

## ***George J. Mitchell Oral History Project***

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**Lauren Higgins**  
(Interviewer: *Brien Williams*)

**GMOH# 109**  
June 4, 2009

**Brien Williams:** This an oral history interview with Lauren (Griffin) Higgins for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project at Bowdoin College in Maine. We are in Ms. Higgins' office at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, where she serves as senior legislative analyst in the Office of Legislative Policy and Analysis. Today is Thursday, June 4, 2009, and I am Brien Williams. Lauren, will you give us the date and place of your birth, to start off?

**Lauren Higgins:** Yes, I was born in Waterville, Maine on February 21, 1964.

**BW:** And your parents' names?

**LH:** Lawrence and Gail Griffin.

**BW:** And tell me a little bit about your background, where you grew up.

**LH:** I grew up in Waterville, Maine. I happen to be of Lebanese descent, my grandmother was Lebanese, so in some ways I grew up in the same Lebanese community that Senator Mitchell did, although several years later.

**BW:** Where'd you go to school, Lauren?

**LH:** Well I, as I said, I grew up in Waterville, Maine, and I went to Waterville High School. One interesting note going back to elementary school is that the elementary school that I went to is now the George Mitchell School, which it wasn't then, but- And I, after high school, went to the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, and then after being in D.C. and working for Senator Mitchell for a few years went back to Maine and went to Maine Law School, University of Maine School of Law.

**BW:** The elementary school you went to, was that Mitchell's own elementary school?

**LH:** No, it wasn't. It was actually brand new when I started kindergarten, and it was Brookside Elementary School, but they since have named it after Senator Mitchell.

**BW:** Talk a little bit about that community, the Lebanese community in Waterville, what was it like?

**LH:** Well it's a very close-knit community, and very proud of their Lebanese heritage and tradition. And my great grandparents came over from Lebanon and worked hard to build up, you know, the church was very much a part of their life and their community, and they worked hard to build the church and stay connected to one another.

**BW:** What about linguistically, did they speak -?

**LH:** Arabic? Yes. I didn't, and I don't know any, but I think it's the cultural thing where, in order to have your children assimilate more into the culture of the big community, generations start losing that language.

**BW:** Right, where there's a lot of social pressures for kids to speak the -

**LH:** Right, right.

**BW:** The religion, the church was?

**LH:** The Maronite Catholic church, St. Joseph's Church.

**BW:** And what are the big differences between that branch of the Catholic Church and Rome?

**LH:** Well, you know...

**BW:** Okay.

**LH:** I haven't gone to a Maronite church in a lot of years.

**BW:** Okay, let's just leave that.

**LH:** Can we not? Because it's sort of like all vague memories.

**BW:** Fine, fine, very good. So what was your first awareness of George Mitchell?

**LH:** Well I think my first memory is when he ran for governor. I grew up in a very big Democratic family in Waterville, my grandfather was Eddie Atkins who, his second wife, Barbara, is George Mitchell's sister. And he was a printer, his father started the printing business, and he was the printer used by all the Democratic candidates – I think in the entire state because, you know, he employed union workers. And so it was a big deal when Senator Mitchell was running for governor, and unfortunately he lost, and I remember how disappointed everybody was at that, but it turned out, in some ways, probably for the best for Senator Mitchell.

**BW:** How come?

**LH:** Well, because then he went on to be a federal judge, and then was appointed to fill Senator Muskie's seat.

**BW:** What was your father's profession, then, did he carry on the printing business, or was that the other side of the family?

**LH:** No, well my father, that was the other side of the family.

**BW:** Right.

**LH:** My father was a financial planner, stockbroker, and so he had his own business.

**BW:** And was involved in Democratic politics?

**LH:** Yes, my whole family was. My father ran for school board, my mother was in charge of our ward. I forget the official name of her position, but I mean she even ran for, it was an elected position within the ward in the city, so she used to work election night. And so politics was a big part of growing up, and the importance of voting and being an active member of the community and society.

**BW:** Your mother, did she have a profession, or was she a homemaker?

**LH:** She was primarily a homemaker.

**BW:** You've seen a lot of politics since you left Maine. Is politics as practiced in Maine kind of a special breed, or unusual? You sort of give me the sense that it is a little bit.

**LH:** Well, it seems in Maine, and I don't know what it's like in every single state, and some of the other small states might be the same way, but everybody knows one another and nobody's scared to go up to the senator and introduce themselves and talk to them about issues. I think it keeps the senators humble, and it reminds them, they stay in touch with the people who elect them.

**BW:** And is being active in politics considered a real virtue and sort of a civic duty in Maine, or would you say that there's, it's not much different than other places?

**LH:** I mean it might be my perspective, because I always grew up thinking that it was an important civic duty, but I think so.

**BW:** Were there interesting discussions around the dinner table during the early Reagan years and so forth in your family, or don't you recall any particular memories?

**LH:** I was young and in college a lot during that time, and then came to D.C. at the end of the

Reagan presidency.

**BW:** And you went to Holy Cross and majored in biology.

**LH:** Right.

**BW:** So at that point, what did you see sort of as your career path ahead?

**LH:** I wasn't sure. I was young, and during my senior year I did an internship for a local community service, and I was working on a project with a city council member – it's all very vague. But that's sort of my background, and coming from an active political family kind of meshed with, I realized that my interests were in community service, and I started thinking about what other opportunities might be available, other than just doing something in science, having a science career. And that's when I pursued working down in Washington, D.C., and was able to obtain a summer internship in Senator Mitchell's office, which was how my career in Washington, D.C. began. So I started out as an intern, and it was only supposed to be for the summer, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do in the fall, and one of the fall interns ended up not being able to come down to D.C. and they allowed me to stay on for the fall, and then in December I was hired by the Mitchell office.

**BW:** Did you have a guardian angel that allowed, or how did you get the first internship?

**LH:** Well, as I said, my grandfather was married to George Mitchell's sister, and so I went and talked to him a little bit about it. And at the time, I wasn't sure if I would be able to work for Senator Mitchell because it seemed like there might be a family connection, but because I'm not related to him, there was no family connection. And Senator Mitchell felt that, you know, he offers summer internships to Maine college students and I fit that bill, and there was no guarantee that it was going to work into anything more than that but it would allow me to come to D.C. and see if this was something that I liked. And fortunately it was a good fit for me.

**BW:** Was it an unpaid internship?

**LH:** There was a small stipend.

**BW:** And what about living quarters or arrangements?

**LH:** I lived with, some other friends from college were coming down to D.C., so I was able to live in, and it was actually a subsidized housing for college interns at the time. So it was five girls squished into a three-bedroom apartment.

**BW:** And not necessarily for Maine interns, or -?

**LH:** No, no, they were all, they actually were all from Holy Cross. But nobody else from -

**BW:** And during that, excuse me, during that summer internship, what was your role, your job?

**LH:** I did anything and everything. I answered phones, I primarily made copies, delivered things to other offices, and I actually learned how to give tours of the Capitol as well. So in some ways, it's the 'low man on the totem pole' job, but as somebody said, "If you can lick an envelope with a smile, you'll get a long way in life," and I think that advice is something that I would pass on to others. It's a great way to start, because you learn a lot about the legislative process, the Senate is an exciting place to work and there's a lot going on, so if you can keep your eyes and ears open you can learn a lot.

**BW:** I was going to ask you to characterize what that experience was like as a newcomer. Just really exciting or kind of scary or what?

**LH:** I thought it was really exciting. I think it helped that I was working in an office with other people from Maine, because everybody, just a lot of the staff was from Maine so they had family in Maine, and we would get the daily clips from all the Maine newspapers, and a number of people coming into the office were from Maine. And so it was like a home away from home.

**BW:** And I would guess some of those people that came down to visit were the ones you were taking on a tour.

**LH:** Exactly.

**BW:** And who did you report to, who was quote/unquote your 'boss' at that point?

**LH:** At that point it was Donna Beck, who was the office manager. And then I'd work on small assignments for other people in the office, but I was responsible to Donna.

**BW:** When you extended your internship into the fall, did you continue to do the same things, or did your role change a little bit?

**LH:** I continued to do the same thing, because they always needed someone there to make the copies. And actually in the fall there were fewer interns, because in the summer more college students are available. So in some ways, I had to do more of the dirty work. But it was an exciting time because it was in 1986 when Senator Mitchell was the chair of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, so we were following the elections very closely. So it was a very exciting time to be in D.C., and especially to be in Senator Mitchell's office.

**BW:** So what was the next step then?

**LH:** The next step then, his personal secretary left, and Gayle Cory – who had worked for Senator Muskie, a very senior member of his staff and someone Senator Mitchell himself respected very much – they decided that she would take on that role, take over as his personal

secretary in a unique way, because Gayle had so much more expertise and they didn't want to have her lose all the other functions she provided for the office. And so they asked me if I would be Gayle's assistant, to help put together his daily schedule and be involved in that aspect of the office. So more involved with the Senator's day-to-day activities.

**BW:** I wanted, there was one other question I wanted to ask you about during your internship period. What contact did you have with the Senator as an intern?

**LH:** Very little actually, I would see him in the hallway; he was always very friendly. And then at the end of the session he would always meet with the interns and we'd get our picture taken with him, and every once in a while I think I would bring some people to the Capitol to meet with him, but very, very little interaction myself.

**BW:** But he had a special role in developing the internship program for Maine students to come into Washington, is that correct or not?

**LH:** What do you mean, "He had a special role"?

**BW:** Well, did he create this internship program for his office or not?

**LH:** No, I think all senators' office do this; it's a way to bring young people from the state into, down to D.C.

**BW:** So he -

**LH:** But he did pay the stipend, which a lot of offices don't necessarily pay. So that's why they had a limited number each semester and the summer, because they could only carry so many on the budget. So that was very nice, because a lot of interns I met did not get paid at all.

**BW:** Stingy senators.

**LH:** Yes.

**BW:** So when Gayle Cory came back to the office -

**LH:** Well she was in the office when I was there, she was already there.

**BW:** Oh, she was already there.

**LH:** She was an executive assistant.

**BW:** My impression is that she was a big personality.

**LH:** She was.

**BW:** So her taking over this command position in a way, did that make for a lot of changes in the office structure and whatnot, or not?

**LH:** Well, because I was an intern, it's hard for me to really know what, all the ins and outs and the decisions that were being made.

**BW:** But, okay, what did it feel like to be introduced as her assistant and getting to, and how did you develop a working relationship with her?

**LH:** Well, Gayle was very, very easy to work with. Even as an intern, I remember – the office in Russell Building had, it was an office suite and there were three offices on one side of the hall, and then most of the staff worked on the opposite side of the hall. The office where there were only three offices were the Senator's office, and where Donna Beck, the office manager, and Gayle Cory, and his personal secretary, who was Regina Sullivan at the time, and then an office for his chief of staff, who was Rich Arenberg at the time. So it was the really important people over on that side.

Whenever I had to go over there I was always a little bit nervous and, even as an intern, Gayle always made me feel welcome and was very friendly, and I never felt like, 'Wow, this is, she's a big person.' She just came, you know - I knew she had been at the State Department with Senator Muskie, but she always made me feel like I could always come and talk to her and have even just a little chat with [her], she was very friendly, very easy to talk to. So it was very easy to work with her, because she was very patient and kind, and I don't remember her ever being angry at me for anything, or if ever I made a mistake she was always like, "You know, we'll work it out, we'll figure it out." And so she was wonderful to work with.

**BW:** What was Rich Arenberg's style and sort of how did he, as chief of staff or AA, did that work well?

**LH:** I think so. I had very little interaction with Rich; he's very quiet and serious. So, while very nice – I know he's going to think this is funny – a little intimidating to a young staffer, because he's so quiet.

**BW:** Now, while you were there he was succeeded by Martha Pope, is that correct?

**LH:** Exactly.

**BW:** And was that, did that create a big change?

**LH:** I think so. Martha actually ended up sitting in with us, because she liked the idea of being right outside of the Senator's office. So Gayle, Martha, and I shared an office when Martha became chief of staff. And again, so I was able to get to know Martha better than I did Rich Arenberg, because she was right there with me. She didn't care about having, being in her

own private big office, so she was very, again, very easy to get along with, and I felt very comfortable working with Gayle and Martha.

**BW:** So you moved across the hall.

**LH:** So I moved, well as an intern you're not really anywhere, but, but yes, so I got to work in the big side of the office.

**BW:** One of the things that always strikes me when I'm in the offices, on either side of the Hill actually, is how congested and how on top of one another you are. How is that as a working environment, do you just get used to it?

**LH:** I think you just get used to it. And I didn't know anything else, because I was out of college so it was, for me it was just great to be working for a United States senator, steps away from his office. And it was, like I said, it was an exciting time. I was there when he was the chair of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and the Democrats took back the Senate. And then during the Iran-Contra hearings, and he was a member of the committee, during those times, and then he became the Senate majority leader. So it was very exciting.

One of my colleagues, Grace Reef, who was a legislative assistant for him at the time, she was only a few years older than me, but she and I would go down to the cafeteria and say, "Don't you wish you had a pin that said, 'I work for Senator George Mitchell'?"

**BW:** How were you reporting what was going on in your life with your family at home? Were you writing to them, or were you on the telephone a lot?

**LH:** Probably phone calls the most.

**BW:** But probably not quite as much communication as there would be today, e-mailing or -

**LH:** Right.

**BW:** Save up...

**LH:** We were just starting to get e-mail in the office and we'd get phone messages, but I don't remember ever in those days e-mailing somebody beyond the office.

**BW:** So would you have a certain time in the week when you were likely to talk to your family, or did it just happen?

**LH:** For a while I was actually, I would get to the office really early and I would call my mother almost every morning.

**BW:** So then your next step was to move to the Majority Leader's Office, is that correct?

**LH:** Well, eventually.

**BW:** Eventually. Okay, well let's –

**LH:** Yes, after a few years, so then I went over, he became the majority leader and I remember there was a lot of anxiety in the office about what was going to happen to the staff, was this a positive for the staff or a negative? And because he now had so many more staff reporting to him, you know, with the Majority Leader's Office. I didn't know what was going to happen to me, but I was fortunate that I was able to move over and work in the leader's office, which is directly across from the Senate floor, and primarily work as Martha Pope's assistant, although it was the kind of situation where I would do whatever was necessary to keep that office running smoothly.

**BW:** So like what would be some of your tasks?

**LH:** Lots of times coordinating with the office over in Russell, making sure that staff people were, knew when meetings were going to take place over in the Capitol, and when votes were going to take place, working with the floor staff a little bit, trying to keep an eye on what was going on on the floor [at] all times, and coordinate activity, because there were always people from Maine in town, and whether the Senator was going to be able to meet with them, or at least have a photo taken and where that would take place.

**BW:** I think we may have jumped ahead here, because the last we were talking about in the Russell Building, you were the assistant to Gayle Cory.

**LH:** Right.

**BW:** Did you take on other roles then as time went on there? So let's pick up that thread.

**LH:** Yes, so I worked, I'd started out as Gayle's assistant, and then it was all during a short time frame, but then when Martha Pope became chief of staff, then I also took on the role of her assistant. But on the whole, working with Gayle and Martha, I was still in his personal office so a lot of my duties were pretty much the same. It was coordinating his schedule with the staff and trying to keep track of what was going on on the floor, when there would be votes, when he would be away from the office. He went to Maine almost every weekend so it was coordinating with the staff from Maine about the weekly schedule, like the outlook for when he might be able to leave, when votes, if there would be votes on Friday, if he could leave Thursday night, Friday morning, Friday at noon, Friday at two. Fortunately I got to know the airline congressional desk very well, because lots of time we were changing flights throughout the day on Fridays, until he could get away.

**BW:** Where did your tenure come in, in terms of Regina Sullivan, was she before or after you?

**LH:** She was there when I was an intern, and she left – I can't remember if it was in November or December – but that's when Gayle then moved into the role that she played and I became Gayle's assistant. So it was because Regina left.

**BW:** And that was '86, at the end of '86.

**LH:** At the end of '86, right.

**BW:** I talked to Regina just a few days ago.

**LH:** You did?

**BW:** We did this.

**LH:** And then Gayle, this is like baptism by fire, Gayle broke her arm over New Year's weekend, so my first day as Gayle's assistant, Gayle was home with a broken arm. And it was a pretty serious break. I can't remember the situation in the Senate, because in January, especially back then, they didn't do as much work, so the Senator wasn't in D.C. as much. But, so it was scary at first, but Gayle would advise me over the phone, and the Senator was very patient with me.

**BW:** Being on that side of the hall, you probably saw a lot more of the Senator than you did -

**LH:** I did, yes.

**BW:** And what was that like?

**LH:** He's very, very nice, very patient, very easy to work with, and it was neat because I got to see all of the things that he's involved in and all this. People that would come down and meet with him, and realize what a busy day he had.

**BW:** So any other shifts in your duties while you were still in the Russell Building?

**LH:** I don't –

**BW:** You don't think so.

**LH:** I don't think so.

**BW:** Okay, so then you made this move over to the Capitol.

**LH:** Then I moved over to the Capitol, and I was actually only there for six months, and then I left, that's when I decided to go back to Maine –

**BW:** Talk about -

**LH:** - to go to law school.

**BW:** Yes, talk about how you came to that decision.

**LH:** I'm not sure. I think it was a combination of things. My grandmother had had a rough year, she was sick and had a couple heart attacks, and I remember feeling like I wanted to be closer to family. And also at the same time, I started thinking that I might want to be more involved in issues and thought, "Well, if I go back to Maine and go to law school, it gives me some time to figure out the next steps in terms of what I want to do in my career, and I can be closer to my family." So for personal reasons, it turned out to be very nice. My family was in Waterville, the law school's in Portland, and so I was able to be close to my family but still be independent. And I actually thought I was going back to Maine for good, and then decided that I wanted to come back to D.C.

**BW:** Was George Mitchell at all instrumental in your getting into law school?

**LH:** I think so. He wrote a letter of recommendation and he has a lot of ties in Maine, and the law school in particular, so I assume the fact that I had worked for him, that being on my resume, in combination with his letter of recommendation, didn't hurt things. I did do well on the LSAT, though.

**BW:** And law school was a good experience for you?

**LH:** It was a great experience, it really was. And I met my future husband there, so maybe that has something to do with it. But I loved the law school experience, and just being a student again and being in Maine and I had new friends, too, because I had worked for Senator Mitchell and so the people in his Maine offices I got to know, and I worked on campaigns while I was in Maine. And so it's sort of like, coming down to D.C. and working for Senator Mitchell expanded my opportunities in Maine itself.

**BW:** And when you entered law school, did you have a sense of where that was going to take you?

**LH:** I did not, because as I said, I thought I was moving back to Maine for good and I guess I imagined myself practicing law in Maine somewhere. And that didn't happen.

**BW:** And it didn't happen because you didn't *want* it to happen.

**LH:** Right, right. Fortunately Senator Mitchell was still the majority leader when I came back in 1993, and there was an opening on the Democratic Policy Committee, which was part of his jurisdiction, and since I was a known entity, they took me back.

**BW:** Who did you talk to about coming back?

**LH:** I think everybody. I got back in touch with Martha – and she was then the sergeant-at-arms – and then I met with John Hilley, who was his chief of staff, and Diane Dewhirst, who was his communications director.

**BW:** And were you *really* aiming for going back into the majority leader's staff, or was the Policy Committee to your liking?

**LH:** The Policy Committee was a good fit for me, because I had the legislative experience but I hadn't really had a specialty in any issue, and so the Policy Committee, at the time Senator Daschle worked with Senator Mitchell to create these leadership committees, and Senator Mitchell, that was what he did. When Senator Byrd had been majority leader the Policy Committee was his staff and his alone, and with Senator Daschle, Senator Mitchell created a committee that served as a resource for other Democratic senators and turned it into what it has, it's expanded since then, but it's taken on a different role which started when Senator Mitchell was the majority leader.

**BW:** So that was, in terms of the Democratic structure and the caucus, that was a big shift, and probably a very beneficial one, would you say?

**LH:** It was, and what Senator Mitchell did is he brought more members into the leadership role. Because now they have even broken the Policy Committee up into three separate committees, which I can't remember all the names, but one focuses on communication, one focuses on the issue, they run the TV system, there's a Democratic TV station, and all that started under Senator Mitchell when he first became majority leader.

**BW:** So did you join one of the leadership committees?

**LH:** Well at the time it was just the Policy Committee, because this was when it was still, it hadn't turned into three committees yet. But yes, so I was on the Policy Committee focusing on issues, and I started doing judiciary issues, which was a good fit because I had just come out of law school. Then over time I worked on education, and then even health care, but that was after Senator Mitchell had moved on and I was working for Senator Daschle. And Senator Reid was actually then the chair of the Policy Committee.

**BW:** Before Senator Reid was minority leader.

**LH:** Right, right.

**BW:** Was that normal, that the Policy Committee was directly under the jurisdiction of the leader?

**LH:** Yes, it's just the different role that the committee took on, it became more of a resource for all the Democratic offices, like giving information about bills that were coming up and information on amendments. It was a way to help other Democratic staff and other Democratic senators prepare for legislation and big debates that were going to be taken up on the Senate floor.

**BW:** So any staff member, any senator could send a query to the Policy Committee and -?

**LH:** And we would respond, yes.

**BW:** What about the CRS, how did that play in?

**LH:** Well, the Congressional Research Service, so they mostly do research, and any senator or member of Congress can contact them and ask them for information on a certain topic, so they're less political and more research and background information. I mean they're a great resource, but it was different. Like I would go to CRS to get more information about a topic, because they're real experts.

**BW:** So that's what I was thinking, that they would be a resource for the Policy Committee.

**LH:** Oh yes, yes.

**BW:** So you say there are these three, it's now these three -

**LH:** It's now turned into three separate committees.

**BW:** And as you describe them, and I won't hold you to the exact titles and whatnot, but it sounds like part of the Policy Committee is sort of functional, like running the TV studio.

**LH:** Right, right.

**BW:** That's not policy, that's -

**LH:** Functional.

**BW:** - scheduling.

**LH:** Exactly.

**BW:** - and getting cameramen there on time.

**LH:** Right, right.

**BW:** - and so forth.

**LH:** Right.

**BW:** But the heart of the committee is really the policy -

**LH:** The heart of the committee is the Policy Committee, and what the TV channel does – and it may have changed because, like I said, I haven’t worked in the Senate now for years – but the TV would even run information about what was happening on the Senate floor. So say if you had to leave the Senate for a little bit, as a staffer, and you were trying to figure out what was going on on the floor, you tune in to the middle of the debate, and sometimes there are quorum calls. And C-Span has actually started giving out more information, if you follow the Senate floor, but at the time they didn’t. So sometimes you’d turn it on, you’d not know what was going on, you could turn to the Democratic Policy Committee channel and they’d be running screens like current debate, information about, if there’s an amendment being discussed, or a recent vote, what a recent vote was, so the screens would change so that any staffer could turn on the TV and figure out what’s going on on the Senate floor.

**BW:** So this was closed circuit system.

**LH:** Yes, closed circuit only – it’s an internal, yes.

**BW:** It had nothing to do with the Senator going to a studio to talk to a station back in Maine, or to cut a statement of some sort, was that different?

**LH:** That was different. There was a radio and TV gallery that had that set up. But I do think they’ve expanded a little bit more, and I know the plan was to create their own Democratic studio for only Democratic senators to be able to tape things in D.C. if they wanted, but the recording studio was there for all the senators, if they needed to do anything.

**BW:** When I go into an office and the TV is on, I usually assume that it *is* C-Span, but it might be -

**LH:** No, it’s C-Span, because that’s more interesting to anybody walking into the office. And I think most people, if you’re watching the debate on the floor, you’re going to watch the floor, but lots of people will flip over to the Democratic station or, and the Republicans have their own TV station, to see what’s going on. Sometimes staff will watch that, but on the whole, people have C-Span on.

**BW:** So were you developing policy statements and whatnot on some big-topic issues while Senator Mitchell was still in the Senate? I’m thinking particularly the health care.

**LH:** You know, I didn’t work on health care then. And, let’s see, I came back in ‘93, and he left -

**BW:** In '94.

**LH:** In '94, so I wasn't there for very long while he was the leader, and I was mostly doing at that time, there was a big health care staff because health care, they really thought they were going to get health care reform then, and I wasn't part of it at that point.

**BW:** But were you handling the background on any big bills during that last year of his time?

**LH:** I'm trying to think if, I think there was a crime bill, which was one of the first things I worked on so he must have been there. My memory sort of fades me as, what I was working on during which time frame.

**BW:** And who was chief of staff of the Policy Committee while you were there during the early stages, do you recall?

**LH:** There were two people. I reported to Greg Billings, and there was also Debra Silimeo, so it was a joint effort. She was more in charge of the communication side, and Greg Billings was in charge of more the substantive policy side.

**BW:** So when Senator Mitchell announced that he was retiring from the Senate, how did you take that, and how did you hear about it?

**LH:** Well he had a meeting, he called all the staff to a room in the Capitol, his personal staff and all the leadership staff, which included the floor staff and a number of offices. I remember being told that there was going to be this meeting and everyone was a little bit in shock, and all of a sudden the talk, there became this rumor that, 'oh, he was stepping down,' but people sort of dismissed it. And I remember walking into the room and a number of senior members of his staff were sitting very quietly, and it seemed like the rumors were true after all, that that was what was happening. It was a big shock at the time.

**BW:** How did the Senator conduct himself at that meeting?

**LH:** You know, like always. George Mitchell is very professional, he's very articulate. I remember he stood at the front of the room and told everyone that he decided that it was time that he move on, and I don't remember his exact words but he thanked everybody too, and he's always very gracious.

**BW:** So he didn't become overwhelmed by emotion.

**LH:** No, no, not that I remember.

**BW:** And do you recall what, after he finished making his statement, what happened?

**LH:** There was a lot of silence in the room. And then people were just, I think everybody

pretty much was in shock and in disbelief.

**BW:** Did he leave the room right after?

**LH:** He left the room. As I recall, he did.

**BW:** And you were all there.

**LH:** And we were all there and just, “Wow, what does this mean?” you know.

**BW:** And in terms of your case, what did it mean?

**LH:** Well actually, being on the committee staff, it was not a problem. Senator Mitchell still had - We were his staff, but he had made Senator Daschle the co-chair of the Policy Committee and so in some ways Senator Daschle was more involved with the Policy Committee, we met with him, every once in a while he had staff meetings with us. And Greg Billings worked for Daschle before being the head of the Policy Committee. So I felt like, “Well I can keep my job,” pretty much, and that’s how it worked out. Senator Daschle became the next leader – I think he might have been, it might have been a race with he and Senator Dodd, if I remember correctly. And so we were all a little nervous that if it wasn’t Senator Daschle, what would happen to us. But he became the next leader and told us we could all stay, and he appointed - That’s when Senator Reid became the co-chair of the Policy Committee.

**BW:** What about some of Mitchell’s personal staff and whatnot, you probably maintained contact with them, and how did they sort out?

**LH:** Well, different people responded different ways. I think there were some people who decided it was time to leave the Senate, so it was a good time for them anyway to move on and out of the Senate. But a few members of the staff stayed on working for Senator Daschle. I think he wanted some of that senior experience that his personal staff didn’t necessarily have, so there were some people that stayed on and that worked out well.

**BW:** Did you notice a big difference between the leadership qualities of Senator Mitchell versus Senator Daschle versus Senator Reid?

**LH:** They’re all different in their own way. Senator Daschle, his priority was, and this is what he was able to get Senator Mitchell to do by making him co-chair of the Policy Committee, and Senator Daschle I think took that a step further, which is when they became three committees, and really trying to have the resources for the other offices. But also what happened is that the Republicans took back over the majority, so Senator Daschle then became the Democratic leader, or minority leader. So he was in a different role than Senator Mitchell, where Senator Mitchell was, as the majority leader you set the agenda, and as the minority leader you try to influence that agenda, so there was just a difference anyway in what they were doing.

**BW:** But you say the personalities of senators make a difference, so what was it like to work for George Mitchell, what was it like to work for Tom Daschle, what was it like to work for Harry Reid?

**LH:** Well, I'm very loyal to Senator Mitchell, and my experience goes back much further and I feel like I knew him better. Senator Mitchell could have run his own office in some ways, and he would even say he had worked for Senator Muskie; he was a former Senate staffer. He knew the ins and outs of everything and was a brilliant man. And so I think you couldn't fool Senator Mitchell. I think one of my favorite moments was during the health care debate when Senator Phil Gramm was on the floor of the Senate and he had all the stacks of paper, saying, "This is the legislation, the health care reform, look at all the paper and what it means." And he had desks with reams of paper, saying, "It's just going to, look what it's going to create, we don't even know what's in here." And Senator Mitchell coming out and asking for some floor time and saying, "Here is the Republican plan," and he's like, "oh, you can't see it?" And then he's like, "It's a stealth plan."

It was just an example of how he was so quick on his feet. And, because I'm sure he was in his office, somebody told him what was going on, he turned on the TV, saw it and, you know. (*Snap*). At the time I was in the Policy Committee so I wasn't in the office to see him run out to the Senate floor to react, but that was George Mitchell, he was quick on his feet and he could do anything. And the other two leaders, I never had personal experience, so I would see them sometimes on the floor, but couldn't even imagine what transpired to get them to the floor, where Senator Mitchell I could.

**BW:** Where were you located on the Policy Committee?

**LH:** In the Hart Building.

**BW:** So when you say you see him rush off to the floor -

**LH:** Well, I could envision it.

**BW:** Oh.

**LH:** Having been in the Majority Leader's Office when he first became majority leader and having worked for him and knowing how he'd react to something and go. I feel like I had some insight into Senator Mitchell that I didn't have with the other two.

**BW:** So you stayed at the Policy Committee until '97, I guess, is that right?

**LH:** Right, '93 to '97.

**BW:** Hmm-hmm. And then you decided -?

**LH:** To go work, an opportunity in the legislative office at the Department of Health and Human Services.

**BW:** What lured you over there?

**LH:** I thought maybe it was time for a change again. It was a political job, and so I thought it might be fun to be a part of the administration in that capacity, as a political, and -

**BW:** Who was secretary?

**LH:** Donna Shalala, was Secretary Shalala, and the assistant secretary for legislation was Rich Tarplin, and the deputy assistant secretary, that I worked for, I worked on the human services side, not the health side, was Mary Burdette, so I worked for her and worked on child care, child support issues.

**BW:** Compare and contrast life on the Hill and life off the Hill.

**LH:** It's different. You have a lot of access on the Hill, and I think sometimes you take it for granted. You can talk to, especially being in the leadership offices, when any bill that I was following was on the floor, I was on the Senate floor. And even when I worked for Senator Mitchell in a low-level capacity in the leadership staff, any time I wanted access to the floor I could get it. I was there if there was a big vote, or I went to a joint session of Congress when some heads of state were speaking. And you had access to things, and you could talk to senators. And then you're really removed from everything that's happening over there.

**BW:** So did you sort of go through a period of adjustment?

**LH:** I think so.

**BW:** And disappointment maybe?

**LH:** A little bit, a little bit, although it was fun. Secretary Shalala was fun to work for, and it was different. There's no break when you're not on the Hill. On the Hill you have those recesses, especially August, but in the executive branch, in August you're getting ready for the budget cycle of the following year, and the agencies have to submit budgets, and then pass-backs from OMB [Office of Management and Budget] and it's like, "No, the Senate's in recess, I'm not supposed to be working as hard."

**BW:** Right. And then in '01 you decided to come out here, is that right?

**LH:** Well, because I was political I didn't have a job any more at HHS, and there was somebody that I worked with in the legislative office that was coming out here to NIH and she wanted to work part-time, and so I was fortunate. I had just had my first child, and it was a part-time position sharing the job with her. And since then she's left and I've expanded my hours

here. But it was, for family reasons, a way to stay involved in health care issues, but yet have more time to be with my family.

**BW:** So what is your role here, what do you do?

**LH:** Similar to my role at HHS, where we monitor legislation and keep the community here at NIH informed about what is happening on the Hill, go to hearings when we have expert witnesses at a number of hearings on the Hill, and we help prepare the testimony and get them ready to go to the hearings, and we work with the committee staff. And then any enquiry that any senator's office might have on an NIH issue, or how things work here at NIH, we take those enquiries and make sure they get responded to.

**BW:** You are prevented from trying to influence legislation, is that correct? I mean you can't, you're not a lobby.

**LH:** We don't lobby, right, right, it's all -

**BW:** I think that needs to be stated.

**LH:** - informative, right.

**BW:** Since that fateful day in that big room in the Capitol, have you had many contacts with Senator Mitchell since, or not?

**LH:** You know, I have not. I remember there was a luncheon that we had for Donna Beck when she was leaving the Senate and a group of us had lunch over at the Monocle and someone said, "Oh, did you think of inviting Senator Mitchell?" And I thought, "I know he's so busy, and he's not even in D.C. all the time," but I called and told his secretary. And she called back, she goes, "Oh, he's very interested in attending, he's going to come." So I was really shocked and we were all contributing so that Donna didn't have to pay, and he's starting to leave and I remember thinking, somebody looked at me and said, "You know, we need to get some money from him." So I walked up to him and I'm like, "Excuse me Senator," I said, "but we're all sort of chipping in." And he goes, "Lauren, I just paid the whole bill." So I was a little embarrassed, but it's just a fun story of his generosity.

**BW:** Absolutely, yes. What about some other stories that you recall about Senator Mitchell, anything else?

**LH:** Well, most of the stories I have are like some things that I think I'll always remember. I remember the Iran-Contra hearings and when how the phone, for days, just lit up after it was his turn to question, and instead of, he realized, strategically, that none of the senators were getting anywhere by trying to question Oliver North, and so he decided to turn the tables – again, an example of how strategically his mind works. And he decided to make his own statement, and the phone for days – there, where we sat across the hall, we sort of were backup to the

receptionist. There were two reception desks, but there was only necessarily one person there at the time; sometimes they had an intern backing up the receptionist. And so when the phones got busy out front we'd try to help out, or if the receptionist had to leave we could answer the phones out back, or across the hall.

And I remember for days the phones were just constantly lit up, as one line went down it would come back up, and so we were constantly answering the phones out back. And the positive reaction from people, it was just overwhelming to hear all these people calling from all over the country, not just the state of Maine, and what that statement meant to them and how proud they were. And it was really, it was one of those memories that it was like, "Wow, I'm glad in some way to be a part of this history."

And then I also remember too – it's, this is all kind of disjointed, but, and this just shows how loyal his staff was. The summer that I was there, C-Span was experimenting with putting the Senate on TV, the Senate had just come up on TV. And so most of the staff was used to listening to the Senate floor on the radio, and the office manager was purchasing mini TVs for different offices to share. And so Senator Mitchell was going to be on the floor, and I don't even know what bill it was but he was going to be participating with Senator Simon of Illinois in a colloquy. And so the whole staff gathered in *his* office, because he had a bigger TV than anybody else, and we all sat around to watch his first Senate floor colloquy on TV. So it was kind of fun to be a part of [that].

And I remember – and I don't know which State of the Union address this was, but it must have been fairly early on in my career, he gave the Democratic response to the State of the Union. A number of staffers, we stayed there and watched it on TV in his office, and the phones were ringing off the hook as people from across the country reacted. I would have never, you know, I remember being so surprised like, "Why would people think to call a senator's office at nine o'clock at night after he gave a speech?" But they did. And it was just fun to be a part of and see how, his appeal to the American people.

**BW:** Did you field any negative phone calls following his interaction with North?

**LH:** I'm sure I did. I don't remember those.

**BW:** Because I can imagine there would have been some people -

**LH:** Yes, I'm sure there were, and I think we politely said, "Thank you for calling." That's all you could do, was listen and not get them any more angry, but overwhelmingly it was positive.

**BW:** Did you ever have to fess up to the Senator about some -

**LH:** Mistake?

**BW:** Got him on the wrong plane or something?

**LH:** I think so; I don't remember those very well. Like I said, he was very patient with me. I remember I was so overwhelmed in the beginning with Gayle being out, and he was getting all these invitations and I was just learning and I didn't know what to - Senators get invitations to all these receptions, and so I didn't know what he wanted to go to, what he didn't. So one day I just went in and I said, "I've got all these invitations, and I just don't know what to do with them." And I had them separated out by month, and he's like, "Why don't you give me a few of those folders?" And he took them, and he came back and there were one or two that, he's like, "I'll go to these, and find out if anybody from Maine is going to be at this one, and see if they'll come into the office instead of having me go to the reception." So he sort of was helping me to learn the job, "See if you can do this."

I don't know if I got him on the wrong plane, but I know there were a couple mishaps with planes, like either he was on his way to the airport and something happened with a plane, so I had to be the one to tell him. And then, he liked to go on certain size planes. I can't really remember, but I did put him on the wrong size plane once and he wasn't very happy about it, and he just asked me not to do that again; he told me what to look for. He was a former staffer, he knew every detail, so in that way he's a difficult member to work for because he knew everything already and down to the minute detail what should be done. But because he was also very patient and -

**BW:** Do you have any recollections of his lighter side?

**LH:** Well I just remember an important part of his day was the sports section and checking on the Red Sox, getting the box scores.

**BW:** Did he have athletes come into the office very often, or not?

**LH:** Not that I remember, not any athletes.

**BW:** Okay.

**LH:** But he did one day - I remember a child from Make-a-Wish Foundation wanted to have lunch with him, and he had lunch in the Capitol. And I remember his schedule being so busy, and I remember saying, "They're waiting for you in the Capitol restaurant," because a member of the staff was going to bring him by, and I'm like, "I don't know how much time you're going to be able to spend there." And he looks at me and he goes, "This is this boy's wish, to have lunch with me?" And I said, "Yes." He goes, "Well, we'll have to make time then." So he was very good about those things.

**BW:** Did you feel that he was very even-handed in terms of his dealings with men versus women on his staff?

**LH:** Oh yes, at one time he had all these women running his office, Martha Pope became his chief of staff, Diane Dewhurst became his communications director; he had no problems promoting women.

**BW:** And he treated evenly.

**LH:** As far as what I saw he did.

**BW:** Talk a little bit about Donna Beck, what were her duties as office manager and what was she like?

**LH:** Donna - To this day I tell people I do not throw out a paper clip because of Donna Beck. She was the office manager, and she ran a very tight budget, so there [was] nothing to be thrown out unnecessarily. But yet, she had this tough side to her, she ran a tight ship, but she was very warm hearted, very friendly. I think even the Senator might have been a little scared of her, because he did what she said, in terms of the office. But again, like I said, she was a wonderful, wonderful person, and as I got to know [her] - I was scared of her when I was first an intern and she told us what the office policies were and what we were supposed to do. And so I tried to avoid her so that, in case I was doing anything wrong, but became a very good friend of hers, and I laugh now at thinking back about how I avoided her in the beginning because I was scared of her.

**BW:** What were her interactions with Gayle Cory like, and with the Senator?

**LH:** Well, she and Gayle were good friends and got along well. And even with the Senator, she would go in and joke with him. She was a, she was just a regular person and she had no, nothing held her back, not even the Senator. If somebody had to tell the Senator something, she was happy to do it.

**BW:** Was she also from Maine?

**LH:** No, but she worked for Senator Muskie, and she started working in the Senate I think at age eighteen, and worked her way up to being an office manager and worked for Senator Muskie and so was somebody that had stayed on.

**BW:** Any other recollections that you'd like to share?

**LH:** I can't think of anything.

**BW:** How do you think Senator Mitchell ought to be remembered?

**LH:** Wow. First and foremost, he always did as much for the state of Maine as he could, and that was his priority, and the people of Maine, from Maine. And he was never too busy to say hello to a constituent, even when he was majority leader and even if it was really quick, he felt

that that was very important, that they were in Washington, D.C., and they deserved at least a few moments of his time. And very generous and giving and he knew he was there as a representative of the people from Maine, and even as majority leader he never forgot it.

**BW:** Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm. Anything else?

**LH:** I don't think so. I think he's one of the brightest senators maybe there ever has been.

**BW:** Did you see a big change when he became majority leader, taking on that responsibility was -?

**LH:** Everything was so natural to him, he took everything in stride, and I think he naturally was a leader and so it all came together. Because I remember Senator Byrd had been the leader forever, and trying to think of somebody replacing him, I remember thinking, "Wow, Senator Mitchell's going to be like that on the Senate floor all the time and making these decisions." And he did, he just, without any problem.

**BW:** Did he rely on certain other senators? I suppose Daschle would be one.

**LH:** Daschle was one, I think he had a good relationship with Senator Kennedy, and he's very deferential. And the senators that were the chairs of their committee, Senator Bentsen, I remember him at the time, and Senator Sarbanes, Senator Paul Simon, as well as Senator Byrd, and he was very deferential.

**BW:** You mentioned the colloquy. What is that?

**LH:** That's when two senators are on the Senate floor having a discussion as opposed to a debate. They go back and forth, because they're both on the same side of an issue, so it kind of helps to reinforce some of the points they want to make, as opposed to just going down to the floor by yourself and making a floor statement, there's a little back and forth then.

**BW:** Is that commonly done?

**LH:** Yes – lots of times it's just done on paper and they submit it for the record as if it occurred during the debate.

**BW:** Well, I think we've come to the end of this interview.

**LH:** Great.

**BW:** Good, thank you very much.

**LH:** Thank you.

End of Interview