

George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Barbara Trafton

(Interviewer: Andrea L'Hommedieu)

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Andrea L'Hommedieu: This is an interview for the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project, the date is May 7, 2008, and we are at Keller Williams on Center Street in Auburn, Maine, and this is Andrea L'Hommedieu, I am interviewing Barbara Trafton. Barbara, I just want to make a note before we begin that we got a lot of background information on you in the Muskie Oral History, so we won't repeat that today but we'll focus on your connections with Senator Mitchell over the years. And I guess I'd like to begin just to talk about when you first remember having interactions, or meeting Senator Mitchell.

Barbara Trafton: I think the first time was in 1974, because I think that was the year he ran for governor, and I was just a young kid out of college. And my first political activity in the area had been to go door-to-door for George McGovern in 1972, but as a result of that I was sort of on the radar for any political events, so naturally as the gubernatorial election emerged, I was invited to various primary activities to meet the candidates. And interestingly, the one I really remember meeting is Joe Brennan, at Bob and Tookey Clifford's house, and they were promoting Joe Brennan, and so I remember attending that.

And George Mitchell was kind of a sleeper almost, an unknown to some degree at that point. But he, you know, emerged as the candidate and so then naturally I was involved at a very local level, you know, handing out flyers and doing that kind of thing for him in the general election and, only to be devastated that year by having an Independent sneak in. And of course in our area, the Independent was from here, you know, Jim Longley.

And ironically then, two years later, I entered the state House of Representatives and had to work with him, and I remember thinking, oh my, what a difference it would have made to have George Mitchell as governor. Because there were big issues facing our state, and we were at a point of trying to really look ahead. And some of the issues, for example, that I worked on, you know, Governor Longley was not supportive of.

For example, stopping domestic violence, and back in the mid-'70s that hadn't even been identified as really a problem. There were no shelters except for one that had started in Bangor, Spruce Run, and so I sponsored a bill and we got it through the house and senate, only to be vetoed by Governor Longley.

And so I remember thinking fondly of George, and thinking to myself, you know, this would not have, this bill would have seen the light of day if George Mitchell had been governor. So, you

know, who gets elected makes a huge difference, and sometimes, you know, I mean I did work for him – I guess I should have worked harder – but it was an unusual year because I think George Mitchell really thought he would win, everyone thought he would win, and it was that unusual combination of, you know, a fairly weak Republican, a strong Democrat, and I don't know, it just left enough room for an Independent to kind of sneak in the middle there, so devastating.

So that was my first introduction. And then, you know, we didn't really hear that much about George. Because a lot of George's activities in politics had really preceded me, he was Democratic National Committeeman, and he was party chair at one point, but that was when I was too young to even vote. So then the next time I think that we really got to know each other was after he – he was appointed in 1980 to follow Ed Muskie, and of course you know how fond I was of Ed Muskie so I figured anyone that follows Ed Muskie would be terrific.

Oh, you know, I should digress and just tell you this, just an impression I had of George, which turned out to be very wrong, but - . When I first met him in 1974, when he was running, there used to be a weather forecaster on the top of Mt. Washington named Marty Engstrom, and at the end of all his forecasts he would smile this little tight smile and he'd say, "That's all from the mountain," and he'd do this. And for some reason, when I first met George and got to know him, I always thought he was like Marty Engstrom, he had sort of that little, funny, cute smile. But, you know, obviously I grew to know him in a very different way.

So then when he was appointed in 1980, I ran and was Democratic National Committeewoman for the state of Maine. And in our state, just one man and one woman are elected, so they're huge elections, they're statewide elections, and George had been the Democratic National Committeeman. And so then I was sort of the go-to person to host a lot of things for candidates and be involved with things. It's not comparable, but it's like if you're senate majority leader you're expected to support all the candidates and show up at events and things like that. It's similar in that as Democratic National Committeewoman, everyone wants you to attend and support their events and things like that. So I was pretty active in doing that.

And then George had to run in his own right in 1982, and at that point David Emery looked like he had kind of a lock on running, he was way ahead in the polls. And I don't think George had really emerged as the dynamite stump speaker that we all know him today, you know, he still had more the Marty Engstrom, shy, quiet little presence, I think. And frankly, I think a lot of us kind of wondered, you know, if someone of his obvious caliber could win, given a seasoned campaigner like Dave Emery, who had been a popular vote getter in District 1.

But, you know, once again we were all tremendously enthusiastic because he was, he's so bright, and he's so thoughtful, and he had already in our view distinguished himself in the two years that he had filled out for Ed Muskie. But we were just still getting to know him I think at that point.

So, but then I, I always think of this, he, in forming his 1982 campaign, he obviously was beginning to show how masterful he was as a politician. Because traditionally up until that

point, you know, you'd pick one person, maybe two people to chair your campaign and, you know, you'd have a treasurer or something. But George, I remember George calling me and asking me to be a co-chair of his campaign. And I thought, wow, this is an honor. And, what does this mean? But what I, as I talked to him about how he was structuring the campaign, I really had a good feeling because, you know, George does things in a way that I think lead to success.

You know, he was putting his campaign together in the most thoughtful of ways, sort of like Noah's Ark. So there were four campaign co-chairs, which I think is the first time that any statewide candidate had been thoughtful enough to look at not only geographic diversity, but also sort of demographic diversity and gender diversity. And so we had this little balanced team, and so I was the young woman from Androscoggin County, so I got to get on the Ark. But anyhow, I think that was characteristic early on, of the way that George thoughtfully put together structures that led to success.

And I don't know if he had thought a lot about that. I'm sure that he reflected greatly on his loss as governor, and what he might have done differently and so forth, and so I think he was really poised in a way that, you know, we were, I was unprepared for. Because as I said, he broke the mold, it wasn't the traditional approach to kind of reach out and diversify in 1984 and have four of us on board.

AL: Do you recall who the other three were?

BT: You know, that's an awful thing to say.

AL: Well, it's reaching back a lot of years.

BT: I don't recall who the other three were because – and I would know them if, you know, if I could remember, but you probably could look it up. But I was pretty much responsible for the greater Androscoggin County area, and of course I had a lot of contacts in Oxford County and Franklin County, and so it was wider than that. And I had a lot of contacts statewide because obviously I was still the sitting National Committeewoman.

So at any rate, I remember doing a lot of events with him, for him. I remember sitting in a living room and listening to him speak, and thinking, this is someone who should be in higher office, this is someone with a real intellect and a real thoughtful approach to the issues. And it reminded me very much of Ed Muskie, and I know that George had served in some capacity, advisory capacity, staff capacity to Ed Muskie. And Ed Muskie always brought to the plate, you know, a different way of looking at things and helped, he didn't just retread all the same things; he helped you put more context around an issue and be more thoughtful about an issue.

I remember saying to Ed Muskie once, "I'm so tired of everyone always saying that the Democratic Party is the party of big spenders." And he sort of looked at me with his little wry grin and he said, he said, "Barbara, both parties are big spenders. What it is, is what they spend

on, it's the priorities. So don't be embarrassed that your party spends money, they don't spend any more than the Republicans spend. Be proud of what they spend it on." So, it just kind of, you know, turned it around for me and I felt good.

George was like that too, he, I remember his speaking on national security things, and he just had a way of really penetrating the issues and making us all in awe of his presence. So, but you know, you're still a little nervous because being terrific and being a great intellect and so forth doesn't mean you're charismatic on the campaign trail. It's not a given that the best person wins, it's usually the best campaigner.

AL: Did you see his style change?

BT: You know, I obviously saw quite a bit of him during that campaign, and yeah, I began to see him really getting more of the stump speech, getting more of the facility of, you know, making things understandable to people, a lot of connection. What I remember about George Mitchell, too, is that he always knew your name. And I think he told me this, I think I complimented him once on just remembering so many people's names, because we'd go into a room and he just seemed to know everyone, you know. And he just told me that he really worked at that, that if he met Andrea L'Hommedieu he didn't just let it buzz over his head, he tried to look at you and associate something with you, and maybe say your name in the course of a conversation, like, 'nice to meet you Andrea L'Hommedieu'.

But, so I think he was sort of early on kind of, again, understanding the mechanics of trying to make a connection and be able to carry that connection throughout the campaign. Because it means a lot if the next time you meet someone they say, 'Hi, Andrea.' You feel good about that, you feel that you are important, and George was great at that, he remembered names. But I remember him saying he meant to remember names, and he worked at it. It's not like it's just an easy thing, so George was very purposeful I think in trying to be a good campaigner and develop his campaign skills and make connections with people. So I did see a style of change, and I did see him really develop. And of course, he won. And so he had his first term, six years, in his own right and, well he just took off from there.

AL: Do you recall the point during that campaign when it looked like it was turning in the Senator's favor? Because Dave Emery was so far ahead.

BT: Yeah, yeah. I mean, at one point I remember he had like thirty points on George or something, or thirty-nine points, I mean I'm remembering back.

AL: It was thirty-something, yeah.

BT: Oh, yeah, it was overwhelming and, you know, I don't really remember because I don't think the polls back then were quite as daily as they are now. I just remember seeing him, because I was so present in a lot of events. And I would go to events outside of my immediate area too, because I was National Committeewoman so I was traveling around. And I just

remember seeing how he was connecting with people, and seeing how people were responding to him, and just in my own heart feeling, this is not something Dave Emery's going to be able to compete with.

Big difference between being seen as okay for a congressional seat, and being seen for a Senate seat that's six years, and one of only fifty. [There is a] big difference, how people want to see their U.S. senators. And I had gone down to lobby Dave Emery when he was in the House of Representatives, as a free lobbyist for the Library Association and, because I had worked on some bills during my first term in the house, for the library. They asked if I would go to Washington and sort of deliver the message about the need for library support in the, to the congressional representatives. So I visited Dave Emery, I visited Bill Cohen, I visited – Peter Kyros was there then – and then it was Ed Muskie, yeah, Ed Muskie was still there.

So, you know, I remember going in to Dave Emery's office, and it was very ill equipped, and I remember seeing a stack of about six books holding up one side of his desk. And I thought, oh, so that's, here I am for the Maine Library Association and you're holding up your desk with books, great. So there was a real difference in demeanor, in intellect, in the, really the characteristics that make you feel someone is distinguished and a leader. And Dave Emery was a little folksy, and when George started to turn on the star power and reveal his ability to handle the issues and deal with the issues and connect with people on this very personal level.

And then he had all of us out working for him, too. And, you know, I was the top vote getter in Auburn so I was still well known, and he was bringing people like me on all over the state. I mean you just felt it was the big 'mo,' you know, the big momentum growing and, both from his star power and also from the organization that he carefully put together from day one when he decided he'd have four chairs, so.

I was just going to go back to 1980 and tell you one little story – and this may be my unique perception, but – it was in 1980 that I was elected to be National Committeewoman. And it was in the spring, our convention was in May, in Bangor, and so George Mitchell had just been appointed to the U.S. Senate, and Joe Brennan was the sitting governor at that point, and so I had my second son like two days before the state convention. And I had to deliver an address to these five thousand delegates because, then they were going to vote, this was my chance to be elected National Committeewoman and so it never crossed my mind that I didn't have to be there, but you know, I'd had this little baby.

And so I arrived at the convention – no one thought I would actually show up – and I arrived at the convention. I remember sitting between George Mitchell and Joe Brennan, and I just had the feeling, you know, Dick, my husband was in the audience holding little Sam, and I was just going to stand at the podium a very short time, you know, to make my speech, and then I was going to leave immediately and they had it all arranged so I could go off and be with my little baby.

But I remember sitting between George and Joe and, and having, you know, I think they were

kind of like, 'oh my,' you know. Because -

AL: Be careful with her.

BT: Yeah, yeah, what's going on here? That was my perception. It may not be fair, but I think that, you know, that was back early enough in politics that there weren't a lot of women in politics, period – and I was in the state Senate at that point – and you know, and then the thought that, you know, you'd be there with a little two-day old baby, it was like overwhelming. So I was always kind of amused, you know, sitting there between them and wondering, you know.

AL: Oh, that's a neat story.

BT: So then I was going to take you fast forward, so now George wins his election and so, then of course once you win an election everyone wants you to help them win their elections in subsequent years, and that's kind of expected, that you'll appear and do things.

And so the next story I have, and again it involves Sam, the little baby in 1980. But this is in 1984 when Chip Bull was running for the 2nd District congressional seat against Olympia Snowe. Now, no one in their right mind thought Chip Bull had a chance. He was from the county someplace, we didn't know him, he was kind of a, I think he was a, kind of a farmer. I think he had done something maybe with U.S.D.A. or something, but you know, he had some credentials, but anyhow, it was really clear that it was going to be an uphill battle, let's just say it that way. And yet I was still Democratic National Committeewoman, George was the sitting U.S. senator; we tried to pull out all the stops. Obviously Lewiston-Auburn would be key if Chip Bull could win it, and it was Olympia's home territory.

So I had an event, George and I had an event, and it was at my house on Dillingham Hill and so George came to build momentum. Because at that point people had really developed a rapport with him, and so he was a great crowd getter, you know, just having George there, people wanted to go. And then he invited Ted Kennedy, so Ted Kennedy came. So we had George Mitchell, we had Ted Kennedy, and we had Chip Bull, and I was the hostess, Dick and I were the hosts, and I had, you know, my son Ben who was seven, and then I had little Sam who was four years old.

And I remember this because you get everyone in, and I had this big room, we filled it and packed it, and I thought, great. And George is going to make a stump speech, and then Senator Kennedy was going to speak, and then of course Chip Bull would speak and hopefully be pushed ahead with a surge based on the popularity of the previous two speakers.

And so all the press was there, we had like AP, we had UPI, all the, all the television cameras, it was huge because, you know, George was there and Ted was there, it wasn't because Chip Bull was there. So, the room was filled, the media were there in force, and so we started with the program. And I had little Sam, who was a little towhead, he was in little green OshKosh B'Gosh coveralls and a little shirt, and I guess I had given him a lollipop, he had this little lollipop he was

licking.

And so he was kind of wandering around, and I remember Ted Kennedy was sitting down on a bench that I had in there, and George got up and started to speak. And so the media turned to George, and so I thought okay, well 'good,' you know. I guess I'd introduced George, that's the way it went, and when we were on the media was focused. Well then little Sam, with his little lollipop, just sort of wandering through the crowd, right up to Senator Kennedy, and just crawled up in his lap, and sat on his knee licking his lollipop.

Well that was the end of the whole thing. The media took no pictures of anything except little Sam on Senator Kennedy's lap. That's what went out over the wires. I got those pictures sent to me from all over the country; apparently that was quite the photo moment. And I always felt bad. I don't think it ruined Chip Bull's chances, I don't think he was going anywhere but, I just thought, poor George, you know, that kind of, this little four-year-old kind of undid him and that was it, that was the media coverage of the day. So it was interesting.

So, you know, George and I continued to cross paths. I went down to Washington D.C., I remember taking my mother on a visit there and we were in George's office and I have a wonderful picture of George and my mother and me. And he just, he and I continued to be in the same circles, supporting candidates. And of course he ran again. At that point he was just a shoo-in so he didn't need to be quite so strategic, but naturally we all supported him.

And then he started his, after he got out, he started his Mitchell Institute, and invited me to be on the board of that, so I was on the first board of that.

AL: Were you there in the first formative years?

BT: Yeah, yup.

AL: Talk to me a little bit about that, and if you can remember some of the details. Do you remember who you sat down with and how you figured out, what was this going to be? I know it's grown a lot, but.

BT: Well I can't say that I was pre-, I was part of the first board so a lot of thought had already gone into what we were going to look like then. But it's changed tremendously since then, and of course part of its success was George's ability to raise money, you know, and have the monies available for scholarships for kids in all the high schools in Maine. And during those early years it wasn't clear how we would get all this money.

George had some money left over from his campaign, and I think that went into it. But then he was a fantastic fund raiser, you know, fantastic. And so it just grew and grew. I was there, I was trying to think of some of the people who were there with me, but I think Bill Hiss was there with me, and Pat Eltman was there on the board with me, just a lot of, I think early on it was a lot of the people George had known through politics. And I think now he's expanded it to have

more educational people I think, now that he's gotten it going and it's such a vibrant part of every school system, to get a Mitchell Scholar.

And that whole thing's developed, too, that it means a lot more to be a Mitchell Scholar than just to get the scholarship, there are events and other things that go along with it and it's distinguished in other ways, in internships and things like that. But I remember reading the applications and we were pretty hands on early on, really helping to make the decisions and things.

AL: Yeah, because in the early years it wasn't every high school.

BT: No, no, I mean it's emerged clearly over the years.

AL: Now it is every [high school].

BT: Now, I was trying to think, you probably know better than I what year it actually started. I think it was after he got out, so that would have been -

AL: Well, '94 is when he started to envision it, and then it actually became more structured in, I think, '98. But those early years, scholarships were being given.

BT: I'd have to go back. I was in the early years, and I'd have to look and see exactly when my tenure was.

AL: Oh yes, we can figure that out. What do you see that that institute is going to do for Maine students over time?

BT: Well, you know, of course first of all it's a source of money in a very expensive environment. And there's clearly, you know, it raises aspirations because, you know, people are aware of it, kids are aware of it, and they think about being a Mitchell Scholar, I mean it has a cache beyond just getting the \$5000, I mean it's a recognition of excellence. And I think George having done that has inspired other people to do scholarships, so I think of, like our local chamber, you know, started a golf tournament and is trying to help with scholarships.

But I think George is one of the early people that really, sort of an outside group really, trying to do scholarships. I mean there were always little scholarships, a couple hundred dollars here and there from various things, but he raised the stakes, you know, that's a big scholarship, and a meaningful one. So I think it had kind of raised the bar for other groups to try and do more.

The other thing the Mitchell Institute has done, is done a lot of research, you know, and tried to look at aspirations, and look at who the gatekeepers are in terms of getting kids to want to go on to college. Because, as you know, in Maine, we have a very high rate of graduation from high school, but we don't do so well with college, not so well at all. And so they have engaged in research, and then over the years – I'm not on it any more, in fact I wrote George a nice letter

just before I started the library campaign in 2000, and I just, I wrote to him and said, “The Mitchell Institute is doing so well, and anyone would want to be on your board, it’s a very distinguished opportunity. You won’t have trouble recruiting anyone that you want on your board, between your firepower and the board’s firepower, and the mission and what you’re doing,” I said, “but I’ve, my little hometown library, no one seems to raise the monies for them that will give them a new life for the next hundred years. And so I’ve decided to resign from the Mitchell Institute and spend my full time efforts making sure that Auburn has a really wonderful library for the next century.” And he of course understood, and he understood that, I mean no one else was competing for the volunteer job of raising seven-and-a-half-million for the Auburn Public Library, there was no competition. But, you know, to be on his board is very, it’s a great honor to be asked to be on his board. So that’s when I resigned, because I just felt I had to put my full time effort into this local effort.

AL: And you did, because look at the Auburn Public Library today, terrific.

BT: Yeah, so we were successful. But I try to do that, I either, you know, try to be totally involved or I need to move on.

AL: And as a side note, I just have to add that I was on the long range planning committee for the APL, and really very much enjoyed that process. It was my first experience with that, and the vision was awesome, I think, it was well thought out and planned.

BT: Yeah, and I think we see now, with your work and our work on the campaign and the new library, our numbers have tripled in most areas, whether it’s circulation, attendance at programs, use of our Internet or computers, renting of our public spaces, our community meeting rooms, they’re available to the public. So it meant a lot, you know, to our community. And you could put a lot of your time into something, whether it was long range planning or fund-raising, and if the people didn’t come – you know, they say build it and people would come – you would say, what a waste of my time, but it, you know, that’s the mark of success truly, is after your work is done, whether it’s long range planning or campaigning, that it’s filled a need and that people have responded.

And just to bring that back to George, you know, the Mitchell Institute has grown and prospered because it clearly, early on, identified a great need. I mean, you know, when you look back in ‘94, not a lot of people were talking about aspirations or things like that. We’d just really kind of gotten our arms around getting high school graduates graduated, and so it really was very forward thinking, I think, to then begin trying to raise aspirations for college degrees.

AL: Well, I think it’s an interesting structure that he developed, where it was one student from every high school, which meant that it would reach the most rural kids who maybe didn’t have the same resources as somebody in Cape Elizabeth or Portland high schools. And so that there was an opportunity for at least one, one student from every high school.

BT: And George, you know, grew up in Waterville and had a very rural, low key experience

up there. Subsequent to this actually, his sister Barbara, who's an Atkins, I interviewed her, because I was helping with the Waterville library, and the Waterville library is the same architectural design as the Auburn library. I mean, when you walk into it you say, wow, I'm in the Auburn library. So I'm not quite sure what happened, but I imagine there was some sharing of the architectural renderings. And so I interviewed Barbara who was involved with the library up there.

So, you know, he had a big family and they clearly valued education and made it possible for him to go on to Bowdoin and he's gotten an advanced degree at Bates, I mean an honorary degree at Bates and stuff, I mean, he's just really distinguished himself. But you don't forget how hard it is for a lot of kids to make that journey, and George never forgot how hard it was.

And in Waterville he knew a lot of kids who never got to make that journey. So I think you inevitably go back to your roots, and after you get out of public office and you're kind of thinking about your legacy, and you have some money left over from a campaign, and you're trying to think what the next step is. That was a really important step that he took, and really transformational, I think, for Maine and for aspirations for high school graduates.

So, and you know, he's certainly gone on to distinguish himself in all sorts of other board activities and things like that but I think ultimately we will remember him for all the high school graduates he helped get into college and the impact that will make on our state.

AL: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about your interactions with Senator Mitchell, or funny stories or anything that you think is important?

BT: You know, there probably are, Andrea, I probably am forgetting things. I mean I know that George did ads, for example, that was traditional, that you'd get someone like George to endorse you. So he did ads for me in 1980 when I was running for, I think he did it for me in 1980 when I was running a reelection to the [state] Senate. I know he did them, endorsement ads, for my husband who then ran for my seat in '82 and '84. I could probably dig some of those up but, I don't know, they're probably on tapes, but I don't know where they are. But I just have this, I guess many, many year association with him really, going back until 1972 and, I don't see him as much now because he's not as actively involved.

I did see him recently at Shep Lee's, so you know, and I was trying to think, Shep Lee had a birthday party and I was trying, maybe that was it, maybe we were at Shep Lee's for a birthday party and George was there, because he maintains contacts. And Shep Lee always lived on the hill with me, and Shep Lee and I would do joint events together, too. So we would share events. And so I think, you know, I've seen him there. Sometimes I've seen him on Mt. Desert Island; he likes to spend time there. But often when he has some of his events, I'm not necessarily available to go any more. So I think that was the last time I actually saw him, was at Shep's.

AL: Well great, thank you so much.

BT: Okay, well you're welcome.

End of Interview