The Honorable Shelley Berkley

U.S. Representative of Nevada (1999–2013)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

July 22, 2019

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC

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Abstract

From an early age, Shelley Berkley knew she wanted to work in public service. In this oral history, she details her experience volunteering for the early campaigns of Senator Harry Reid, Senator Richard Bryan, and Governor Mike O'Callaghan, which served as her introduction to electoral politics. With her mother's encouragement, Berkley decided to start a family and run for office. She discusses the ongoing balance of life events and work responsibilities that followed—like giving birth to her first child while serving as a state legislator—and the family support that made it possible. Berkley sheds light on aspects of House re-election campaigns, including the support she received from unions and women's groups, and the challenge of campaigning in one of the fastest-growing districts in the country. While her colleagues would meet the same voters year after year, Berkley constantly introduced herself to new constituents in the Las Vegas area.

In this interview, she explains her focus on local and international issues as a member of both the Ways and Means Committee and the Committee on Foreign Affairs. As the granddaughter of Jewish immigrants, Berkley prioritized American relations with the Middle East and Israel. Additionally, she stresses the importance of working with her Nevada colleagues to protect Yucca Mountain from becoming a nuclear repository. She also recounts her work concerning young immigrant constituents that became one of the building blocks for the DREAM Act. Berkley reflects on her 2012 Senate campaign and what it means to have been a political role model for a generational of Nevadans.

Biography

BERKLEY, SHELLEY, a Representative from Nevada; born Rochelle Levine in New York, N.Y., January 20, 1951; graduated from Valley High School, Las Vegas, Nev.; B.A., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1972; J.D., University of San Diego Law School, San Diego, Calif., 1976; member, Nevada state assembly, 1983–1985; member, Nevada University and Community College System Board of Regents, 1990–1998; elected as a Democrat to the One Hundred Sixth and to the six succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1999–January 3, 2013); was not a candidate for reelection in 2012, but was an unsuccessful candidate for election to the United States Senate.

Read full biography

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, http://bioguide.congress.gov and the "People Search" section of the History, Art & Archives website, http://history.house.gov.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

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Interviewer Biographies

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a BA in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master's degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.

V. Grace Ethier is a researcher, writer, and oral historian for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned her BA in history from Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina. She co-authored *Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress: 1900–2017* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2017) and leads web production for the oral history team.

— THE HONORABLE SHELLEY BERKLEY OF NEVADA —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm here with Grace Ethier [in the Rayburn House Recording Studio]. We're with the Historian's Office for the House of Representatives. The date is July 22, 2019, and we are interviewing former Representative Shelley Berkley of Nevada. Thank you so much for speaking with us [by phone] today [from your office in Henderson, Nevada].

BERKLEY: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

ETHIER: Thank you.

JOHNSON: This interview is for the Jeannette Rankin project that we've been working on for several years now. It's to commemorate the election of the first woman to Congress. To begin today, Congresswoman, when you were young, did you have any female role models?

BERKLEY: Yes, I did. My mother, who had never worked outside the home, never really left the house. Her job was her children. Even though she had limited education—she never graduated high school—what she cared about was making sure that her two daughters were well educated and successful and could do anything that we set our minds to doing. That's the way both my sister and I grew up. I would say that my mother is one of my role models, not that I wanted to emulate her or be like her, but I know because of her I was able to accomplish the things that I did in my life.

In addition to that, as probably every Jewish girl growing up in the '60s in the United States of America, Golda Meir—who, of course, was the Prime Minister of Israel—was a great role model, especially for somebody that was

politically inclined and never wanted to be anything else other than a public servant. She was the quintessential public [servant], certainly in my mind.

Also, one other woman in Las Vegas—when my family moved to Las Vegas, I was 12 years old. My mother thought it would be a good idea if I had a lady doctor. Now, back in those days, there was only one lady doctor in Las Vegas, and that was Dr. Parvin Modaber. She was my doctor from the time I was 12 years old until I went to Congress at the age of 48. She was a tremendous role model because here was a woman that I knew that was a professional woman, a successful woman, and a wife and a mother. I very much wanted to emulate her.

So I would say those were my three role models for completely different reasons, but each one of them affected my life in a very positive way.

ETHIER: When you were growing up, what were the expectations about your role in society as a woman?

BERKLEY: As I said in my earlier remarks, my mother never worked outside the home, did not finish high school. But in our house, it didn't matter if you were pretty or popular. You had to get good grades in school so you could make something of yourself. There was tremendous pressure, and that's not in a negative sense, to do well in school and to do well in anything that I did. That was the expectation in my house, that you would be successful.

They were giving me a foundation, although there was very little money in the house. My dad was a waiter when I was growing up. But it wasn't the money that mattered. It mattered that you were going to get a good education, and my mother wanted me to be an attorney from the earliest time I can remember. That's exactly what I became, and then, of course, I used my legal background as I was running for office and certainly serving.

JOHNSON: Can you talk about your family's background and how they immigrated to the United States?

BERKLEY: Yes. I'm second-generation American. My grandparents came to this country. They couldn't speak English. They had no money. They had limited skills. The only thing they had when they came to our nation's shores was a dream. That dream was that their children and their children's children would lead a better life here in the United States than they had where they came from. I often refer to myself as my grandparents' American dream, although I'm quite certain neither side of my family could have imagined that two generations after coming to the United States that they'd have a granddaughter serving in the United States Congress.

My mother's side of the family is from Salonika, Greece. Prior to World War II, half of the population of Salonika was Jewish. After the Nazis finished with the Jews in Salonika, out of the 80,000 Jews that were there before World War II, only a thousand survived. I'm not presumptuous enough to think that my family would have been among the thousand to survive. My father's side of the family was from the Russia-Poland border. An entire civilization that had existed in that part of the world for a thousand years, for a millennium, was exterminated in the Holocaust. Both sides of my family were here on the Lower East Side of New York, and that's where I was born.

ETHIER: How did you first become interested in politics and public service?

BERKLEY: I can't remember a time in my life that I wanted to do anything else but public service. That's for two reasons. One is in order to give something back to this country for having taken my family in. It gave us not only an opportunity to survive but an opportunity to thrive, and we certainly have done that. Also having been very active in the Jewish youth groups and very

active in the secular community as well when I was growing up in Las Vegas, not only did I want to give something back, but I wanted to be in a position that if, God forbid, anything like the Holocaust ever happened again, that I might be in a position to stop it or help stop it. That's what motivated me to run for public office, a desire to serve and a desire to protect and defend.

ETHIER: Who served as your first political mentor?

BERKLEY: There was a gentleman in the state of Nevada. His name was Mike O'Callaghan. He was just the most lovely Irishman you could ever imagine, tough as nails, a heart of gold. When he ran for governor of the state of Nevada, I was a student at UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas]. I volunteered to be, in those days, an "O'Callaghan Girl," where we wore a little green beret and a short plaid skirt. I devoted my time that I wasn't studying and going to school helping him campaign and I just fell in love with the process. I fell in love with politics, and I fell in love with him. He was a wonderful role model and mentor, and when I got out of law school, he gave me my first job. He was governor at the time.

JOHNSON: Before coming to Congress, you served in the Nevada state assembly. Why did you run for that position? And then how did that work compare to what you did in Congress?

BERKLEY: Since the time that I was in high school—1968 was the year of my political awakening. There were two young fellows in the state of Nevada running for the Nevada state assembly. One of them was a man named Richard [H.] Bryan. The other one was a man named Harry Reid. They were both in their late 20s at the time. I became politically active and involved in the 1968 election, and I walked precincts for them. I made phone calls for them. In those days, I think their campaign headquarters was in the dining room of

their homes, and I would show up every day and make calls and lick stamps and envelopes and walk precincts.

Both of them ultimately went on to very, very productive and successful political careers in the state of Nevada. Of course, Harry Reid was the Majority Leader of the United States Senate. Richard Bryan was attorney general, governor, and ultimately United States Senator for the state of Nevada as well.

I just loved, loved being out there. I loved walking precincts. I became enamored with the entire process of elections and how people get elected and how they end up serving. I think that was, for me, probably the moment that I realized that this was exactly what I wanted to do with my life. I was student body secretary in high school. By the time I got to college at UNLV, I was student body president and knew at a very early age that this is what I wanted to do.

ETHIER: You also served on the Nevada University and community college system [Nevada System of Higher Education] board of regents.

BERKLEY: Yes.

ETHIER: Did this service prepare you at all for your time in the House?

BERKLEY: Oh, absolutely. I think every aspect of my life was preparing me to be in the United States Congress. When I was student body president of UNLV—earlier than that when I was student body secretary at Valley High School in Las Vegas—it prepared me to deal with people, to understand what people's issues were, understanding what being a leader is. Public service—you serve the public, not the other way around. The public doesn't serve you. I learned all of those things very early in my life.

Being in the Nevada state assembly, of course, was a tremendous opportunity to learn the legislative process, and then serving on the board of regents was practically coming full circle. [I was the] first person in my family to go to college—University of Nevada, Las Vegas, might as well have been Harvard. It opened up an entire new world for me. After four years as a student and then three years in law school, coming home, getting involved in politics and running for the Nevada state assembly, by the time I got to the board of regents, I felt like I was coming home.

UNLV, which is my alma mater, was in my regent's district. I had an opportunity to serve not only my own institution but to really put my money where my mouth is when it came to the importance of education and the importance of providing an outstanding quality education for all of the students in state of Nevada that were either at our universities or community colleges.

JOHNSON: Why did you decide to run for Congress in 1998?

BERKLEY: I had always planned to run for Congress, particularly because of my involvement in the pro-Israel community. That is where I ultimately wanted to be, and in 1998, I had my pulse on what was going on in Nevada politically, and it was pretty obvious to me that John [Eric] Ensign—who was my predecessor—Congressman Ensign was going to run for the United States Senate, which meant that there would be an open seat. I think that's what motivated me to run for Congress at that time.

I knew it was a Democratic district. I knew there wasn't an incumbent—and John was a Republican. I didn't think I would have a hard primary, and I didn't, and I thought that whoever came out of the Democratic primary

would probably win the election. It was strategic, my decision to run, and it was ultimately successful.

JOHNSON: Were you recruited to run?

BERKLEY: You know, I've been listening my entire life to candidates saying that their phones were ringing off the hook with people urging them to run for office. I can say without fear of contradiction that that doesn't happen. I mean, you have to be self-motivated. This is something I wanted to do. I let it be known that I was going to do it.

I went back to Washington after I decided I was going to run and met with—like any first-time candidate, you talk to the DCCC [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee]. If you're a Democrat, you're talking to EMILY's List. You're talking to the labor unions. You're talking to the environmental groups and all of the other groups that are important to success if you're a Democrat. I went to Washington, spent three days there meeting with everybody, and they gave me a lot of food for thought.

I have to say that I hesitated after being in Washington. When I got on the plane, I really had a good talk with myself. "Is this what you want to do? Is this what you want to dedicate your life to?" At the end of the flight, before we landed, I said, "I do. It's going to take every bit of energy and time and resources that I could possibly muster, but it's important enough to me." I thought that I could do a good job, that my reasons for running, I think, were the right ones. Truly a desire to serve your fellow man, your fellow citizens, and that's exactly what I did. Once I made the decision, I never looked back.

JOHNSON: What made you hesitate at that point?

BERKLEY: I think the emphasis on money, how much it was going to cost, how much time it would take to raise the money, how challenging it was to do that. It was a decision that if I want to hold office, if I want to do public service, if I want to serve my fellow citizens, this is the trial by fire you have to go through in order to reach your goal. I weighed everything and realized that the goal was worth the effort, and then I went forward with it.

ETHIER: Did you receive any memorable or helpful advice during your campaign?

BERKLEY: Yes, constantly. {laughter} Things changed dramatically from the first time I ran to the last time I ran, and it was a different type of campaign and a different atmosphere. But when I first ran, I just loved every minute of it: knocking on doors, making phone calls, meeting constituents that were going to ultimately vote for me. I reveled in the entire process. I thought it was fabulous.

People gave me advice. I can't give you anything specific, but people gave me advice from the beginning to the end. I knew that they would because I had been very actively involved in a lot of campaigns before I ran myself and I very freely gave advice whenever I felt like it. So I was expecting the same, and I got the same.

JOHNSON: How important was gender in your first House campaign, and then beyond that?

BERKLEY: Well, when I first ran for the Nevada state assembly, I was pregnant with my first son, Max. I had Max at the end of May of 1982, and I won my first assembly race that November. Gender, to me, was never an issue. I mean, I was very obviously pregnant while I was running. I don't think there had ever been a candidate before for the Nevada state assembly or any other office where the candidate was visibly pregnant. {laughter} After Max was born, I

put a T-shirt on him [that said] "Vote for my mom," and he and I went out campaigning. That was as much a part of his life as it was of mine. I think you have to reach the proper balance. How do I raise a family and do public service? I think that's always a challenge, but I always realized that my family came first. My kids came first.

JOHNSON: Since you just said that you probably were the first or certainly one of the few at the time, what was the response of the voters when they saw you and you were expecting a child?

BERKLEY: Well, it was hard to miss, {laughter} but they voted for me. I won the election, so I guess that validated what I was doing.

There were some people that asked how I was going to do it. I was very, very lucky. I had family buy-in, and I think without that, especially in the very early '80s, it would've been very, very difficult. But my husband at the time was a consummate father. I had both sets of grandparents in Las Vegas, and without both of my mother and my mother-in-law, I couldn't have done this. But they very much, I guess, agreed with what I was doing and thought it was important enough to support me.

Now, I'll tell you a story. I really wanted to run for office. This was the very early '80s, and I remember having brunch with my mother at a place that doesn't exist anymore in Las Vegas, the French Bakery. We were sitting there, and I was lamenting to her that there was an opening in my assembly district and I wanted to run. But I was also in my very early thirties, and I wanted to start a family. I remember telling my mother, "I have this opportunity to run for office. It's an open seat. But I want to start a family, and I don't know what to do." My mother—who I have already explained

her background—she looked at me, and she said, "Do both. I'll help." And she did.

My mother encouraged me from the beginning to have children and not to let that part of my life be dormant. She thought it was very important to have a family, to have children. As she always said to my sister and I, the best part of her life were her kids. She didn't want me to miss that, but she knew that I had a desire and hunger to run for office. With my mother's help and my mother-in-law's help, we got through the election. I could not have done this without them.

ETHIER: You touched on this a little bit. As a woman candidate running for Congress, was fundraising a barrier?

BERKLEY: Not for me, although I know it is a very difficult thing for most women to ask for money. But I had been involved with fundraising for many, many, many years before I ran for office. I was on the Jewish Federation board. We were always raising money—all of the Jewish organizations, everything that I was doing in college, and then as a professional woman in Las Vegas. I was always raising money. So, for me, it was easy to ask. I knew that one "no" doesn't make an answer. I was relentless. I knew how much it would take to run, and I was committed to do this. You obviously have to have the resources in order to get your message out.

Fundraising for me was not an issue, but I do know that it's a very difficult thing for many women and I suspect [for] some men as well that don't have that experience to ask for money. But it never bothered me much. Frankly, when I was practicing law, it was harder for me to ask my clients for money than it was for me to ask people to support my campaign. Why that is I don't

know, but I had a much more difficult time asking my clients to pay me than I did asking people to donate to the campaign.

JOHNSON: Did you have the support of any women's groups in your House campaigns, local or national?

BERKLEY: Oh, all of them, obviously. Yes, yes. Tremendous support. EMILY's List was amazing, but also many of the others. Planned Parenthood was obviously a strong supporter of mine, as I was of them. Yes, I received a lot of support from women's groups, both locally and nationally.

ETHIER: Why was having the endorsement of the Culinary Workers Union important?

BERKLEY: Well, my father was Culinary because he was a waiter in town, and the entire [Las Vegas] Strip was unionized. I grew up in a union household, and then when I started working as a waitress during the summers or on weekends when I was in school, I was culinary. Culinary is an extremely strong union, very, very well organized with tens of thousands of members, and they can make a difference—they do make a difference in your campaign. If you get the Culinary Workers' support, you're going to have a much easier—it's not a slam dunk, and there's no guarantee of victory, but their help is very instrumental if you're a Democrat.

JOHNSON: Our office works very closely with the curator of the House, and in the House Collection, they have one of your campaign buttons.

BERKLEY: Yes, I saw it.

JOHNSON: Okay, I just wanted to ask you about that, if there's any story or anything connected with that particular button that you can remember.

BERKLEY: Well, it's a great button, but every year we changed the logo. Every year I can say without fear of contradiction that I thought my campaign logos were outstanding. Always did red, white, and blue. I thought that was very, very important. After all, I was a federal official, or at least aspired to be, and the colors of the country and the flag are red, white, and blue. I thought that was important, and that button that you're talking about was definitely red, white, and blue.

It had the state of Nevada in it because I never wanted people to think I was Washington, DC, focused and I never was—I came home every single weekend for the 14 years that I served in Congress. It was a job with a very long commute. But it was important to be home, and it was important to, obviously, be in Washington during the week. There's a little Nevada logo on it.

I liked a square [pattern] because I'm very definite. Well, it's not a square. It was a rectangle, but it had four sides, and I thought that was important because I'm not wishy-washy.

I thought it was also important to have your name very large on the campaign buttons. That logo just said it all. It was also, if I'm not mistaken, the year 2000, which was a new millennium, and you're running in a new millennium. I thought that that was great, also, that it had the date on it.

ETHIER: Can you describe your district when you first elected in 1998?

BERKLEY: Yes. Back in '98, there were only two congressional districts in the state of Nevada. I had all of southern Nevada, and the second congressional district had the rest of the state. It was—well, it's never easy—but it's a pretty easy district to understand, and that determines what your priorities are. I had large concentration of senior citizens. It was the fastest-growing senior

community in the United States at the time, so senior issues were very important to me, Medicare, Social Security.

Veterans. It was one of the three fastest-growing veteran populations in the United States, so veterans' issues were very, very important to me. I had a very, very close relationship with the veterans' organizations in town. When I first got to Congress, I sat on the Veterans' Affairs Committee. But these vets took me under their wing while I was running, and by the time I was appointed to the committee, when I got elected and was appointed, I hit the ground running when it came to veterans' issues. I was very aware of that.

At the time, my congressional district was one of the fastest-growing congressional districts in the United States. Issues of growth and water issues and employment issues. I used to say—and in those days it was very, very heady—but I had the fastest-growing congressional district in the United States. When you came to Nevada and you came to Las Vegas, if you wanted a job, you could get one. We had very, very low unemployment, between construction work and the tourism industry. Las Vegas back in 1998 was doing very, very well. And that was what I was representing.

ETHIER: What challenges did you face when campaigning for reelection in the fastest-growing district in the United States?

BERKLEY: Interesting you should say that. I used to talk to Members of Congress that told me that—ones that had been there for quite a while—and they were telling me that 20 years ago, when they knocked on their constituent's door when they were first campaigning, they left a little sapling, a little tree. They went back to the same door every election. And 20 years later, the little saplings that they had been giving out as a campaign gift, if that's the right word, were now large, beautiful, blossoming trees. But whenever they

knocked on the door year after year, election after election, the same people answered.

In my district, it could not have been more different. There's tremendous transience in the Las Vegas area, and from year to year, you could knock on the same door, and there's an entire new face opening the door. Also, you're not only reintroducing yourself to those that have voted for you, but you're constantly introducing yourself to the new people that were coming into your congressional district. I think at one point I had 7,000 new residents a month coming into my congressional district. You add that up by two years when you start campaigning again, and you got a whole new set of people that are coming in that don't know you at all. I would say that was a bit of a challenge.

JOHNSON: Even for people that haven't been to Las Vegas, everyone knows about the city. What was it like representing such a famous part of the country?

BERKLEY: I loved it, and I capitalized on it. Ordinarily, you're the Congresswoman from Nevada, the Congresswoman from Wisconsin, the Congresswoman from New York. From the very beginning, I was the Congresswoman from Las Vegas. I mean, it was my hometown. I grew up here. I knew it very, very well. I often say that it's not so much that I grew up in Las Vegas, I grew up with Las Vegas. There were very few parts of the city that I wasn't very, very familiar with. I went to junior high school here, high school here, college here. It was very much my home. Everybody knew I was from Las Vegas.

And I knew the issues well. I'd been in the gaming industry for nine years prior to coming to Congress. I knew the number one, I guess, driver of the economy, the gaming industry. No one in Congress knew it better than I did. I knew the challenges with Yucca Mountain and the fact that we didn't

want nuclear waste 90 miles from where our families lived. I had a pretty good handle on all of the issues that I would be confronted with when I came to Congress before I got there.

ETHIER: Moving on to your time in the House, were there any Members who served as mentors when you first arrived? And what advice did they offer?

BERKLEY: I have to say that the women were very welcoming. I mean, I didn't know any of them. I knew a lot of the men because people like Eliot [Lance] Engel, Howard [Lawrence] Berman, Henry [Arnold] Waxman, they were all very active in the national Jewish community. I was active in the Jewish community nationally, so I felt very comfortable. When I got there, there was a whole group of people that I knew.

With the women, I didn't know too many of the women, but they were very welcoming, very supportive. People like Diana DeGette, who's still there, she was very, very helpful. Anna [Georges] Eshoo was very helpful. Just felt very, very warm and welcoming. When I came to Congress—and that was the class of '99, I guess. We won in '98, in November of '98. People that I'm friendly with today, although I don't see them—they are very busy being Congresspeople. I'm very busy doing what I'm doing now. But people like Jan [Janice D.] Schakowsky from Chicago, Grace [Flores] Napolitano. These were the women that I came in with as freshmen, and it was a lovely freshmen class, I have to say.

JOHNSON: Dick [Richard Andrew] Gephardt was the Democratic Leader for the early part of your career.

BERKLEY: Yes.

JOHNSON: What was your relationship like with him?

BERKLEY: Outstanding, very helpful. He came to Las Vegas to campaign for me a number of times. He gave me some very good advice. Throughout the time that we served together, he was extremely helpful. He was a very good leader. I'll tell you who else was wonderful on the female side: Rosa [L.] DeLauro, I thought she really went the extra mile as well.

When you get elected—and I ultimately only won by three points, so there was no guarantee I would be back the second term. Patrick [Joseph] Kennedy was the head of the DCCC back then. They really spent a lot of time with the freshmen, preparing us not only for what we were doing in Washington but how to get us back two years later.

I remember distinctly because it was just a crazy time in life for me—all good but very concentrated. I won the election in November of '98, beginning of November. At the end of November, my youngest son was bar mitzvahed—we had 300 people at the bar mitzvah. Then in January I was sworn in and everything that entailed: a new office, new staff, new life. Then in March, I got married. I had a number of seminal life-changing events all occurring within a six-month period.

It was a very busy time, but I remember Congressman Gephardt having all the freshmen in his office and talking to us about our re-election. "Are you raising money?" And "Are you doing this and doing that?" Now, January and February I was getting sworn in. I was preparing for a wedding, and we had 600 people at my wedding, so raising money wasn't a major priority.

When we went around the table, one freshman said, "Oh, yes, I've done three fundraisers already," and this one did that, and this one did that. Then they got to me. I said, "I'm getting married next month. I'm not raising any money right now." Oh, my goodness, they got nervous. {laughter} But as it

turned out, I pivoted right after the wedding, right after the thank-you notes, and started raising money and won convincingly the second time.

JOHNSON: And the rest is history from there.

BERKLEY: Well, my history, anyway. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Right. Grace and I read that you were vice president of the House freshmen Democrats. Was that a position that you had to campaign for?

BERKLEY: No. I think that I got it by acclamation because nobody else wanted it. {laughter} We had a freshmen class president, and if I'm not mistaken, Stephanie Tubbs Jones—a blessed memory—African-American woman, she really wanted to—no, no. She wanted to be very involved. If I'm not mistaken, there was somebody else that was a freshmen class president, Brian Baird of Washington. We decided, why don't we give everybody a piece of the prize? There would be one president and a few vice presidents that would serve and then pass it on to somebody else. Everybody seemed to buy into that. The most vulnerable freshmen took the lead, and so maybe I was one of the most vulnerable freshmen, but I was vice president of the freshmen class by acclimation. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Did you have any specific responsibilities with that position?

BERKLEY: Probably not, {laughter} but it was a wonderful talking point. I worked very closely with Brian, our class president, and it worked out well for me.

ETHIER: How would you describe the atmosphere of the House when you arrived, and was it a welcoming place for women in your opinion?

BERKLEY: I thought so, although I tend not to notice things like that. I know who I am. I'm comfortable in my own skin. I grew up in Las Vegas. There weren't too

many things that I hadn't seen when I was working on the Las Vegas Strip. I just plowed ahead. By the time I came on the scene, I really was standing on the shoulders of other women that had come before me.

I would say that earlier in my life, when I was student body president of UNLV, I was a pioneer. There hadn't been a female student body president of UNLV. When I went to law school, the year before me there were only about 10 to 20 women in the class. By the time I got there—and I started in 1974 in law school—20 percent of the class were women. And, again, there were women that had gone before me that really had suffered the slings and arrows. By the time I got there, I think it was a different ball game. That doesn't mean that there wasn't discrimination, I guess. But for me, I was just happy being in law school.

I was just happy being in Congress. I'd served already in a number of positions on the state and local level, so I didn't pay too much attention to that. I figured if a man was better than me, he would have won the election. But I won. I must be okay.

JOHNSON: In the Year of the Woman [1992 elections], there was a bump in the number of women, but you still were in the minority quite a bit.

BERKLEY: Yes. Absolutely.

JOHNSON: There weren't a lot of women Members. Did you find that women tended to work together and gravitate towards each other because there weren't that many women in the House?

BERKLEY: Interestingly enough and sadly, no. There was a Women's Caucus, and in my year, it was just starting to—not partisan like it is now, but there was some serious partisanship. The women that had served long before Rosa DeLauro

and Nita [M.] Lowey, Nancy [Pelosi], Anna Eshoo, they'd been there for a while, and so they were extremely helpful.

But the Women's Caucus, which was Republicans and Democratic women, because of the abortion issue, we couldn't even come up with this one seminal issue that we could all support. I became very disenchanted with that. I thought, "Good heavens." That's when I noticed that all of a sudden it was more important for these pro-life women to, I guess, support their party rather than to work for women's health issues, which I think are very important. I was a little disappointed in that.

JOHNSON: Did you find ways to work outside of the caucus, then, perhaps with other women or even men on issues like women's health?

BERKLEY: I was on the Ways and Means Committee Health Care Subcommittee when we were doing the Affordable Care Act. A good part of my congressional career was spent on health care issues and family health and women's health and generally providing affordable and accessible health care to the people of this country, and it was a pretty bumpy ride.

ETHIER: When Jeannette Rankin served in Congress, a lot of attention was paid to her dress and her demeanor because she was a woman. Do you think that changed by the time you came to the House or did you face that attention as well?

BERKLEY: Oh, most definitely. And, look, I represented Las Vegas. This is {laughter} a very glitzy, blingy place. I grew up here. It's very much a part of who I am and what I am. I dressed, I think, a little bit differently than other women from more conservative parts of the country or any other part of the country but Las Vegas. What I wore was the subject of conversation. It's okay. When I came home, I looked just like everybody else. {laughter}

JOHNSON: You mentioned just a little while ago that you were on the Ways and Means Committee. What argument did you make to the Democratic Leadership to get a spot on this very influential committee?

BERKLEY: I wanted a spot on the Ways and Means Committee from before I got elected. I knew that it was a very, very important committee for my congressional district for a whole host of reasons. Gaming issues, tax issues, Social Security issues—all of that went through the Ways and Means Committee. I actively sought this position for quite a while.

Nancy Pelosi became the Speaker. Harry Reid, who in those days was Majority Leader of the United States Senate, recognized how important that position was for me to represent my district. I actively approached Nancy. There hadn't been a Democrat from Nevada on the Ways and Means Committee since, I think, the turn of the last century. And I'm talking about 1900. John Ensign, my predecessor, was on Ways and Means, but he was a Republican. And there were very few women on the committee. So I approached Nancy with those two issues, in addition to the fact that I thought it was essential to represent my constituents. She agreed with me, and she made the appointment. I was very grateful to her for that.

ETHIER: Do you think it's important to have women on influential committees like Ways and Means?

BERKLEY: Absolutely. This is a saying that I absolutely love: if you don't have a seat at the table, chances are you're going to be on the menu. I think it's important to have women represented on the major committees. The days of the soft issues are over. You've got to have a seat at the table in the most important committees to make sure that the issues that are important to you are

represented in deliberations and on the committee. I think, quite candidly, Nancy has done a great job in doing exactly that.

JOHNSON: You served on several other committees as well, including Foreign Affairs. Why was that particular committee assignment so important for you?

BERKLEY: Well, that's a very good question. Now, Ways and Means was where my head was, but Foreign Affairs was where my heart was, and I wanted that committee assignment. I wanted to be on the Middle East Subcommittee, for obvious reasons. I was a pro-Israel Congresswoman, made no bones about it, never apologized for it. Quite the contrary. That was the perfect perch for me to forward the issues that I think are very important to the United States and our strongest ally in the world—Israel.

ETHIER: You were an outspoken critic of the Department of Energy's plan to use the Yucca Mountain as a nuclear waste repository. How did you use your position in the House to oppose this proposal?

BERKLEY: {laughter} For anybody representing Nevada, Yucca Mountain is one of the seminal issues, and that's the issue that you're going to be judged by when you go back to your constituents and ask them to support you the following election.

The idea that Yucca Mountain would be the location of a repository for the entire nation's nuclear waste is preposterous. You need to have a tremendous amount of water to cool the nuclear rods. I don't know whether people in Congress have noticed, but Nevada is in the middle of the desert, and there's no water here. We're having enough of a struggle with Lake Mead and limited water for growth. How, in heaven's name, in the middle of the desert, are you going to find water in order to cool the nuclear waste? It is a ridiculous concept.

They chose Yucca Mountain when there were eight people here in the state of Nevada. Things have changed dramatically. In addition to two and a half million people here, located in the Las Vegas Valley, we also welcome 40 million plus visitors every year. How are you going to protect these people from a catastrophe that happens at Yucca Mountain?

The state of Nevada does not create any energy from nuclear power. So why should we be the repository for every other state that is producing energy with the use of nuclear power? You want to use nuclear power? Fine. That's your business, but then you store the waste. We're not a garbage dump. This is a place, in the state of Nevada, that over 3 million people call home. It's not our job to take everybody else's nuclear waste.

Another issue that was very, very important in those days was transportation of nuclear waste. Going through 43 states in order to get to the state of Nevada to dump somebody else's garbage here. I think the people of the state of Nevada think a little more highly of themselves and are also worried about our fellow citizens across our great nation that these trainloads and truckloads of nuclear waste are going to be going through their neighborhoods.

ETHIER: How did the Nevada delegation come together over this issue?

BERKLEY: This is one of the issues that every Senator and every Congressman and woman who has ever represented the state of Nevada is opposed to. We collectively do not want our state to be the nuclear dump, or as former Senator [Jacob] Chic Hecht said, "the nuclear suppository for the rest of the country." We have fought it very successfully. It's reared its ugly head again now, but I hope that our congressional delegation can successfully fight this as well.

JOHNSON: In looking at your specific career, we know that you were involved in the Democratic Whip organization. Can you talk a little bit about that, how you became involved, and the different positions that you held?

BERKLEY: Again, in 1968, when I became involved in politics, I just loved it. Loved it. I think the first county and state convention and, ultimately, national convention I became involved in was the '72 election. So '68 I got a little taste of it, but by '72 I was fully engaged in party politics. And, again, it was my entire social life. Back then, in the state of Nevada, everyone I met was a Democrat.

I loved it. It meant something to me. It very much emulated my values and who I was as a person, and so it was just a natural coming together for me. And, of course, [I] became involved in party politics and ultimately culminated in being National Committeewoman for the state of Nevada, and [I] enjoyed that position very much.

JOHNSON: For people that don't know much about how the House works, which is a lot of people—

BERKLEY: Most everybody. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Right. Can you explain what you did as a regional whip, what your responsibilities were?

BERKLEY: Oh, absolutely. There's an entire Whip organization. You have to have a count. If you're an effective Whip—of course, Steny [Hamilton] Hoyer was Whip most of the time that I was there and then Congressman [James Enos] Clyburn. Before you could put anything on the floor, before you vote, you have to have a pretty good idea—not only a good idea. You have to have an

absolute-slam-dunk knowledge of where your caucus is and where your votes are.

And so you have an entire Whip operation. A regional whip meant for the western region that you were assigned certain people that you needed to check how they were leaning, how they were voting, what their concerns were before an important piece of legislation was brought to the floor for a vote. That was part of what you did. You had a list of names of people that were serving from your region, so that would be the people from Nevada, Arizona, Utah—if there were any Democrats in Utah in those days, highly unlikely—Colorado. So you had your group of people and you periodically checked with them when it came to a particular piece of legislation, and then you reported back to the Whip's office. "These are the people that are undecided. These are the people that are pro. These are the Congresspeople that are leaning no."

Then your Whip will report to your Leader or your Speaker. If it's an important piece of legislation, the Whip operation did everything they can to persuade the Members to vote whichever way the caucus was leaning. It was either you were going to get the votes to oppose something, you were going to get the votes to support something.

ETHIER: Do you think your approach to politics was a good match for your district?

BERKLEY: Oh, it was a perfect match. I think if I had decided not to run for the Senate and stay in [the House], I could have stayed there forever. It was very, very compatible with my own positions. I had a very large immigrant population, and I, coming from an immigrant family, I certainly understood the challenges that they had.

A lot of the services that my congressional offices provided were regarding immigration. [I] had a lot of Dreamers in my congressional district and dealing with issues like that for years before there was such a thing as the Dreamers and the DREAM [Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors] Act.

The first time I ever heard of this was—I started noticing a pattern, come March, April, May of every year. We had a rash of calls from people, youngsters, that were graduating high school. There's a Millennium Scholarship in the state of Nevada. If you're going to Nevada University or community college and your grades are exemplary, you are eligible for the Millennium Scholarship. We had a rash of kids that were graduating from local high schools, planning to go on to college, and applying for the Millennium Scholarship.

The Millennium Scholarship required that you attach your birth certificate to the application. These kids went home. They're as American as you and I. These kids went home, asked their mother or father for their birth certificate. That's when they find out for the first time that they weren't born in the United States and that they weren't American citizens. For a lot of these parents who were American citizens, they mistakenly thought that their becoming citizens inured to the benefit of their children. They did not know that their children had to seek separate citizenship.

So here you had a bunch of very successful high school graduates that were smart enough to be eligible for the Millennium Scholarship that are planning to go to college the following year, and finding out for the first time that they're not American citizens. It was a shock to them. After seeing this time and time again, I knew that we had to do something about this, and those youngsters ultimately became the Dreamers as we know them now.

I'll continue with the thought. Since I had a gaming background—I'd worked in gaming for a number of years. I knew the issue for the most important industry in my state and certainly my congressional district. I had grown up there, so I was very, very familiar with the Clark County School District and the importance of a quality education for everybody. So my background was pretty compatible with my congressional district.

JOHNSON: For most Members—and we've noticed a lot for women Members—there are descriptions of their political approach or their style. But how would you describe your own style or approach to your work in the House?

BERKLEY: Well, I was known as the hardest-working Congresswoman in Congress. Now, there may be many other Congresswomen that have the same—I don't know what I would call that. But I ordinarily worked very, very hard, and so I was completely devoted to my constituents. I considered myself a buffer and a bridge to the federal government. I protected the people of the state of Nevada from the federal government, and I was a bridge to the federal government should my constituents need anything from the federal government. That included everything from Social Security and Medicare, immigration issues, veterans' issues, senior issues. All of that we had an up close and personal relationship with.

Since I had worked in the casinos as a youngster—I was a cocktail waitress and a waitress and a keno runner—I understood what it was like to be a worker in these hotels. In addition to that, I ultimately ended up as an executive in a hotel. I had a pretty good understanding of what was going on in my district, and I think that inured to my benefit and, ultimately, the benefit of my constituents.

But I was hard-charging. If it came to protecting the people that I represented, I was like a lioness taking care of her cubbies. That's how I thought of myself. That was my job. When I gave speeches, I always used to say "my veterans." "My veterans did this. My veterans did that." I was at a movie one night with my husband, and we were walking out. This couple came over to me, older couple, and the man said, "I'm very curious, Congresswoman." He says, "Why do you call us veterans, we veterans, your veterans?" I looked at him and said, "Because you are my veterans. I mean, I'm sworn to protect and defend you, and that's exactly what I will do." He seemed satisfied with the answer, but then I realized how proprietary I was when it came to the people of my district.

ETHIER: Why did you decide to run for the Senate in 2012?

BERKLEY: There were a number of reasons. One, I have to say in all candor, the longer you stay in Congress, that trip home gets longer. And again, I very dutifully came home every weekend, but that was becoming a bit of a challenge. I thought if I had a six-year term that it would be easier, a little bit easier. Maybe my husband can come to Washington one weekend a month just to lighten that load of coming home every weekend.

In addition to that, Joe [Joseph I.] Lieberman was retiring from the Senate, and he was the strongest pro-Israel voice. And I didn't see—although there were a lot of Jews and a lot of pro-Israel people in the Senate—I didn't see somebody that would take Joe Liberman's place when it came to that issue, and I wanted to be that voice in the Senate. That also compelled me to do it.

I knew my state very, very well. I grew up in Nevada when there were very few people here, so I'd had an opportunity to traverse the state on many, many occasions and felt that I would take the same passion that I had for my

congressional district and just enhance it and be a very good representative for the people of the state of Nevada. That's kind of what motivated me to run for the Senate.

I don't regret it. I also knew—and it's very much a personality characteristic—I thought if I didn't do it I would always regret it. In those days, I had no idea that Harry Reid would have his unfortunate accident, so I thought he'd be there forever. I thought this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to run for the Senate, have a much stronger voice for my state, because you're one of 100 instead of one of 435. I decided if I didn't do it, I would always regret that decision and spend the rest of my life saying, "I should've, I would've, I could've, and I didn't." What ended up happening is I ran. I lost by a point. But if you ask me if I regret making that decision, the answer is definitely no.

JOHNSON: Well, it certainly is not an easy thing to run for Congress and certainly not for the Senate. What were some of the major obstacles that you faced?

BERKLEY: It was a very, very tough election. I was accused of a lot of things that I found so appalling, yet I did not handle the accusations very well. I took them very personally and did not run an effective campaign. I knew better, and I kept chiding myself throughout the entire election. "This doesn't feel right to me. This isn't working for me." If it's not working for you, you know it's not working for the people that you're hoping to get their support and vote for you. I just thought it was a poorly run campaign, a poorly executed campaign, and I was not a good candidate.

If you ask me why, I'll never in a million years be able to tell you why, but I think—and I've given this advice to my friends that are now in office, including the two Senators who are good girlfriends of mine, close

girlfriends. Of course, the Members of Congress of our congressional delegation are very, very close friends of mine. But my advice to them, as it should have been to me, is, be yourself. You can't morph into something you're not, and so you should run your campaign in a manner that works best for you and, ultimately, that works best for your campaign and your constituents. I did not do that. I tried to be something that I wasn't, and I didn't do that very well.

If I had that to do over again—although I am delighted with my life right now. I have a wonderful and responsible position as a CEO and senior provost of two medical schools, one here and one in northern California. I divide my time between the two campuses and truly enjoying my life and have no regrets either way. But if I had to do over again, I would have run that Senate campaign [in] dramatically different fashion.

ETHIER: You served for seven terms in the House. What were the most significant changes to the institution that you witnessed during your tenure?

BERKLEY: Oh, a tremendous loss of the middle. I don't think I'm telling anybody anything [new]. If you're just the most casual observer of politics right now, you know that this is very polarized atmosphere. There's very little interaction between the parties. It was beginning to be that way when I first ran, but by the time I ended my career in Congress, it became a much less welcoming place to be.

We used to have the center. When I first got to Congress, I joined the Center Aisle Caucus. I don't know if it exists now, but it was a group of Republican and Democratic Members of Congress that were in the middle and very proud of that, were good moderates on both sides of the aisle. We met monthly for dinner, had a Cabinet member or administration official come

and speak with us, and we actually tried to find middle ground to craft legislation that would be helpful to the American people. We had a very robust group when I first got there. By the time it ended, I think there were two of us left, one Republican and me. I think that's a sad commentary, and you're seeing the result of it now.

JOHNSON: Wow. That's a big change.

BERKLEY: It is a big change, and I do not believe for the better. Whether we'll ever get back that way I don't know—where we actually work together on behalf of what's best for the American people. Maybe that's just a pipe dream. Maybe it never existed, but when I first got to Congress, I believed it with all my heart. That was my job. I think things have changed dramatically now. It's much more difficult to get work done across the aisle.

JOHNSON: So, as you know, we are historians, and we are always asking questions about the past, but there's one question that we're asking all of our interviewees and asking them to look into the future. There are now 131 women in Congress. One hundred and six of those are in the House. How many women do you think will be in Congress on the 150th anniversary of Jeannette Rankin's swearing into the House? So that would be in 2067.

BERKLEY: Ideally, there should be at the very minimum a 50–50 split because that reflects our population in the United States of America. We could aspire to that, but whether we reach that goal, your guess is as good as mine. I simply don't know. I used to feel that I had a very good handle on the political pulse of my state and our nation. I don't feel that way anymore, and I suspect a lot of people are like me, just shaking our heads and wondering where we're going as a nation. I just don't seem to recognize the institutions that were so sacred to me when I was growing up and coming of age. There are a lot of

changes that I'm uncomfortable with, and I suspect there are a lot of my fellow citizens that feel the same way.

ETHIER: What do you think your lasting legacy will be in terms of your House service?

BERKLEY: There's a very concrete thing. The thing that I'm most proud of is the VA [veterans affairs] hospital in my congressional district. I had a wonderful staff both in Washington and here in the district. They all worked very, very hard to make sure that we were able to transfer the land and receive the financing to actually build a state-of-the-art, breathtakingly beautiful VA hospital in my congressional district. That's the thing I am most proud of.

As far as beyond that, when I first lost my Senate race, I was absolutely heartbroken. For somebody that loved public service, when you don't have an office to do public service with or from—[it was] a very, very difficult year for me. At the same time, and this was so bizarre, while I was feeling my absolute lowest, that's when I was being honored by almost every organization, every church, every group in southern Nevada. There was such a tremendous outpouring of support that the dichotomy was really difficult for me to wrap my head around. Feeling so poorly myself and yet having people coming over to me and thanking me and honoring me for my service. The irony of it all and the paradox was a little shocking to my system.

But as I got passed that—and time heals all wounds, obviously—as time went on, I came to realize that I had had a tremendous impact on a whole generation of Nevadans. All the little schoolchildren, when they were learning about their government or about who their elected officials were, they all knew about me. From 1983, when I started my service in the Nevada state assembly, to 2013, when I concluded my service in Congress—that's a 30-year stretch of people in this state that knew who I was, what I did, why I

did it, and were very much a part of my life because I was a part of their lives without even knowing who they were. I think for a large number of youngsters, especially girls in Las Vegas, I think I served as a role model for their future aspirations. I think, if anything, that would be my legacy.

JOHNSON: I think that is a great place to end, unless there is anything else that you wanted to add today.

BERKLEY: No, if you come up with any more questions, please feel free to call me back.

JOHNSON: Definitely.

ETHIER: Thank you so much for your time.

JOHNSON: Thank you.

BERKLEY: Thank you very much for what you're doing.