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Interview with John Nale by Mike Hastings

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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John Nale
(Interviewer: *Michael Hastings*)

GMOH# 187
January 22, 2010

Mike Hastings: The following is a recorded interview for the Senator George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, an activity of Bowdoin College. The date is January 22, [2010], it's a Friday, I'm in Waterville, Maine, at 44 Main Street, the Nale Law Offices. The subject of this interview is John Nale, I'm Mike Hastings. Could we begin, could you state your full name and spell your last name.

John Nale: John Elias Nale, N-A-L-E.

MH: And your date of birth and place of birth?

JN: 9/4/49 is the date of birth, and the place of birth is Farmerville, Louisiana, my father's home town.

MH: And your father's full name and your mother's full name.

JN: My father's full name is Melvin Travis Nale, and my mother's full name is Caroline Boles Nale.

MH: Tell me about your mother and father, a little capsulated, what was their stories?

JN: My father is from Farmerville, Louisiana, and my mother was born here in Waterville, Maine, right across the street here in the Lebanese section of the Head of Falls area. And they met in Florida when he was in the service, back in 1942 or 1943. She was down there working at the Camp Blanding military base in Florida, that's where they met. They came back to Maine in about 1944 or '45, they first located in Bangor, Maine because of my mother's relatives up there, and there they were married. And my mother gave birth to three children in Bangor, our oldest sister Carol, our brother Mel, and our brother Tom, and then I guess my father probably had enough of the Maine winters, he thought he wanted to go back to Louisiana so they went back to Louisiana, and in 1949 down there I was born. But my mother missed Maine, so she brought us all back up here to Maine, relocating first in Bangor, with our father, and then after our brothers Richard and Mark were born, my mother and father separated and my mother moved us all back to Waterville, which of course was her home town. And that's when she started raising the six of us children on her own.

MH: Now, did she come back to Head of Falls as well?

JN: No, when she and our father separated and she came back to Waterville with us children, first we located on Union Street, which is, again, down by the Head of Falls area, and then after a year or two there she moved us into an apartment over on Front Street, which was like on Front Court, which is kind of right next door to where George Mitchell and his family were brought up. And we were at that Front Street location, of course when we got there the Mitchell children were all grown up and gone, I believe George is about, George is the youngest in the Mitchell family and he's sixteen years older than I was, so by the time we got there he had graduated from college and he was down in the Washington, D.C., area, and of course the other members of the family were located in Waterville. We were all younger than them. I really knew the mother and the father.

MH: Okay, tell me about them, what do you remember about them?

JN: Well, of course the mother's heritage is Lebanese, and their mother is sister to our grandmother, and of course that would have made the Mitchell children and my mother first cousins. And then George's father was an orphan, a train orphan, as he tells the story, the father would be on the train with other orphans and they would travel throughout Maine and make stops, and if somebody wanted to adopt one of the children they'd go to the train station and, as I understand it, a Lebanese family adopted, a Lebanese family in Waterville adopted George's father, George Mitchell, Sr., and then married our great aunt, Mintaha, George's mother, and of course had, what – five children I believe, and I think maybe one at childbirth passed away there.

And so, the father worked at local jobs, I believe he worked at Central Maine Power Company, and then maybe up to Colby College, and then the mother worked as well. But when we were growing up, the Mitchell children had all grown up and gone and now we were living next door to their mother and father, our aunt and uncle.

MH: Was the Lebanese community close when you were growing up?

JN: Yes, the Lebanese community, really for the most part, started down in the Head of Falls area. The Head of Falls area is located down off Front Street, and as you walk down into that area, the area on the right hand side was predominantly Lebanese, and the area on the left hand side was predominantly French Canadian, and over the years of course the Lebanese and the French Canadians married and had children. But nevertheless, the Lebanese community was a strong community, starting first in the Head of Falls area, and then through education and acquiring businesses and entrepreneurial skills, we were able to work ourselves out of the mills, because that's why we located here, because of the textile mills. My grandparents came to Waterville in 1912.

MH: Really, where did they come from?

JN: Jezzine, Lebanon.

MH: Oh, so they came right from Lebanon to Waterville.

JN: Yes, our grandparents. And the way that is, is like my grandparents, Mary and Thomas Boles immigrated here, and they left one child back in Lebanon and then they came and they located here, and then they asked for Mintaha, our Aunt Mintaha, the Mitchells' mother, to bring that child over, and she brought the child over and she decided to stay herself. And then my grandparents had another eight children, with our grandmother dying of childbirth on her last child, which is [Rosemary] Mary Baldacci. And Mary was then adopted by another aunt, our grandmother's other sister, Rose, who was living in Bangor at the time. She raised Mary, who married a Baldacci, and then had the Baldacci family up in Bangor.

MH: It's a remarkable story. I mean that one, going back to get that one child spreads it all out, it's amazing. Did you, when you were a kid, did you go up to Bangor a lot and visit the other end of the family?

JN: No, not really. My mother raising six of us on her own on welfare, we didn't have the means to go too far. And as far as the Lebanese community, we built our own church, the church cornerstone is dated 1951 I believe, so we were a strong community back then, and we still continue to be today. We had Lebanese restaurants and Lebanese bakeries here in town. And of course when George was younger, and just like us, we spent a lot of time at the local Boys' Club, local YMCA, sports were very prominent.

MH: Was the Boys' Club the YMCA, or was it separate?

JN: Yes, it was a separate building.

MH: And where was that?

JN: Well, the Boys' Club probably that the Mitchell family went to was the old YMCA, that became the Boys' Club, and then when that building ended, we went over to the, it used to be the girls gymnasium at Colby College, because Colby College was located downtown Waterville, so the Boys' Club over here off College Avenue was really the Boys' Club that I knew, and the Mitchell family knew it as well.

MH: So did you go to local high school here, Waterville High?

JN: Yes, Waterville High. Well, we had our own grade school, St. Joseph Maronite School was a grade school. Again, I don't think that the Mitchell family, maybe they did, I don't know if they had a grade school back then, but they had a grade school for us, a Lebanese Maronite grade school.

MH: Right next to the church.

JN: Right next to the church. I don't know how far back it went before me. I would have

entered in 1955, 1956. I would have entered grade school, and all my siblings went to the school, graduated after eight years, then to high school. And as was a predominant theme, at least in our family and the Mitchell family as well, was education, education, education. You got to get that education under your belt, as our mother would say. And so that led to us going to high school and then four of us lucky enough to go on and go to college, and then four of us lucky enough to go on and go to law school.

MH: And where did you go to college and law school?

JN: I went to the University of Maine Orono, undergrad, and then Franklin Pierce Law Center in Concord, New Hampshire.

MH: I read recently where the gentleman who founded that college just died.

JN: Yes, Bob Rines.

MH: Rines, yes.

JN: Oh yes, tremendous gentleman, unbelievable.

MH: Quite a biography.

JN: Quite a biography, talk about a Renaissance man.

MH: Yes, unbelievable.

JN: Yes, he was full of energy and ideas, that guy.

MH: And wouldn't say no, apparently, when he wanted to, when he said he wanted to start a law school. I read once the story about all the regulatory hurdles that he went through to get that place started, and every time they put a hurdle in his way he jumped over it.

JN: He was that type of guy.

MH: Your practice here in Waterville, did you, right out of law school, did you come right back to Waterville?

JN: Yes, came right back to Waterville, started a law practice here in Waterville with my brother Richard, and then brother Tom joined us, and then brother Mark joined us. So for fifteen years, four of us practiced together.

MH: And now Tom's separate, right?

JN: Right, Tom is separate, Mark and I went to Portland for ten years and did criminal

defense work. And now we're back and we just do elder law, we've been doing elder law now for the past eight or ten years.

MH: What is elder law?

JN: Elder law is working with family with elders who have a decline in capacity, and we work with them regarding care issues for the elders, we work with them regarding legal issues and financial issues, and we work with them in terms of using their assets wisely for their care so that they can have the care when they need it, for as long as they need it, and then hopefully pass something on to the heirs.

MH: I haven't heard that term elder law that often, are there many firms like yours in the state?

JN: No, probably six or eight who specialize in it right now.

MH: You mentioned education seemed to be a big thing. Would you say that was a more important value to your community than the others in the area?

JN: I don't know that. I know that it was important in our family, because our mother stressed it in terms of, if you are ever going to get ahead, you better get an education, and once you get it, it's something that nobody can take away from you. So it was stressed in our family, and I believe it was stressed in the Mitchell family as well, I believe they all went to college as well.

MH: Did the Lebanese community, aside from church, did the Lebanese community come together frequently for celebrations or community events, or sports or anything?

JN: Yes, we had an annual Hafli, which is an outdoor gathering of Lebanese people; it's like an outdoor all-day picnic.

MH: Okay. How do you spell Hafli?

JN: Hafli is probably H-A-F-L-I, Hafli, H-A-F-L-I. And then Mahrajan, actually it's the Mahrajan that is the outdoor activity in the summer, and the Hafli is more of an indoor activity in the winter, but I mean they're both basically the same. The Hafli would have Lebanese music, Lebanese food, belly dancing, and just an opportunity for Lebanese people to get together and review history and heritage.

MH: Did the folks from Waterville come from the same, did they all have roots in the same part of Lebanon, or different?

JN: No, different parts of Lebanon. Right out this window you can see a Lebanese mural, and we probably came from about fifteen different towns in Lebanon. As I understand it, back in

the 1800s, a number of Lebanese would not conform to the Syrian rule, and so we were persecuted and we took off to the mountains of Lebanon, Lebanon is a very mountainous region. And because the hills were so mountainous and steep and difficult, the Syrians left us alone. But nevertheless, that region remained part of Syria until about in the 1930s or '40s or '50s, when we broke off and became an independent state of Lebanon.

But nevertheless, while we were still under the Syrian rule, a number of Lebanese emigrated to this country at the turn of the 19th century. And because our background in Lebanon had to do with textiles and clothing, we immigrated and we took to the cities that offered those types of jobs. A lot of Lebanese located in the Lowell area, the Boston area, and then of course because here in Waterville we had the Hathaway shirt factory, we had Wyandotte Woolen Mill, we had a cotton mill, we immigrated up into this area, and that's why we had such a large Lebanese population, all at first living down in the Head of Falls area.

MH: I notice on your wall of your office here you have a lot of historic photographs from Waterville. Are any of them of the Lebanese area?

JN: Yes, yes, this one here. This is, let's see, we are located like here, you and I, and if you walked right straight across, you'd come into this tail end, and then this is the Lebanese section.

MH: Okay, yes, I've walked down by the church and by the, what do you call it, the Two Penny Bridge?

JN: That's right, Two Cent Bridge. And you ask question of what it was like when I was a kid growing up, well when I was a kid growing up we had newspaper routes, early morning delivery, and we delivered all down into the Lebanese section, into the French section, the Front Street area, the Union Street area, that was our paper route. And of course back then, that was pre-urban renewal, so the downtown area that you look at today that's made up mostly of parking lots, that was all made up of buildings and restaurants and things like that. I was also a street shoeshine boy when I was a kid, so I was out on the streets really a lot of the time just by myself, in and out of restaurants, in and out of bars, because even though you were eight years old, you were a shoeshine boy, you had your shoeshine kit and they let you in, and you could go anyplace you wanted with that shoeshine kit.

MH: Comparatively though, Waterville seems to be, the downtown seems to be pretty busy even today. I mean it's not like a lot of Maine towns that, where the activity's died down in the center and gone out to shopping centers. You've got a shopping center, but it doesn't seem to have taken away too much from the downtown.

JN: Well, when the Wal-Mart comes to town, it takes away from your downtown, and that's what we got, we got a Wal-Mart instead of downtown. But anyway, we're trying to make a comeback.

MH: Now, you have a family here?

JN: Yes, well they're grown and gone now.

MH: I see, how many children do you have?

JN: Three children.

MH: Are they lawyers, too?

JN: One just started law school at the University of Maine School of Law, my youngest boy, my next boy is down at Penn State studying for a doctorate degree in philosophy, and my daughter is a school teacher, but now a mother raising my two grandchildren.

MH: That's great, are they nearby?

JN: Portland, yes, thankfully.

MH: Not too bad.

JN: No, no, not too bad at all, not too bad at all.

MH: Now, as George Mitchell got interested in politics in the '60s and then into the, and then later on, did you ever go down to Washington and visit him?

JN: Yes, let's see, when he was elected as majority leader of the Senate, we went down for that ceremony.

MH: What was that like?

JN: It was right down in Washington, D.C., at one of the big hotels down there, and it was a crowd of people down there, and a lot of Lebanese people from all over the country. And we had a big dinner, and of course he spoke and other people spoke on his behalf, and then following that a number of us went over to his office, Senate office, majority leader's office, and congregated there for a while. And then I think even a small number of us family members went over to his condominium that he had down there and just kind of socialized.

MH: His brothers and sister all there, were they?

JN: Yes.

MH: It must have been fun.

JN: Oh yes.

MH: I worked for him from 1980 to 1984, the two years before the first Senate election and two years after, and we used to kid him, we used to tell him that if he did well then he'd become the most famous Lebanese, and then we qualified it and we said, you know, probably Casey Kasem would still be more famous than he was. But I think he's probably eclipsed Casey Kasem now.

JN: As a matter of fact, I went out to an award ceremony for him out in Los Angeles, California, I went out with his brother Paul, and my Uncle Joe as one of the sponsors of it, and we had Ed McMahon as the emcee, and Casey Kasem was there in the audience. It was a good, full crowd.

MH: That's great. Now who was giving the award?

JN: It was, oh, jeez, it escapes me now. But it was a religious organization out there, Catholic religious organization out there giving him the award.

MH: One of the projects on which I worked for him when I was there was putting a memorial to Khalil Gibran, on the National Mall, because it required a resolution as I recall, of the Senate, in order to be allowed to place a monument on the Mall you had to have a Senate resolution passed. And we worked with a group of Lebanese Americans from Texas who were pushing it, and I got to meet quite a few people there then. And at one point, I got to actually meet the bishop from Detroit. I can't remember his name, but we would frequently have Maronite Lebanese come to the office. Because at the time, there was only, I think there was two or three people in the Congress who had Arab backgrounds. Mary Rose Oakar was one, and Jim Abourezk, who was a senator from the Dakotas, and then there was a guy from West Virginia named Rahall, Nicky Joe Rahall. But most of them came from areas where, they weren't large Lebanese communities. It was very interesting, meeting so many of the people from around the country that were Maronites. Have you followed his career much lately?

JN: Oh yes.

MH: And what do you think of this Middle East assignment?

JN: I just saw him interviewed by Charlie Rose, I don't know if you saw that PBS interview?

MH: Was it a recent one?

JN: Yes, yes, you got to see that.

MH: Was it in the last month?

JN: Yes, just look up Charlie Rose and the guests. It was a great interview, an hour.

MH: I guess he was recently here, too, in Waterville, for some speaking engagement.

JN: Yes, yes. My brother and I were one of the founders of the George J. Mitchell Distinguished Lecture Series up at Colby College, and he comes annually for that, when he comes for the Mitchell Institute Dinner gala and things like that.

MH: Now, that brother-in-law is who?

JN: No, my brother Mark [Nale], yes, he and I, and then the Mitchell family from GHM Agency, his brother Paul and his [Paul's] son Billy.

MH: There seems to be a lot of connections between the Mitchells and Colby, because of the fact that the Senator's father worked up there for a while.

JN: And his brother John, the basketball coach up there.

MH: He's still there, isn't he?

JN: Yes, yes, still there as assisting coach.

MH: Any family stories you want to divulge?

JN: Well, like I say, the Mitchell brothers and sister are older than us. I just know that we really grew up and knew the mother and the father better than we knew the kids, I didn't get to know the kids, my cousins, until I was older myself. But the mother and the father were very good people, they were very family oriented. I remember their mother, Aunt Mintaha, inviting me in. We would deliver newspapers there and shovel the walk, and I'd help out with chores around the house there because -

MH: You lived right next door.

JN: Yes, I lived right next door, and go up to the smoke shop for the father and get him his newspapers and cigars – he was a cigar smoker, he'd sit out on his porch and read. They're very intelligent, I think that he could read in English and Arabic and French, the father could, so they'd have those newspapers that they would read. The mother was of course cooking Lebanese food all the time, she'd invite me in, she'd have zitr and Lebanese food.

MH: Did your mother also cook a lot of Lebanese food?

JN: Oh yes, yes, our mother was a great Lebanese cook.

MH: I mean, would it be Lebanese food most of the time?

JN: Oh yes, in our house, yes, pretty much.

MH: Do you still eat a lot of Lebanese food?

JN: Well, we lost our mother a little over a year ago, this is our dear mother up here, lost her. The two pictures in the middle are when she was ninety years old.

MH: And there's a picture in Washington, too.

JN: And the picture in Washington.

MH: A picture in front of the Mall side of the White House.

JN: Right, right, we were down there for my son John's graduation from the George Washington University.

MH: Great photos.

JN: And that's her cooking some of her Lebanese food down at my house.

MH: Well, this has been great, thank you very much. I know you have time constrictions, you have something you have to prepare for, and I appreciate your taking the time to talk to me.

JN: Okay.

End of interview