

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

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**Grace Reef**

*(Interviewer: Diane Dewhirst)*

**GMOH# 084**

March 26, 2009

**Diane Dewhirst:** [p/o] This is Diane Dewhirst. We are here with the George J. Mitchell Oral History Project. It is March 26, 2009, in the afternoon in Washington, D.C., (and Grace is going to turn off her phone so that we can proceed with this interview). Now, I have to start this in a certain way, because this is what they want me to do at wonderful Bowdoin College, and I'm going to ask you to state your full name, your parents' name, and where you are from, so that we can put this in place and context.

**Grace Reef:** Okay, my name is Grace Reef, and my father's name is Norman Reef, and my mom's name is Patricia Reef, and I grew up in Portland, Maine.

**DD:** Grace, can you tell me a little bit about how you first met Senator Mitchell, in what capacity, and where you were and what you were doing?

**GR:** Well, I grew up in Maine, and Senator Mitchell was a long time in politics in Maine, and in the '70s, I think it was '74, he was running for governor so I think that's the first time I knew who he was. But when you grow up in Maine, you know, it's a small state with a million people so people who run for political office are kind of like sports stars.

When I was in college I was lucky enough to have an internship, and I went to Colby, which is in Waterville, which is where Senator Mitchell's from, and Senator Mitchell's brother was assistant basketball coach there, and I played basketball so I actually knew "Swisher" before I knew Senator Mitchell, and had an internship and came to Washington, and just totally got taken in by Senator Mitchell and what he stood for and the work that he did on his committees and how to make government better.

**DD:** Can you describe what your first position was with Senator Mitchell, and what your workload was at that point, highlighting what issues you worked on in general?

**GR:** Well, I first went to work for Senator Mitchell when I was twenty. It's kind of like the 'growing up series' with Senator Mitchell. But when I first worked for him, other than being an intern, I researched for mail – correspondence comes in, it needs to be looked up and draft responses go in to him for review. And then I was promoted to legislative assistant and spent basically seven years as a legislative assistant or senior policy advisor on children and poverty issues and economic development.

**DD:** Describe a little bit about what the office was like and the process was like when you were a correspondent, legislative correspondent, before we get into when you were an LA.

**GR:** Okay. I think when – just to say, take a step back and say – when I was an intern, and it was an introduction to the legislative process, I knew that’s what I wanted to do, was to come back and work for Senator Mitchell, because it was a just a great group of people and there was so much going on from hearings and legislative staff, to communications and press operations, to case work and helping people out with their problems, Social Security benefits or food stamps or whatever problem they might happen to have with the government, veterans’ benefits. And it was just really neat to see this dedicated group of people all spread in a million different directions, running around doing all these different things.

And when I came back, I was really fortunate to be hired as a legislative correspondent because I think in a Senate office there’s probably always more work to do than the people there are to do the work, and so I worked for Bobby Rozen, and he was the tax legislative assistant, and he would always give me projects and let me do meetings and help him do prep for hearings, and help him do prep for markups, and it was kind of just great training. I was fortunate that he was secure enough with himself that he could give me real things to work on and to learn from and really get involved.

I remember, like in 1985 and 1986, when the Senate was really busy with tax reform, and it was just a fascinating and thrilling thing to work seven days a week, twenty hours a day, learning different aspects of the tax code to help Bobby out and give him whatever he needed. I’m always going to remember that, and that Senator Mitchell was so involved in a core group of people who rewrote the tax laws in the mid-‘80s.

**DD:** What were your interactions with Senator Mitchell then?

**GR:** Back when I was a legislative correspondent? From time to time I would write memos on different things. Like I got Senator Mitchell involved in a children’s commission that Senator Dodd was the head of; sometimes if Maine constituents came in on certain issues, then I would write a background memo and staff him on the issue. I was really always interested in children and families and poverty, and I was just lucky in working with Bobby that I learned a lot, and when a job came open in that area I was able to get more involved. And so I worked in that capacity with Senator Mitchell to promote better policies for families with kids.

[*aside*]

**DD:** [p/o] Talk a little bit about your interactions with him, though, and some comments about his style, his leadership decision making.

**GR:** Let’s see, I think what I remember most about working with Senator Mitchell, and some of that is the lens that you look through, and when you’re, you know, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, and you’re talking to a senator and he’s asking you questions, it may

be different than if you're fifty doing it.

But to me, I was always taken that he reviews material and could be so quick to get to the bottom line and to ask the key questions and to put the pieces together, and to want to know what the options were.

**DD:** Once he reached a decision, was there a debate, was there discussion? How was that process done?

**GR:** I don't really remember debating him, but maybe the issues that I worked on, I remember definitely discussions on different approaches to do something. But generally he kind of listened, like a judge, and you would lay things out, and then you would have a conversation about it and discuss pros and cons, and then he made a decision and generally that was consistent with what I thought we should do, too. But he was very, seeming to weigh everything before making a decision.

**DD:** Can you talk a little bit about some of the issues in Maine specifically? I know that there was a lot of discussion with regard to base closures, and any work you may have done on that front. And then I'd like you to talk a little bit about child care.

**GR:** You know what? On base closures, I kind of know generally about it, but I think that was really Bob Carolla, and it wasn't me. So I can just tell you, I know he was really involved in it, and I know that that took up a lot of staff time and his personal time, but it wasn't really something that I was involved in. Do you want me to talk about child care?

**DD:** Please.

**GR:** Okay, child care was something that Senator Mitchell was really, really involved in, he was in the middle of it. Senator Moynihan was kind of the father welfare reform, way before Bill Clinton brought welfare reform to the forefront in the '90s, and so in, I think it was '87 or '88, there was the Family Support Act, and that was by Senator Moynihan, who really took a leading role on that.

And I worked with Senator Mitchell to develop a survey of child care providers in Maine, and it was kind of interesting because we were the only ones that did that, to survey child care providers in the state to see what the rates were, to see what affordability was, to see what availability and supply was, and we actually had our own research, not just some material from the national studies.

And so we worked on child care and welfare reform, and then the next year Senator Dodd and Senator Hatch had the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which initially was called the ABC Bill, and I think it was the Act for Better Child Care. And Senator Mitchell as leader really brokered the deal to make the Child Care and Development Block Grant happen, and he was right in the middle of it.

And it was really important because at the time, we really didn't have a federal program that was designed specifically to help working women with the cost of child care. I mean, child care is a family issue, not just a women's issue, but it's really tied to the growth of women in the workforce and the fact that there was an increasing demand for child care, and the fact that child care is really expensive and it's hard for people to afford. So Senator Mitchell was really the lead advocate in the Senate making the Child Care and Development Block Grant happen. Senator Dodd was the author of the bill, with Senator Hatch, and there's no way that it could have happened without that bipartisan leadership, but Mitchell in his leader role was really able to make it happen.

And the reason for that was, in 1989 the Senate actually passed the bill. There were a lot of amendments on the floor and it took time, and Senator Mitchell brokered a church-state compromise with Senator Durenberger. The Senate was able to pass the bill, but the House couldn't, and the House had some political, interesting things going on that prevented the bill from really moving forward. And so in 1990 it was Senator Mitchell who met with Senator Dole and said, "We need this bill to happen." And really, Mitchell carved out a box in the omnibus reconciliation bill with Senator Dole, in which the Finance Committee was going to kind of insert the Senate-passed child care bill and make it happen.

And ultimately, that did happen. There were a lot of behind-the-scenes meetings that aren't really reported on in the paper or the debate doesn't happen on the Senate floor, but that child care bill, although it was passed in '89 by the Senate, was actually plopped into kind of a box for it, coming out of the Finance Committee on – even though it was a bill with Labor Committee jurisdiction – which really was unprecedented, and ultimately it was enacted as part of this omnibus budget bill.

**DD:** Wasn't there a dance that Mitchell did, not only with Senator Dole, but also between Senator Dodd and Senator Bentsen as far as merging the two pieces.

**GR:** Oh, yeah, you're right. Senator Dodd and Senator Hatch had basic rules for child care and how it was going to work, and there really weren't minimum standards, but it was a framework for how child care was going to work. And Senator Bentsen had his own ideas about how child care was going to work. So basically, to get this box within the omnibus bill reported from Finance, where the Labor Committee bill was going to be born, even though it was coming out of a different committee, Senator Mitchell worked it out with Senator Bentsen to do what was called Title 4A At Risk Child Care, which was a new \$400 million funding stream for child care; it had separate rules, and in '96 was later consolidated as part of welfare reform.

But it was just historic, that Mitchell could really make this happen, which was a marriage between Dodd and Hatch and Bentsen and have a funding stream out of the Finance Committee and a funding stream out of the Labor Committee into this kind of black box that lived in the omnibus bill that ultimately the House lived with, and it got enacted. And we still build on that today, so it was kind of historic.

**DD:** There was some push back from some of the interest groups because, as I recall – and I’m not supposed to give my opinion here – but I believe history would note that it wasn’t as pure as some advocates wanted it to be. And if I recall, it was a challenging time within the community to push forward on this front. Can you ignore all the opinions I just expressed there and speak to that? Because I think that lends, and how that applies to Senator Mitchell’s style and what attributes he brings, or non-attributes he brings to the process, for when he was Senate leader.

**GR:** It is actually kind of funny because there were a lot of politics going on, and there are twenty different groups or so that work on child care, and there are many different views that are brought to the table when you bring twenty different children’s groups together, including some who feel that if it wasn’t a hundred and ten percent their way, then it was the losing way. And that’s always politically delicate.

I think, there were different views. In the House –

*[aside: **GR:** Can I just ask a question? **DD:** Sure. **GR:** Where does the recording go? **DD:** The recording goes to the library. **GR:** Okay. **DD:** They will edit it and – no, they won’t edit it. They will transcribe it. **GR:** Okay. **DD:** They will send it back to you for approval. **GR:** Okay. **DD:** And then you get to approve it and sign over the rights to it. **GR:** Okay. **DD:** Is how it is, not in all legal terms, but that’s it in general; but you will see a transcript of what you say. **GR:** Okay.]*

**GR:** Well there were some groups that kind of got aligned between Representative Downey of the Ways and Means Committee, and some other groups who were aligned with Representative – I guess it was Downey and Miller who had one approach. And there were others who felt there should be a different approach. And, you know, part of it might be Democratic politics. You put all these people in the same room, and it was a very emotional time. I mean it really shouldn’t have been, but people got emotionally vested in their approach, and some interest groups really let that get in the better way of their judgment than maybe they should have.

And I think what Senator Mitchell really did was be able to take a step back and take a deep breath and say, “Okay, what’s the common ground here? What is it that we want to achieve? What’s our objective?” And then sit everybody down and be able to move forward without hard feelings. I think, there was a lot of splintering in the groups, and the variety of reasons for it, some of it being how emotional some groups got with the issue. And you know, it does sound kind of crazy, but I think people think up an idea and they have some ownership of it, and as the legislative process works, changes are made, that’s the natural thing. That’s what happens when you’re in Congress and every step forward is some kind of compromise with some group in order to move forward on behalf of an issue. And I think there were some groups that just became emotionally defensive, rather than seeing, “Hey, this is a step where we want to go.”

And Senator Mitchell really made it happen. He enabled that bill to move forward in a way where – I think there were some mistakes made by some interest groups along the way that at any time could have killed that bill, because some members could have said, “You know what, I’m done with you, forget it.” But he was able to keep it on an even keel and get the groups to sign off on common ground and move forward. And the bill happened.

I mean, church-state was a huge fight, for example, and he was able to get through it. He brokered this compromise between Senator Ford and, there was a Ford-Durenberger amendment that allowed vouchers to be used basically anywhere that parents choose, where some people were saying, “Oh my gosh, you can’t allow a church daycare to take any subsidy kids.” Well, if the voucher’s going to the parent and the parent wants to choose where to put the child, then so be it; we were able to work out a compromise that worked. Churches provide about thirty percent of the daycare for young kids, and that’s the reality of it, and parent choice is a big part of child care.

So I think what it points to is that Senator Mitchell could get things done, and he could take, I don’t want to say ‘the emotion’ out of it, because that makes him sound boring, and it really wasn’t boring. But he was maybe a little boring sometimes, but I think he was able to keep things moving on track, and take that venom that can sometimes come out of the various interest groups when they get emotionally involved with their issue, from poisoning the atmosphere and getting a law enacted. And that’s what happened with child care.

**DD:** I’m not supposed to do this, but I do recall one time when Grace and myself and some others had to go to the Senator and tell him that a group wanted to meet with him, and why we were hesitant to have him meet with the group. And he thought we were nuts. He said, “Of course I’m going to go meet with them.” And by the end of the thirty minutes that he spent with them, they were all singing and he ended up getting an award from the Children’s Defense Fund. And, disclosure: Grace and I have both worked for the Children’s Defense Fund, post that episode. But do you want to just speak a little bit more about the example of that type of approach that he had, an openness or – that was my word, whatever word you choose on that front?

**GR:** I think it’s fair to say that Marian Wright Edelman had an emotional attachment to the issue and felt very strongly that it had to be her way. And if it wasn’t going to be done her way, it was a problem, then it wasn’t the right way. And Helen Blank is a child care advocate who’s been kind of a leader in the field for, I don’t know thirty or forty years or something now, so maybe it was twenty years then – and there just were a lot of emotions involved. And I think Senator Mitchell is the kind of person that could let people rant and rave and just get it all out, and at the end of it they’re somehow appreciative of him and everything’s okay, but it was kind of a crazy time.

**DD:** Last question on child care. Talk about how he worked, as you recall – I know, this was a long time ago – with the other senators on this effort.

**GR:** Senator Mitchell, he put a lot of time in with a lot of different members. You think, “Well, if it’s not your bill, what are you talking about?” But actually, he kind of shepherded the bill through the process like every step of the way. Senator Heflin, from Alabama, I remember Senator Heflin, and I think his attitude was kind of like, ‘Not another dang social program.’ Like, ‘we just don’t need it.’ And so the Democratic Party was kind of splintered, just because Senator Dodd had introduced this legislation and Senator Hatch had joined him and that made it bipartisan, and more Republicans were thinking that women are going to work and they need to have a safe place for their kids to be.

Senator Heflin was just from a different place, and what we needed “was not another government program.” And I remember, it’s just typical that Senator Mitchell was able to sit down with Senator Heflin – he was this big guy – and talk him through how it’s not necessarily a government program. But talking about how women work and they need child care, and families need assistance because it’s expensive, and kids need to be safe, in a way that connected to a southern Democrat who just didn’t think government assistance was the answer. But in the end Senator Heflin was supportive of the bill.

He was able to pick off different members with different problems, and sit down with them and work it out. Church-state was an example, southern Democrats were an example, Democrats on the Finance Committee versus the HELP (Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, but it used to be the Senate Labor Committee, Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, I think) – he was able to meet with the Democratic caucus and explain the issue, and then divide and conquer, where you sit down and spend one-on-one time with different members. With some it might be cost, with some it might be whether or not it’s the right government role, with others it was church-state.

And there were numerous problems to be worked through, including other groups like the governors – National Governors Association – and, you know, the original bill had some standards in it, and that wasn’t going to fly with them because they didn’t want any unfunded mandates. And ultimately the minimum standards that actually wound up in the bill took several weeks to negotiate with the governors association. So there were a lot of different negotiations where I think he really played a critical role to make it happen in a way that other members, you know, you need to be able to grasp the issue quickly, assimilate the information, explain it in a way that makes sense to people who have a diverse array of views about what it is that government’s role should be, or a family’s role should be, or a woman’s role should be, and it’s not something everybody can do; but it’s something that he was very good at.

**DD:** Were you involved in the Family [and] Medical Leave Act?

**GR:** I was involved in the Family Medical Leave Act. In fact, the Family Medical Leave Act was the first Rose Garden ceremony that Senator Mitchell and I went to; it was a lot of fun, with Willy.

**DD:** Say who Willy is.

**GR:** Oh, Willy was the driver. But it was just fun, because that was a new time, because that was 1993 and that was when Clinton came into office, and that was I think one of the first bills that Clinton signed into law. And it was something that we tried repeatedly to get enacted, family medical leave. It was unpaid leave. It shouldn't really have been a big deal you know, to allow employees to take a limited amount of unpaid time off to care for a sick son, daughter, spouse, or maternity leave. But it was a big deal.

And it was interesting because it was – I'm kind of laughing just because it was kind of fun. But back in I think it was '89 maybe, '89 or '90, George [H.W.] Bush (the father, Forty-One), was saying "We need a kinder, gentler nation," and we had him in a speech saying, "It's time for a kinder, gentler nation." And so when we went to the floor with the Family Medical Leave Act, Senator Mitchell was able to say in his speech, "Well here's the president, I just want to deliver on what he called for, and what did he call for? He said, 'It's time for a kinder, gentler nation,' and what could be a kinder or gentler or more family-friendly policy than that damn Family Medical Leave Act?"

And it was just great because the news were able to pick up on Bush when he actually gave that speech and play it over and over and I think it was a problem for Bush that he was vetoing, I think twice, the Family Medical Leave Act, in addition to unemployment bills at the time when we had high unemployment. I think it was a big deal when Clinton came into office that we'd worked on that Family Medical Leave Act for a long time to get a bipartisan group to support it, and it was just ready to go because of the several years of work before, and the two times that Bush had vetoed it, that we could make it a priority and stand for families.

And it was funny. I guess I'll always remember it because it was the first time I had gone to White House, other than the public tour, like to see the Christmas lights. And so Senator Mitchell and I were in the car, and we got out of the car and were walking into the White House and – I guess you take it for granted after a while, when you've done it a bunch of times, but this was the first time, and the first time was really cool actually, the first time. And we were walking and they're like, 'here's the Rose Garden,' and the funny thing was that I thought it was very cool but, I don't know, I was like twenty-eight or something, and I didn't want to appear like it was really cool, I just wanted to appear really cool. So I wasn't giving away like my eyes were like really big, or my mouth was hanging open or anything like that.

And so there we are, kind of walking through the White House and walked to the Rose Garden ceremony, and I'd never been to one before and Senator Mitchell turns to me and says, "Do you have my remarks?" I said, "Remarks?" He said, "Yes, do you have my remarks?" I said, "Well, no, Senator, I asked what the drill was going to be and no one ever said that you were going to speak, so not anticipating that you were going to speak, no, I didn't write you anything." He said, "Oh, so what do you think?" And I'm thinking - "Well, you've talked about this issue a million times, I think there are probably a lot of things that you can say, and just the regular stuff, just wing it, I guess." And he's like, "Okay." I'm looking at him, thinking, 'Will he yell at me?' I mean he didn't ever really yell at me, but there we are in the Rose Garden and he's asking me



for remarks, and I'm taking a big breath, thinking, 'Oh my God, I didn't write anything – shoot.'

But he was great, he was totally awesome. And then we got in the car on the way back and I'm still in my 'oh-my-God-is-this-real?' phase, and he has the pen that they used to sign the bill. And he said, "Hey, I have the pen, do you want the pen?" And I'm like, not wanting my eyes to pop out of my head, like, "Do I want the pen!? Oh my God, the pen they used to sign the bill into law? Yes, I want the pen." But I don't want that to come out and break that façade I had of just totally cool, like this was not a big deal, even though it was a totally big deal.

So he gave me the pen, and now I can barely sit still. So we get there, and I get back to the Capitol, and his office was on the second floor of the Capitol, kind of like right on the side where you go in to the Democratic Cloakroom and the floor, and there were a bunch of staff, because nobody had been to the White House yet and I was the first one, or the first one at a signing ceremony. And so when I got back everybody was like, "Oh wow, how was the signing ceremony? How was it?" because I got to shake Clinton's hand, like the first time that was a big deal. And so I'm trying to tell them everything, "Oh my God, like I met the president and shook his hand, and I'm trying to think of what my name is at the time."

And so I'm telling this story about the whole Rose Garden thing and meeting the president and not having the remarks when I probably should have anticipated that he might speak, except no one told me that, and then the fact that I got the pen. So then I take out the pen and I'm showing everybody the pen. Now, of course when I was in the car and I was with the Senator I had that façade on of, 'This is not cool at all, it's just an everyday regular thing,' and I wasn't showing that I was excited or anything. So when I was standing there telling the staff about, "Oh my God, and then this and then that and then this and then that and then I have the pen," and everybody's like, "Oooh," and then Senator Mitchell walked around the corner and started laughing hysterically, because it was very funny, because obviously it kind of was a big deal. So anyway, he had a good sense of humor about it.

**DD:** You worked on the Environment and Public Works Committee.

**GR:** I did.

**DD:** Can you talk a little bit about what end of that committee you worked on?

**GR:** Yes, I worked on the EPW Committee issues, and Senator Mitchell was on that committee, but I didn't do the environmental issues. I worked on economic development, and so I was involved with the highway bills. And probably the only thing that was more political than the dicey emotional arrangement of where everybody sat on the child care issue was highways. 'Highways' [as an issue] was very political.

My introduction, actually the first bill that I worked on was the highway bill that Reagan vetoed and we were able to override with Senator [Terry] Sanford – he was a southern Democrat. It was a huge deal because he switched his vote at the last minute, [and] we were able to override it.

Senator Mitchell was really involved in highways I think, in part, [because] transportation's a really big issue in Maine and the way the formula money goes out, Maine doesn't get much because of population and gas tax collections and everything else.

What was really cool was in, I think it was '91, Senator Mitchell was not only one of the leading people working on the highway bill, but also a conferee, and he got a lot of money for four big projects in Maine that made a huge difference to commerce and economic development. There was a million dollar bridge – which wasn't a million dollars, it was like two hundred and fifty million or something – and the Brunswick bypass, and there were two other kind of bridge projects. And it was huge, and in part it was huge because Maine got such a limited amount of money back from its return on the gas tax, because of its population, largely, to be able to do these big projects, like replace big bridges, was huge. The state would not have been able to do it.

And it's dicey, there's a lot of talk now about 'pork' and 'the growth in pork,' but I think Senator Mitchell was really strong on regional priorities, and there were a couple of bridge projects that he was able to deliver, and it meant negotiating formulas and getting it to happen.

**DD:** Explain a little bit about the formula with the donor states and the non-donor states, and what Senator Mitchell had to do to bridge that potential divide.

**GR:** Oh my God, it was a huge fiasco. *Ach*, I don't still have nightmares about it, but the bill was on the floor for three weeks; that is something that you are not going to forget. Basically, there's a gas tax and states pay, and people pay at the pump, and some states send in more money than they get back. And what ended up happening is, there's something called the eighty-five percent minimum, and you're supposed to at least get back eighty-five percent of your gas contributions so that you're not totally floating all the states at the expense of your own.

And so – groan – what ended up happening was, the bill was reported from committee, and the way the money goes out, there's something called an obligation ceiling, and that's the amount of money that can be spent out of the trust fund and it goes out through a formula. And the money was set at a certain level coming out of committee, and – you know what, I was really young, and I asked the counsel on the committee, Mike Weiss, "So where are we on the money? I mean this is the number, but what does that mean?" He said, "Oh, we're fine, don't worry about it." And I said, "So, it's not going to raise the budget at point of order? I mean where are we supposed to be? 'Fine' means what?" And he said, "Don't worry about it, we're fine, there won't be a point of order, we're right at the cap." I said, "Oh, okay," I mean that was good enough for me. It's a complicated issue.

And probably I should have gone to the Budget Committee and said, "Oh, the counsel on the EPW Committee told me 'X,' is this correct?" But I didn't know enough at the time, and so that was kind of live-and-learn; Senate jobs don't come with a manual. And so we get to the Senate floor and Senator Byrd, who was the chair of the Appropriations Committee, who knows more about money than anybody else on earth, knew that in fact we weren't right at the cap and there

was a little gap between where we could have been and where we were, and his first amendment that he offered basically ended up on a formula fight for three weeks on the Senate floor.

And Senator Mitchell looked at me and said, “How did this happen?” And I took a deep breath and said, “Senator, I’m so sorry, I asked Mike Weiss.” And he goes, “You asked *who*?” “I asked Mike Weiss, and this is what he said.” And you know, it’s like your dad is disappointed in you. And part of it is, I was really young and there’s that lens, like whose eyes are you looking through? But I made a mistake, and I wish I had asked the Budget Committee. And I can’t believe, what is it, twenty years later? And I’m still saying that, that is totally pathetic.

But I remember the day that I had to admit that to the Senator, and I remember the way he looked at me and I just felt like I really disappointed him. And to have the Senate hung up on your issue for three weeks over a formula fight, spending quality time with John Hilley, who was the chief of staff at the time, running on my little Excel program on the computer, a million different ways to figure out a way to get out of this formula fight. And having Lloyd Bentsen, the chairman of the Finance Committee scream at me, scream at me, and just stand there and like not respond, because a senator’s screaming at you, and they really shouldn’t do that – but they can have any type of behavior that they want – but you’re like twenty-five and you have to stoically just stand there and say, “Hmm-hmm,” and then be done with it.

And I remember one time when Senator Bentsen was screaming because – you come up with all these different variations on the formula, you change one variable, you know, number of trees in the state, you’re looking to get fifty-one votes, and what does it take to get fifty-one votes? And so you’re looking for any type of variable that you can throw into the formula that’s going to get some combination of states a greater return on the gas taxes that they can contribute, and still make sure that states are getting back eighty-five percent of what they put in. And I just remember running like fifty million different ways that this formula could be sliced and diced, and where the fallout was going to be among the states, and who the winners were going to be, losers. It’s not like anybody would lose, because there was money being dumped in, but it didn’t really matter because it’s all about the money.

And so it was kind of dicey, and in the end we were able to reach a compromise and move the bill forward. But oh my gosh, it took a lot of caucus meetings and it took a lot of private meetings. Sometimes we’d come out with a little variation like I was beginning to tell you, Texas didn’t do well one time and – it wasn’t that they didn’t do well – it’s that, first you have to look at the split on the money, and then you have to look at the split over time. And so one way I was looking at it, which was another live-and-learn experience, was to backload some of the money at the end; this is budget authority and the way the money spends out, and so I was running a formula on the computer and I kind of back loaded it. Some states got more at the beginning and others got more at the end, and this is where Senator Bentsen looked at the money and he was, “Texas is getting more at the end,” and he was totally upset, like “that’s illusory and that’s never going to happen, and you’re fooling me girl,” and taking my head off. And I’m like twenty-five, looking at him, trying not to react, and went back to my desk and tried a different way to spin that formula.

**DD:** What was Senator Mitchell's reaction to something like that?

**GR:** Senator Mitchell knew at the time that I was trying to make a way to make it work: how are we going to get the fifty-one votes; who do we need; how is it going to work? And try everything you can, any variable that it takes to make it happen. And some of these little things – I don't know if John Hilley ever told him things like the Bentsen thing, but the fact that twenty years later I can still remember Bentsen screaming in my face, is not a good thing, probably.

**DD:** Talk a little bit about the issues in Maine that you worked on. I know you talked about the Brunswick bypass, but any other issues in Maine, and also working with the Maine delegation?

**GR:** I worked on a lot of Maine issues, my issues, like I worked on housing, and so I think I toured every public housing facility and every Section 8 property in the state. Mitchell worked on the National Affordable Housing Act with Senator Cranston, and I don't know, Mitchell felt that it was important to go to every high school and I felt it was important to go to every housing project. And it was good to see what they needed.

At the time, there were a lot of things going on in housing. There were lead paint problems, and there was the president, Reagan, at one point I think, was proposing vouchers, and that was a problem. And then there were properties that their terms were expiring, and what was going to happen? We weren't building any new housing, and so how are you going to extend the life of the properties to keep the families that needed low income apartments? Families needed a place to live, and if owners had properties that were developed and their terms were almost over and they could get out, where were those people going to go? Because, you know, the property owners could go to market rates, as opposed to subsidizing it.

And Bob Rozen, who was the tax LA, worked with Senator Mitchell on the low income housing tax credit, and I worked with Bobby on the low income housing tax credit, but it was something that was really his. But because I did the supply side, the grant side, helping low income families, whether it was a voucher or whether it was an elderly project, a 202 project, or whether it was a Section 8 project, or whether it was a public housing project, it gave me a good handle to be able to work with Bobby on the tax end because I'd been to these places and I could see them.

And Senator Mitchell was very supportive of Senator Cranston and I think his leadership. And Jack Kemp at one point was secretary of HUD, and Mitchell played a pretty big role in negotiating a bill with Jack Kemp in trying to get the National Affordable Housing Act passed.

**DD:** What about working with the Maine delegation?

**GR:** Maine delegation. I did a lot of things for the Maine delegation, partly because there are two House members, two senators, so there's just a lot of working together on projects. There were UDAG grants (Urban Development Action Grant projects), and there were HUD grants that

we were applying for, and there were problems – somebody trying to close down like an FHA, Federal Housing Administration office. And we really, I did at least, in my job, work with the others on housing and economic development issues really closely, and we worked in a bipartisan manner to get things done. If it was a matter of getting an official from the administration, from some federal agency, to come in and talk to them, we did it. Maybe it was HUD, or maybe it was different agencies, we came together.

I met my husband through the delegation. He worked for Olympia Snowe when she was a representative, and at first I thought, “Oh, he’s not date material, that’s like incest, dating somebody in the delegation.” But we were playing tennis together and we got to be friends, and we did a number of delegation projects together. I used to do a lot of work with the National League of Cities and all the mayors from Maine would come down and they had different projects going on, and so I got to know this guy who worked for Representative Snowe (who now is a senator), and – who knows – first he wasn’t date material, and then he became somebody to play tennis with, and then he became someone I played tennis with and then got a beer with, and then he became someone I married.

**DD:** And you have three children.

**GR:** And I have three children.

**DD:** What was Mitchell’s approach to the delegation and working with the delegation?

**GR:** I think – others may have a different view, I don’t know, I can tell you what I saw – but I think Senator Mitchell thought it was good for the state to work together. I think there was a weird time when Senator Cohen sent his chief of staff to work for Representative Emery when he challenged Senator Mitchell, and I think in the meetings that I had been in Senator Mitchell was like, “Get everyone together and we’re going to work on this together.” And so it was good. I didn’t really feel like it was a competition. I think sometimes it felt like some of the others might have wanted to compete, but they needed Senator Mitchell so maybe they were good to come together. But initially, I think it was hard, after Senator Cohen sent his chief of staff to work for Representative Emery, because that’s kind of personal. And I remember at the time thinking, “You got to be kidding me.” But I think after that happened and Senator Mitchell won, he had an approach with the staff that was like, “You know what? It’s over, it’s done with, get over it. We need to come together because there are bigger goals here.”

**DD:** We’re going to take about three more questions. I’m going to tell you the first one: can you discuss in general Senator Mitchell’s attributes, both in working with staff and in his leadership as a senator and Senate majority leader?

**GR:** I think his biggest attribute was probably patience. He was really patient, he was kind of very ‘give me the facts.’ He wanted to know the pros and cons, and he wanted to get things done. I think his biggest attribute was, he was quick. He could take something he knew nothing about and become an expert. Not that he didn’t know anything about things, but senators have to

cover basically a million issues, from what's happening in the Middle East to what's happening in, you know, whether it's acid rain or clean air or clean water, and the reality is you can't be an expert on everything. But Senator Mitchell, I think the biggest, maybe one of the biggest attributes he had was, he was really smart and he was able to take things and assimilate information really quickly and be an expert, and be an expert in an articulate way, which is not something that everybody can do.

**DD:** How would he resolve conflicts?

**GR:** On the issues that I worked on, he brought people in and basically sat them down and let people have their say, and sometimes just let people have at each other. And then when that was done, get back to the task at hand and kind of work it out. I think his approach was: get those with varying views around the table and reach some common ground, because it can be done if you can get everybody to sit down.

**DD:** What have I missed, in talking about Senator Mitchell and his Senate career? Also on a personal basis, you knew him on a personal basis through your family a little bit, and what have I missed?

**GR:** What have we missed? I don't know. It's funny now, being a lot older, looking back, because you have different views depending on where you are in your life, and I really feel that I grew up in that office. You don't work somewhere for basically ten years, between being twenty and thirty, and not develop as a person and benefit from just a core group of people who really, for the most part, got along well and kind of fed off each other, and all had looking out for Senator Mitchell as their 'number one.' And I think that was really unique, and I think in some way that he somehow made that happen. I don't know how he made that happen, but I think he just was kind of like my dad in a way, and that he cared about people. And, I don't know, I think he was more like kind of a Dad, I guess, in a way. He was funny.

**DD:** Talk about that, because not everybody saw that side.

**GR:** Really? He was funny, he was really funny. In a surprising way, because you would think that he was boring, but he wasn't boring, he was – he was sometimes boring – but he was funny.

**DD:** Can you give an example of when he was funny?

**GR:** Just kind of like little quips that kind of came out of nowhere. Like – I'm trying to think; things that you wouldn't expect.

**DD:** That's okay, if you can't think [of anything specific]. (*Telephone interruption*)

**GR:** I can think of him being funny. I can think of him being funny, like just joking. But I have to think about what he specifically said that was funny.

**DD:** Okay, well I'll interview you again if you think of that.

**GR:** Okay.

**DD:** Anything else I missed? No, I can tell by the look on her face there is not. Thank you, Grace Reef. It is Thursday, March 26, Washington, D.C., Grace Reef, for the George Mitchell Oral History Project for Bowdoin College. Thank you very much.

End of Interview