now, there's many friends that come, we see year in and year out, they've been coming for generations themselves, and so that's really marvelous to reconnect with people every summer. It's a special time of year for us, and we spend a lot of family time together, so it's great.

BW: Now how does Senator Mitchell balance that time with his busy work schedule and so on?

HM: Well we've been very, very lucky. Going way back, when he was in Northern Ireland there were a lot of breaks in the talks, and there were a lot of breaks in the summers. We would be over there during the infamous 'marching season' in July, but they didn't meet in August so we were pretty, he was always free and clear in August. And then afterwards, when he was in private practice, he would work his schedule so that he would travel a great deal during the year, but he kept his summer months in Maine open, so that he would take maybe one trip a month and really work out of Maine. And that would mean maybe a little bit of time on the phone, either at the beginning of the day or the end of the day, and during the day we'd be out doing things, hiking, playing tennis, swimming and so on and so forth, really enjoying Maine. And so our summers in Maine have really been sacred family summers.

These past two summers, or this past summer and the upcoming summer will be very different, because of his new role in the Middle East. So he was not in Maine nearly as much as we would have liked in the last summer, and I have a sense that it'll be the same this summer. So that's been a hard adjustment for us, because we're so used to having him around all summer long in Maine.

BW: Is he different in Maine than he is in New York?

HM: I wouldn't say different, I mean he is who he is, but he feels, you know, he's very rooted in Maine and I think he's much, much more relaxed, because of course it's summer vacation mode, than he is when he's working. But he clearly, he's very, very connected to the state, and he really feels very much at home there.

BW: Does he maintain contact with some of his support staff from Senate days?

HM: Oh, I think so, yes, yes. He often hears from them if there's an illness or there's been a death in the family, he'll always make a call or just get news from various former members, so

yes. And the big highlight of our summer is going to Bangor every summer, to the scholarship brunch for the Mitchell Scholars, and that's held in the Bangor area every summer, where the recipients and their families come to a brunch where he speaks, and he sees a lot of people from his former staff that come and attend the event. That brunch is a real highlight for us, because I think, and the children come, and it means a lot to him, he's worked very hard on this foundation, so it's really very moving and very touching for him to come and address these kids.

BW: Do you feel like a legitimate Mainer these days?

HM: Well, I feel very much at home there. It is, we obviously only see a certain, we're only living in a certain part of the state, and it's a summer life. I'm not quite sure how I would fare in the long, windy cold month of February but, January, February, but I did grow up in Montreal so I know what the cold weather is all about. But I think I prefer the warmer months.

BW: Anything else about Maine and your lives there?

HM: Well you know, I really, I love it more and more and more, I have to say, every year it's harder and harder to leave. I have connected with another community in Bar Harbor, and the farmer's market and the Yoga community and it's so great to see these people year in and year out. But sometimes you fantasize how wonderful it would be if we could live here year round, but maybe one day.

BW: There's one other question I want to ask you, and this has to do with his dwelling while he was in the Senate. It's my understanding from virtually everyone I've talked to that he conducted all of his business at the Capitol, and so I don't think anyone has said anything about what was, I think, the C Street apartment, is that correct?

HM: I don't follow you. When he was in the Senate of course he had a home in Maine and he had an office, he had offices all over the state of Maine, and he was in Maine almost every weekend.

BW: No, I'm talking about where he was living in Washington while he was down here.

HM: Oh, yes, he lived on, that's correct, he lived near the Capitol.

BW: And I'm just curious, what was his bachelor pad like when you were introduced to it?

HM: Well, I remember when we took our son, who at that time was four, he still owned a house, and we took him to D.C. and it was the first time he'd seen the house. And we said, "This is the house where daddy stays when he comes to D.C. working, where he used to live when he was in the Capitol and working. And there's the Capitol, you look out the window and there it is." And he said, "Mummy, there's a lot of boxes around here, and there's a big hole in the ceiling." Of course there it was, a skylight—he'd never seen a skylight before, so he was very worried about his father actually living in a house with a big hole in the roof. In fact, it wasn't

really a hole in the roof, but he looked at it that way. It was a very modest, very, very modest house, that he really didn't spend much time in, and it showed, let's put it that way.

BW: And he was the sole occupant of the house.

HM: He was, yes.

BW: And he owned it.

HM: Yes, that's correct.

BW: Good. Well I think you've exhausted my curiosity for today.

HM: Well if you think of anything else, by all means --

BW: Well, you've been very generous of your time twice.

HM: By all means let me know.

BW: Carol and I have enjoyed giving glowing reports of our visit to you in New York City; that was a special time for both of us.

HM: Oh, that's sweet. And you just missed the snow.

BW: Yes, that's right. Well it gave us an extra day in New York.

HM: Oh, that's good, that's good. Well Brien, if you think of anything else, I'd be happy to obviously speak again if need be.

BW: Very good, thanks so much, Heather.

HM: You're welcome, bye-bye.

End of Interview