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Interview with Joan Pedersen by Andrea L'Hommedieu

Joan S. Pedersen

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Joan S. Pedersen

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

GMOH# 052

November 26, 2008

Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, the date is November 26, 2008, and I'm at the home of Joan Pedersen in Turner -

Joan Pedersen: Yes, Turner.

AL: - Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu. Joan, could you just start by giving me your full name, that includes your maiden name.

JP: Okay, my name is Joan Speed Pedersen, and I am from Boston.

AL: And how do you spell your last name?

JP: P-E-D as in David -E-R-S-E-N.

AL: S-E-N?

JP: Hmm-hmm.

AL: Okay. And you were born in Boston.

JP: Hmm-hmm.

AL: And what's your date of birth?

JP: 2/11/40.

AL: What was Boston like in the '40s and '50s, when you were growing up?

JP: It was very insulated. My little neighborhood, you didn't meet anyone different than you were. Our little conclave was Irish Catholic, we went to parochial school, and we didn't meet anyone different, 'til I was about nineteen.

AL: Oh wow. So very insulated.

JP: Very much so.

AL: What part of Boston was that?

JP: West Roxbury, up near Dedham.

AL: And so after high school, where did you go and how did you learn about the world?

JP: Actually I didn't. I got married when I was twenty-one, and moved down near Cape Cod and lived there for, oh, probably fifteen, sixteen years, and then we moved to Maine. So I've only really lived in two places my adult life, strangely enough.

AL: And you've been here, as you said, for about thirty -?

JP: Thirty-three years, thirty-two actually.

AL: And what did your parents do for a living?

JP: My mother worked for an attorney, probably as a secretary at that time, and my father worked for a major company, Firestone Tire, distributing, I don't really, you know, I'm not too sure what he did, but in the office.

AL: And did you have brothers and sisters?

JP: There's two brothers and one sister.

AL: Have any of them come up to Maine to live?

JP: Just one, he followed me.

AL: So you came to Maine, and what, how long was it between that and, or what did you do?

JP: Two or, I was a stay-at-home mom for the time that the girls were little, and then we got here and they were seven and ten, and my husband was injured at work and couldn't work any more, or he couldn't work for a period. And so we needed the money, and I went looking for a job, through the job service, and I signed up. And sooner or later the posting came, and I had always volunteered on political campaigns, so I went and applied.

AL: This was in the late '80s?

JP: Early.

AL: Early '80s.

JP: I think '82, right after Mitchell was appointed, '82.

AL: So you started work for him early in his Senate career.

JP: And stayed right through, 'til he retired.

AL: And what was your job?

JP: Caseworker. Anybody that came in with a problem having to do with the federal government, that's what I would do. We would contact the agency on their behalf, as I'm sure Janet told you, and just act as an advocate for them.

AL: Do you recall some of the issues that you worked on over the years, that stand out?

JP: Oh, I think one of the most fulfilling, I have a picture of the fellow upstairs, he needed a heart transplant and he was a veteran, and he needed it rather quickly – he wasn't doing well. And so I helped him get all of the paperwork submitted, and the veterans' group, the veterans' hospital up here does not do transplants, or it didn't back then, and so it would have to be done out of state. So I contacted Boston and I contacted New York, and I found a doctor to do it.

Somebody had to sign off up here, and they were away on holiday on an island in Casco Bay, and I had the papers brought out to the doctor so he could sign off, and they brought them back and the guy got his heart.

AL: Wow.

JP: It was really a good one. You can help. You know, little people can help.

AL: Were there any tough issues that you can recall, things that were -?

JP: The gun issue, gun control always was a hot button item. Abortion.

AL: Yeah.

JP: You know, those would just flood the office, nasty people, nasty, nasty people. They would ask your personal preference, and you'd say, "Well I'm sorry, that has nothing to do with the issue," you know, and call people names.

AL: Yeah.

JP: Mostly the social issues, and they really didn't care how Senator Mitchell felt, they just, if you didn't think their way that was the end of it.

AL: Right. Now, were these people representing groups, or citizens?

JP: They were people from the community, but they felt strongly on certain issues.

AL: Now, can you talk about some of the other people you worked with?

JP: Oh, that I worked with. I started with Jan, Jan Welch, Jan Barrett now, and we worked together fifteen years. We're very close personal friends, we see each other still. She was an excellent field representative, she represented him well, the Senator. Judy Cadorette was a field representative in Biddeford at that time, and she was Jan's peer in Biddeford. They did the same thing, and we also have kept in touch, we see each other once a month and talk all the time.

Friendships were, they just happened. The staff was good; he had a very good staff. Mary LeBlanc and Marcia [Gartley], up in Presque Isle, were also very, very good at what they did.

AL: And they're close knit, you seem to be close knit on a personal level.

JP: Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm. Yeah, we did, we had a very good group. There wasn't any backbiting.

AL: And Mary LeBlanc doesn't still live in Presque Isle.

JP: No, she moved to New Hampshire to live with one of the, one of her kids. Mary had children, too. I think we all seemed to have children in an age group, or certain of us anyway, and Mary had a son that was quite good in school, and I had a daughter that was very interested in politics, and my Chris went up to Dirigo State or whatever they call that thing at the State House, where the kids take over.

AL: Yes.

JP: And she was sitting around, looking at a magazine that had Senator Mitchell's picture on the cover of it, and this boy came up to her and he said, "It's quite a guy isn't it?" indicating the Senator. And Chrissie said, "Yeah, my mom works for him." And the kid said, "So does mine." It was Mary LeBlanc's son. Isn't it a small world?

AL: Oh that's funny.

JP: So both of their mothers worked for the Senator. But even as recently as, oh, I met somebody last week from some nonprofit, and she asked what I had done and I told her who I worked for, and she went on and on and on about Senator Mitchell, about how good he was and how she used to call him on issues and things like that. So, we were always proud to say where we worked.

AL: Did you have any interactions with Senator Mitchell over the years?

JP: Hmm-hmm.

AL: Can you describe -?

JP: He would come into the, he'd come into the office if he was in the area, and Jan would be more part of the meeting, if he were meeting with like mayors and things like that, on grant work. But you always had a few minutes with him, yeah, he would always stop and ask how you were doing. His sister lived – I don't know whether she still does – in Waterville, and a couple of times, if he was staying over at her house during the winter, he'd call here, because he knew I could tell about Route 4, or I would have heard, and he'd call to ask how the weather was before he came down Route 4.

And one morning the poor man called about six thirty and he got my eldest daughter, who was not a nice little girl when she was a teenager, and she screamed – and the phone was in her room – she screamed from one end of the house all the way to this bedroom, which is like, “Ma, there's some guy on the phone that wants to talk to you.” So I went, and of course I realized right away who it was, and he said, “Oh, don't worry about it,” he said, “I've got one like her at home,” or something like that. Very gracious. But as far as him coming into the office, it was mostly for the field reps, yeah.

AL: Right. How much contact did you have with staffers in Washington?

JP: On the phone. They were available to us.

AL: I mean was there a need, a lot of, you know, was it a pretty smooth relationship?

JP: Yes.

AL: And were there certain people that you dealt with consistently?

JP: Ashley [Abbott Martinage] was the most available. She made herself available, she just, you know, was very special. Mary Mac [McAleney] was available; Gayle [Cory] was very available.

AL: Did you get to know Gayle?

JP: Hmm-hmm.

AL: Can you talk about her?

JP: Not as much as Judy and Jan. I'm not even sure when Gayle left the staff. I felt special towards her because of those two, Judy and Jan, felt so special to her, so I knew she was someone outside the norm. Gayle never made me feel like I shouldn't be asking something, that it was a stupid question. She probably was our first AA, now that I think of it. Yeah, I think she was. So in her capacity she was the liaison between the Maine staff and the D.C. staff, yeah. So

you'd go to her first, and if she couldn't help then she'd roll you over to someone that could.

And then Mary McAleney of course is one of a kind, one of a kind. You'd have to be to do that job, because it's a real juggling, keeping everybody happy. There were a lot of egos, some more justified than others: 'Do you know how important I am?' They handled it well. That old saying about honey versus vinegar.

AL: Right.

JP: No, they didn't come down heavily on anybody. It was a wonderful place to work for a political junky, anybody that was interested in politics. Even at my level, which -

AL: Why is that, what did you get to see and feel around you?

JP: Oh, my children got to meet President Carter. John Glenn, I drove him around, and of course got everybody's signature for the kids, to bring home. I think it opened up to the kids, too - government, it personalized it. And plus, having Senator Mitchell rise to majority leader. And even when he was out of office and working in Northern Ireland, my youngest one, the one that was very involved in politics and government, she followed Senator Mitchell, she worked after college for a multi-national corporation and she used to go to Northern Ireland quite often, and she'd stay at the same hotel he did, and she'd walk in the lo-, (and this is back when they had barricades and there were guns all over the place, I was terrified), she'd walk in the lobby, and there'd be a big welcoming picture for Senator Mitchell, and she said it was like being at home. You know, walking in and finding his picture there, knowing he was either coming right after her, or had just been. So -

AL: Well, that's a nice connection. Did your work change at all when he became majority leader, or did it look the same to you?

JP: I think, somebody probably has statistics on it, but I think our caseload got more, because they thought he was more influential. Which is normal.

AL: Right.

JP: I mean, you know. I think people that may have gone to Cohen would decide to go to Mitchell. And plus, Clinton was in office, too, so the Democrats - It only makes sense.

AL: And you said you came - oh were you about to say something?

JP: No.

AL: You said you came on in '82, was that after he won reelection?

JP: Oh, he hadn't even run on his own at that - when did he run on his own?

AL: Because he took office in '80.

JP: Eighty.

AL: And then the reelection was in '82.

JP: Okay, then that would have been just about the time probably.

AL: Yeah.

JP: But I wasn't there at that time, when he ran for reelection, when he ran on his own. It was after that.

AL: Looking at Maine issues, because you probably, I mean you dealt with some national issues, but -

JP: We also did, we weren't encouraged to, but if someone came in with a problem that involved the state, you could make a phone call, legally. And, but, a lot of state agencies felt that it was like you were intruding, you're a fed and these people should be going to their state representative.

AL: Okay.

JP: Which we did encourage them to do. But if it was something pressing or if they, if the need was a little bit above the normal thing.

AL: Right.

JP: We'd make a phone call.

AL: Are there other people I haven't asked you about that you had significant interactions with, that would be important to talk about?

JP: Did you inter-, let's see, the Augusta office, Tom Bertocci?

AL: Yes.

JP: Okay. Sue Gurney worked with Janet for decades, she started with Senator Muskie, she was another excellent field rep, I mean she cared so much. The Augusta office really wasn't as - Janet ended up going to the Augusta office, from the Waterville office, but I think she probably did more work when she was out of the Waterville. Rockland, that would have been Jeannie Hollingsworth, and then an older woman, who may not even still be alive.

AL: Carmen?

JP: Carmen.

AL: Yeah, she's -

JP: She isn't. See, I haven't kept in touch with Jeannie, so I didn't know that. The Portland office, we didn't really have that much to do with them.

AL: Larry Benoit?

JP: Larry and Sharon.

AL: Sharon Sudbay?

JP: Sudbay. And Margaret, Margaret Samways. Oh, no-no-no, she was out of Bangor. Margaret [Malia Kneeland] – not now, a senior moment.

AL: No. That's okay, because I don't know the name either for sure.

JP: Sharon would know, and Larry will know. The Augusta, the Portland office was the office, the core office, main office, so they had much more to do with Washington than we did. Because that was the Senator's home town, too, he was living in South Portland at the time, so that's what he used as his jumping off point.

AL: So was there somebody in Maine that coordinated all the different field offices, was that Larry's job?

JP: Larry, hmm-hmm, yup, Larry did that, kept herd.

AL: Now I've heard about when computers came in, do you remember when that happened?

JP: Oh, God. I couldn't give you a year, but I thought I could go to my grave without computers. I'm really not technical, and they dropped boxes upon boxes and said, "Good luck, love." So that's how I learned how to do computers. I think they gave us a booklet. And of course Larry loves gadgets like that, so he used to come up and help us out.

AL: Oh good.

JP: Because he's close enough, within an hour, he could do it.

AL: Right, right.

JP: It certainly made things easier, having computers.

AL: Once you got used to them.

JP: Oh, my goodness, yes, oh, definitely. I mean you could do a search for people in Sabattus that called in on a certain issue, and immediately have a list of who they were, what they called in on, how they felt.

AL: Wow.

JP: Just like that. Whereas before, we were sending down carbon copies to Estelle and everybody, it was just primitive, primitive.

AL: And Diane Smith, what was her position?

JP: She still is around.

AL: Yes, but what was her position?

JP: Press secretary.

AL: In D.C. or Maine?

JP: D.C. Oh, she might have worked up here too at some point, in Portland, out of Portland, for scheduling. Yeah, she was the press secretary. That's a job that nobody should ever want. God.

AL: What -? Does the press secretary deal with the press a lot and try to get positive press out there?

JP: Although maybe, I'm just thinking, Diane might have been the scheduler, rather than the press secretary. She might have been his scheduler, now that I think of it.

AL: I know in later years she was, for Baldacci.

JP: Yeah. She is still; she still is for Mike Michaud, I think. She might have done the scheduling down in D.C. As did Mary Mac, she did scheduling also. But Mary could charm anyone. I mean you're always saying 'no' to people, or you're scheduling them for ten o'clock and all of a sudden the Senator isn't available or he's running two hours late. It's a thankless job.

AL: Yeah.

JP: It really is. You have to have the patience of Job, but yeah. I think in fact Judy was offered the position of scheduler at one point. She didn't take it though. I think she was offered,

if I remember correctly.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about?

JP: I wondered what you were going to ask.

AL: We sort of want to get a sense of –

JP: I don't know how people do these. I'm not even familiar what an oral history is, of the Senator.

AL: Yeah, well, we want to get a sense of the people who worked for him.

JP: Uh-huh.

AL: And how the staff worked together and how the offices functioned.

JP: So scholars in the future will go in and listen to a tape, is that?

AL: Or a transcript.

JP: Or a transcript.

AL: They can read the transcript or listen to the audio.

JP: Like they used to say to us all the time or maybe even the Senator did, "You are the eyes and ears for me in Washington."

AL: Right.

JP: Because we got everybody from street people, we had a lot of street people because we were located on Lisbon Street, which back then had not been rehabbed. The kids would come in after school, and they wouldn't go further than People's, you remember where People's Bank, that corner.

AL: Hmm-hmm.

JP: Ash maybe, because after that teenage girls were fair game, they'd never walk down beyond it. So we had a lot of challenging people, yeah. And quite often we didn't like to be alone in the office after a certain – like during the winter when it's dark at four thirty, we wouldn't want to be alone to walk out back on Canal Street.

AL: Right, right.

JP: And by the same token, I can remember getting there at seven thirty in the morning and having a fellow that I didn't want to see waiting for me in the lobby, and knowing there wasn't another person in the building. But we did have a button underneath the desk – I don't know what the proper name is, but – and it would alert someone. And Senator Cohen's office was in the same building and he had an intern at that time who had to be six-foot-three, and very large football type fellow, and when it, we pressed it one day and this fellow came over and he just lifted the guy out of the chair by his shoulder and he walked him out the door; our own private security force. But

AL: And what was it like having Senator Cohen's office right adjacent to yours?

JP: Actually, I went to work for Senator Cohen after I left Mitchell.

AL: Oh.

JP: Because what we do, what we did was so nonpartisan, and I was good at immigration, and so when our office closed up, Bob Tyrer, who is Senator Cohen's Larry Benoit –

AL: Yep.

JP: - alter ego, he asked if I would come on their staff, and I did. Until he went to the Pentagon to be the secretary of defense.

AL: What year was that, 2002?

JP: God, I don't remember.

AL: Ah, not 2002, I'm sorry.

JP: No, because by that time I was working for Baldacci.

AL: I didn't mean 2002, but maybe '98?

JP: Somewhere in that. But no, it was an easy rollover from Mitchell to Cohen. Mary McAleney used to call them 'the boys,' they were very close. Cohen and Mitchell. They had a good relationship.

AL: Did you ever see them together?

JP: They did, they'd come up together on the plane.

AL: Oh really?

JP: And then of course whoever was driving would pick them up. And I can't remember

where Senator Cohen was living then; I think he was married to Diane still so he would have been living in the Portland area. They collaborated, I've got their books, and they were on the Iran-Contra Committee together and seemed to work very well together.

AL: I think that probably, do you think it benefitted Maine?

JP: To have those two?

AL: To have those two together?

JP: That's quite a feather in the cap. Maine, it's such a, the population is so small compared to other states, but we've had some great people. Cohen and Mitchell I think were among the best. I know Muskie is well thought of, and Margaret Chase Smith, and even Olympia.

AL: And so then you went to work for Baldacci after Cohen.

JP: Right. Well, I felt like Typhoid Mary, I mean Mitchell left and then Cohen left, and they were kidding that if you ever want a politician to leave town, hire Joan Pedersen, so I went with Baldacci and of course then he left.

AL: Became governor.

JP: He became governor, but by that time I was well into my sixties, and I had been doing it for a long time. So I retired.

AL: But they oftentimes went on to great things after, so maybe that's your angle.

JP: Oh yeah, I mean, I wouldn't have been surprised if Mitchell's name was not floated for secretary of state, I was very surprised that it wasn't. I mean, he is so much more qualified than anybody that they were talking about, and are talking about. He brings such – my relatives over in Ireland love him. I mean these are plain people over in a little place in Ireland that know about Senator Mitchell. They're so grateful for what he did. So he has a -

AL: That's a question I need to ask the Senator, whether he's, in a different place in his life than doing something like that, or –

JP: Yeah.

AL: It could be, he's got young children.

JP: That's what I was going to say. His children right now, what does he have, two? Yeah. I would be willing to bet he told them, "Don't even bother asking me." Because it's a commitment, it really is. Even when Senator Cohen was brought in by Clinton, I thought that was a wonderful thing for Maine, the bipartisanship, to show that we had people that are not

adverse to crossing over to help the country, yeah. And Mitchell has done that more than most, he really has.

AL: Now what different types of management style did you see between Mitchell and Cohen, anything discernible?

JP: No, I wasn't at that level.

AL: Oh, to really -

JP: - to see it, no, I wasn't, I mean I wasn't in any position to see anything like that. The Senator knew that he had – Senator Mitchell – knew that he had good people around him, and he had confidence in them, he didn't have to be involved in everything. And I have a feeling he probably didn't want to. He didn't have to.

AL: Right.

JP: Yeah. I can't think of anything else in that vein.

AL: I think that's all the questions I had, unless you have something else you'd like to add?

JP: No, I don't. It was a pleasure working for him, every day I enjoyed going to work. And not many people can say that. I was proud of him, and we did a lot of good for the people of Maine. He was well thought of in Lewiston-Auburn, very, very well thought of.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

JP: You're very welcome.

End of Interview