The Honorable Lois Capps

U.S. Representative of California (1998–2017)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

July 16, 2019

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

"But I remember, because my husband died so suddenly, that I was in shock. I made the decision to run only three weeks after Walter's death. It makes me emotional as I think back on those days. I really had to lean a lot on people I trusted around me. [Senator Bob Kerrey] called me to just offer condolences, but also, he gave me this piece of advice on the phone. He said, 'I support your running for Congress. But don't think you're doing it for Walter. You're going to have to do it for yourself.' And that, in a way, took me aback. It was very good advice because it's absolutely true. It was much easier for me to think of carrying on his legacy than my own—didn't even think I had one, you know? I had to own myself and come into myself."

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Abstract

After earning a nursing degree, Lois Capps was working as school nurse when her husband Walter ran for Congress. He successfully challenged the incumbent in 1996, but suddenly died 10 months into his House career. Capps decided to run for the open seat—not to continue her husband's legacy, but to start her own. In her oral history, she reflects on the support she received from her family during her 19 years in the House, the importance of seniority in Congress, and the evolution of women as political leaders and role models for aspiring legislators.

Additionally, Capps explains how being a public health nurse shaped her entire legislative outlook. She kept her nursing license current throughout her tenure, started the Nursing Caucus, and encouraged nurses to run for office, recognizing their people skills as a strength in politics. Capps recalls successfully campaigning for Energy and Commerce Chairman John D. Dingell Jr. to give her a spot on the Health Subcommittee, where she worked on the Affordable Care Act. From her seat on the Natural Resources Committee, she addressed forest fires, oil spills, and other environmental concerns in her district, which she viewed as a health concern for her constituents.

Biography

CAPPS, LOIS, (wife of Walter Capps), a Representative from California; born in Ladysmith, Rusk County, Wis., January 10, 1938; graduated from Flathead County High School, Kalispell, Mont., 1955; B.S., Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Wash., 1959; M.A., Yale University, New Haven, Conn., 1964; M.A., University of California, Santa Barbara, Calif., 1990; nursing instructor; nurse administrator, Yale Hospital, New Haven, Conn.; director, Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting Project and the Parent and Child Enrichment Center, Santa Barbara County, Calif.; instructor, Santa Barbara City College, Santa Barbara, Calif.; elected as a Democrat to the One Hundred Fifth Congress, by special election, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of her husband, United States Representative Walter Capps, and reelected to the nine succeeding Congresses (March 10, 1998–January 3, 2017); was not a candidate for reelection to the One Hundred Fifteenth Congress in 2016.

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.

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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, D.: 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 LOIS CAPPS OF CALIFORNIA —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: Today's date is July 16th, 2019. My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm with the Historian's Office, and I'm with my colleague, Grace Ethier [in the House Recording Studio]. We are very excited to be talking to the former Representative Lois Capps of California. Thank you so much for joining us today.

ETHIER: Thank you.

CAPPS: Thank you.

JOHNSON: Congresswoman Capps is speaking from her home in California. This is a phone interview that we're doing today for the Jeannette Rankin oral history project to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first woman elected to Congress. To begin with today, when you were young, did you have any female role models?

CAPPS: My mother was a very strong woman and a leader in our community always. In many ways [she] provided a role model for me. Many of my relatives did as well. As a young child growing up, we had a harmonious family, which sounds a little remarkable today. {laughter} But for the most part, yes, a grandmother who stood out in my—I was a little afraid of her, as I was of her husband, my grandfather, just because of the kinds of people they were. But they were amazing in their ways, in the time that they lived.

Yes, I think I've identified with some strong women, both in primary school and elementary school. I don't recall as much in high school, but certainly in college and in my preparation to become a nurse. There were rather outstanding professors and other nurses with whom I worked that I wanted to emulate. That list goes on.

I've been blessed being alive during a time when women have really come into their own in so many ways. I'm old enough to remember when I was told a woman's place is in the home, subtly perhaps. But a strong example comes through in the progress that we are making. Since I arrived in the United States Congress, I've seen the small minority of women Members become a much fuller group. The place of women in the [presidential election] campaign is showing a great shift in the public, but also for me personally.

ETHIER: Related to that, when you were growing up, what were the expectations about your role in society as a woman?

CAPPS: My expectations were not to be pushing myself forward very much. Just as an anecdote, I grew up in a parsonage. Some people don't know what that word means. But my father was a minister. He was ordained in the Lutheran tradition, and in those days it was all men who were preachers. He married a woman whose father was the seminary president, where my father received his post-college training. They were the first of their generation to go on to college, or for the most part they were. There were many ceilings broken among the generation right before me. But I didn't have very many women leaders to model after in the political world or in life in general except in the family settings that I have already indicated.

And my goodness, has that changed during my lifetime. When I was a young woman—married, having moved from a graduate school setting, where my husband [Walter Holden Capps] and I spent our first four years of our marriage, to Santa Barbara, where he joined the faculty at University of California at Santa Barbara [UCSB]. As a young wife and young mother, I looked for a group. I found a group that was just [right] for me, out of the feminist rise. The Santa Barbara Women's Political Committee is still a strong organization in our community, and their goal was to encourage women to take part in the political process. I had no idea, even

peripherally, of doing that in the very beginning, but I found the group very stimulating. I got to know many lifelong friends in my community through that organization.

JOHNSON: Is that how you first became interested in politics?

CAPPS: No. {laughter} I wasn't interested in politics, nor was my husband, when either of us were young. He was raised in Nebraska, and I was raised in Northwest Montana for my high school years. We were good, moderate Republican stock, let's put it that way.

It wasn't until we were married and the '60s came, and civil rights—we happened to be in New Haven, Connecticut, when the Freedom Riders went to the South to help desegregate the South—that we were caught up in that movement and that era. I remember when President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy was shot. We were both graduate students then. We dropped everything, and we drove down to Washington, DC, from New Haven to walk somberly around his casket in the Rotunda of the Capitol. I had no idea that one day I would be back in that same building. I would never have dreamed of it. I never would have dreamed of any of it as a young person.

How it came to be was that my husband was trained in theology—Western theology, especially the Middle Ages. He was very excited about the possibility of this new department of religious studies. He thought he was going to be a Lutheran minister, as was the tradition in my family at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Then when he went to seminary, he got an opportunity to take a year of study. The seminary was in the Midwest. We weren't married then. He was offered a scholarship to Yale Divinity School in New Haven, which was, of course, part of Yale University. We went back there, got hooked on academics. I knew he was good at it. We were

married then, and he enrolled in the PhD program at Yale University and got his PhD in Philosophy of Religion.

At the same time, this campus in Santa Barbara was beginning its first religious studies program ever in a secular university. They were groundbreakers here. He was very excited by that prospect, that he could teach in a taxpayer-funded university, such as the University of California, and also teach about religion. Not teach religion, but teach about the religion as a study, as a discipline. Now it's thriving in many, many campuses around the country. But he felt—I believe, I would say—a calling to do that. I supported all of that. I got my master's degree in theology also. I was a nurse. I'm rambling now. Do you want to cut me off?

JOHNSON: No, you can keep going.

CAPPS: Okay. I went back east with my new bachelor of science in nursing and went to work. My husband and I had met during my college years. For our honeymoon, journeyed from Montana to New Haven, with everything we owned on the top of a pink Buick on the luggage rack that my father-in-law made for us. Walter enrolled at Yale, and I worked in New Haven in the hospital, and then for the Visiting Nurse Association. But I got the bug to go back to school too. I should have probably gotten a master's degree in nursing from the wonderful Department of Nursing at Yale University, but I was hooked on religion myself, on the study of religion. So I got a Master of Arts in religion from Yale Divinity School. They let me, for my field experience, use my visiting nurse experiences for that. I was enchanted by the program because I could design it myself—a lot about psychology and the things I was interested in.

So we came to Santa Barbara. I didn't work for a while, while we raised our kids. Then I started to work for the local school district, first part time and then full time. I don't know where we are on the question.

JOHNSON: Your time as a nurse was something that we know was incredibly important to you. What we're wondering is what kind of influence, or how that might have prepared you for a future career in politics.

CAPPS: Well, it's interesting. There were lots of naysayers when I got involved. I got involved not with any intention. I got involved because my husband did. I have to keep going back to his story because that's how I got into it. I was working as a school nurse, he was teaching at the university. But he started teaching a new topic as it was right during the Vietnam War era. The war sort of ripped apart our campus, as it did many campuses around the country, with people protesting the war, and pros and cons that were very inflammatory. Santa Barbara campus was particularly so. A lot of the protests ended up in the Bank of America branch in the community of Isla Vista, as it's right next to the campus. So, I mean, it was the riots in LA, it was a lot. It was the tumultuous '60s.

And he, my husband, for another reason, got to know some Vietnam veterans who were coming back from the war. They were spit upon when they got out of the airplanes at the airport leaving their service. They didn't ask to go to war, and they fought a war that was very unpopular. When they came back, at least in California, they had to go into hiding. They couldn't acknowledge, even some of them to their family, that they had had these experiences. He met a few vets full of anger at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. He was so taken, first by their youth, and also by their experiences, that he thought his students at UC Santa Barbara should be exposed to it.

He asked a couple of them if they would come and talk to his students. He had become quite a popular teacher by then, and he designed a course on the experience of the war in Vietnam and its role in our civil society. He had the foresight to realize that the best teachers of that experience would be the very veterans themselves who, at the ages of the college students, found themselves drafted into this situation for which they had no preparation. They came back and were trying to adjust to life. They became the teachers of this class, and it went on for 30 years. At the same time, the Vietnam War Memorial was being built in Washington, DC. He took a group of students and veterans to Washington, DC, to see the memorial and to experience that process. By then the war was over, but the aftermath was still very much present.

Walter found our particular Member of Congress at that time to be very sort of AWOL, or absent and unavailable. He got frustrated, and that became part of his motivation. So Walter announced at the dinner table that Thanksgiving that he would run for Congress because our district needed a better kind of Representative.

Neither of us had ever been involved, particularly. By then we were Democrats, but we weren't involved in the local Democratic scene to speak of. To a lot of people's surprise, he won the primary that cycle. He didn't win the final [general election]. The district had been Republican for 50 years, and he lost to the Republican, but not by very much. When he ran again two years later, we got a little bit more savvy about how to do it, and he won, but with a very slim margin. He lost by a very little, and he won by a very little. And then, as you know from probably the history there, he was in office for 10 months, and he died suddenly of a heart attack.

The race had been really close—to switch a district from being Republican to Democrat, by a novice, really, in every sense of the word. He was already 63, was not young for being a new Member of Congress. But he was young to the whole experience. He enjoyed every minute of it—well, a lot of it. He didn't like a lot of

the campaigning parts. But we made a good team because—this also is to answer your question—I was a public health nurse. I didn't mind going door to door. I didn't mind meeting people. He liked to write speeches and give speeches. He was really good at doing that. I never was very good at giving speeches. But I liked to mix it up with people. I liked to be among people. I've told nurses this a lot: you have the people skills because you're with people during their toughest moments, and you can relate to them in that setting. You can also take their health concerns, concerns about your profession, to Congress.

After my husband died, we looked around for somebody to run for his seat, and there wasn't anybody who was willing to take it on because it had been such a precarious win. And so, I kind of found myself [thinking], "Well, if I don't do it, it'll flip back to Republican." One of my opponents in the special election was a gentleman who said to me, "I wouldn't have run against your husband, but I'll certainly run against you." Well, I beat him, but only because another candidate entered—it was a runoff. I beat the moderate Republican in the primary, and I could win over the rabid conservative Republican in the general.

So I'm the first one to say that there are lots of accidental happenings along the way that put people into positions of leadership, and that we've got to be always ready to take up the call if we're asked to do so.

ETHIER: What did your family think about you running for Congress after your husband's sudden death?

CAPPS: That's a good question. They were stunned. They rallied. I don't know what they said behind my back. {laughter} But I think there was some, "Who does she think she is?"—even in my family. But our [campaign] was very grassroots. They had just rallied around Walter, who had just won, and so they rallied again.

I share a home now with my daughter, who is on our local school board, who always was more political than either of her parents. She graduated from college when my husband ran the first time, and she wanted to go to Washington, DC. She had interned there. She went back and got a job in the [President William (Bill) Jefferson] Clinton White House. She got a job working for George Stephanopoulos, first as an intern, and then she was his paid staff. Then she worked in the speech-writing department for President Clinton. So, when her dad was elected, she was right there.

Then everyone helped me with my race, my family—actually, my family members all came and walked precincts and met people and made phone calls and all those kinds of things that you do. I had a lot of support amongst my family. But I know I surprised them and myself when I won.

JOHNSON: At the time, you were quoted as saying that you felt "compelled" to carry on the legacy of your husband. What was his legacy, and how were you able to do that?

CAPPS: Oh, my. Well, I saw it a lot. He campaigned on the Founding Fathers. I always want to say "Mothers" as well. But the documents that came from Jefferson and the early writers about the bonds of trust—it came to be almost a slogan. "We are stronger when we are united as people than we ever are when we are divided." I look at where we are in our country today. I'll give him all the credit—he was much more of a reader and a scholar than I. But I heard his speeches. I believed the same way he did. We came from such similar backgrounds and were exposed to similar things. He was able to articulate it in a much better way, but frankly, I became a pretty good campaigner. Even my last race was not a shoo-in.

By then I had decided it was time for me to leave Congress. In the Democratic Party, we have what we call "front line Members," people with swing districts. Our district

is still somewhat divided. It's not totally blue and not totally red. So I never could take a race for granted. I think it made me a better Member of Congress. But I had to work hard the whole time I was there. And I didn't start until I was 60.

JOHNSON: What do you think made you a good campaigner? Grace and I were reading that a lot of people said that you were a very good campaigner. So what were the qualities that helped you with that?

CAPPS: To me, it's all about being comfortable around people who aren't necessarily exactly like you. I watched my father. His trademark as a Lutheran minister, or as a minister in general—a pastor—was going to visit his congregational members, or perspective members, and reaching out to the community and being one of the people. To understand their needs and concerns, to be with a grieving family as they were going through loss. That was my role model as a young kid.

Then when I became a nurse, it was natural that I would be a public health nurse and work with families. A lot of it is—I would just use the word "ministerial," giving guidance and counsel and [being] health-oriented. But I, as a Member of Congress, I used to talk a lot about climate issues as being health-oriented. I started a couple of caucuses. [I started] a Health and Safety Caucus. I started the Nurse's Caucus. I felt like nurses really had a role to play. And my goodness, they certainly have increased in numbers in the Congress.

ETHIER: Going back to your first campaign quickly, did you receive any memorable advice during that first campaign?

CAPPS: Yes. I remember, my husband got to know Senator [J. Robert] Kerrey, Bob Kerrey, the one from Nebraska. Does that name ring a bell?

JOHNSON: Yes.

ETHIER: Yes.

CAPPS: Okay. Well, they got to know each other because both were from Nebraska. Bob Kerrey lost his leg in the Vietnam War. I think he wrote a book called *Waltzing Matilda [The Life and Times of Nebraska Senator Robert Kerrey*]. Well, it brought him out, he came to UCSB to speak in Walter's class. At that time, he was thinking about running for President. Walt went back and campaigned for him in Omaha and spoke on his behalf. Let's see, what was your question? I lost the train of thought.

ETHIER: What advice did you receive during your first campaign?

CAPPS: Oh, he was the one. He followed Walter all the way through, and we got together in Washington, DC, after Walter was elected. I don't know if he was Senator by then, I forget where he was in his career. But I remember, because my husband died so suddenly, that I was in shock. I made the decision to run only three weeks after Walter's death. It makes me emotional as I think back on those days. I really had to lean a lot on people I trusted around me. He called me to just offer condolences, but also, he gave me this piece of advice on the phone. He said, "I support your running for Congress. But don't think you're doing it for Walter. You're going to have to do it for yourself." And that, in a way, took me aback. It was very good advice because it's absolutely true. It was much easier for me to think of carrying on his legacy than my own—didn't even think I had one, you know? I had to own myself and come into myself. Other people said things like that to me, but that's the one that stands out.

JOHNSON: Since this was a special election, it received a lot of national attention. We were wondering what that was like, first, but also, if you could just describe the difference between a special election and a more typical election.

CAPPS: Well, the thing about the special election for me was that I had never run for anything. I think I was a student body officer in high school. Until my husband ran, I had no experience with a campaign. And I didn't know anything about Congress. I learned as much as I could as a spouse in the few months that I was there in that role. I immersed myself as best I could. Remind me, what is the question again?

JOHNSON: Sure. What it was like running in a special election and how that differs from a standard election.

CAPPS: Well, it was the shock of it all. I had to really hang on to everything that had grounded me. My family, my faith, all that I knew and was because of the rollercoaster ride, in a way that it is. Walter's death was public. It was on the front page of the news. I was there as a spouse. I became so close to his staff. His chief of staff, who is one of my best friends now and was my district director, she had to go find a grave site in the cemetery. All of this stuff happened, the funeral, there were all the Members coming out—you know what that whole tradition is like. I didn't know what that was like. I was fairly numb. But then I also found, I couldn't say any of this in public. I wrote about it in my book. Did you know that I wrote a book?

JOHNSON: No.

ETHIER: No.

CAPPS: Okay. Do you want me to stop and just to give you a blurb—well, we can talk about that in a minute.

JOHNSON: Okay.

CAPPS: I found myself facing reporters after his death, asking me what I was experiencing. I'd never dealt with this. I was honest. I said it felt to me, when I realized what happened, that I'd been kicked or punched in the stomach—or something to that

effect, very graphic. I found it the next day in the *Los Angeles Times*, on the front page. I realized that I really had to be careful. I was now in the public as well. And that was before I ran.

Then, of course, I found myself surrounded by staff who wouldn't let me say certain things like that to the press. But in the beginning, it was so raw. There was so much that I wasn't prepared for.

ETHIER: How important was gender in this special election? Gender and age in the special election?

CAPPS: I wasn't conscious of either at the time. But as soon as I was elected, I realized, first, I was one of three nurses in Congress and one of a small minority of women. Women Members of Congress in California really rallied to me in that special election, helped me campaign. They were strong role models, always had been. Nancy Pelosi, Zoe Lofgren, Anna [Georges] Eshoo, [Diane Edith] Watson—I can't even say all their names, from Southern California. Some of my closest friends, also in Congress, were the women Members from California. I've always felt—I don't want to say protected by the women Members, but the feeling that it was still a man's world in the U.S. Congress, when I was first elected, was still very strong. And you said my gender and my. . .

ETHIER: Your age.

CAPPS: My age. I'd never been so very conscious of my age. Unfortunately, I am now. I decided to retire because I'd served 18 years, and I felt like I was getting close to 80—I was in my late 70s. I looked around Congress and saw that some of my colleagues, I believed stayed too long in office. It's an easy position to stay in, as a wonderful job. Once you get the hang of it, there are so many personal rewards, so

many satisfying experiences. So I had to steer myself. "Well, you're not going to stay here forever." Plus, I had come late. And I did want to spend time with my family.

I wasn't really conscious of my age as a negative. I always felt like I could do it, although it was increasingly a long and strenuous commute. The weekly commute from the West Coast for Members of Congress from the Pacific back to DC is a real handicap, I believe, because it takes so much time. And in a district like mine, I had to go home every weekend.

JOHNSON: I can't even imagine doing that kind of travel.

CAPPS: I can't now. {laughter} I don't miss it one bit.

JOHNSON: I imagine. How much of a barrier was fundraising for you as a woman candidate, maybe in that first election or in the elections after? Or was it a barrier?

CAPPS: Every election. It is a huge barrier. It's such a time waster. It is so demeaning to the whole enterprise. When you do read the Founders' [documents] and you believe in the principles—that's why I know my husband turned it [fundraising] over to me. I am a good foot soldier, and he hated making fundraising calls. They had to give him a Snickers bar between every call. {laughter} And at that rate, it wouldn't have lasted. But he would have learned.

No, there's no way around it, [as] we have [it] at this moment. In a district like the one I represented—yes, there are some wealthy people, and there are people who would help each other. But you spend so many hours every single day campaigning, dialing for dollars. It is obscene.

JOHNSON: Do you think it's more difficult for women to raise money than men?

CAPPS: Yes. Oh, by far. Oh, my goodness, yes. We don't have a network. There are so many parts of this society that are a man's world. I don't know. I had a lot of doors slam. But a lot of people aren't willing to take a chance on a candidate like I was, even all the way through.

ETHIER: Did any women's groups, local or national, support your campaign?

CAPPS: Yes. Oh gosh, EMILY's List, right from the beginning. That was the most powerful one of my experience. I don't know if there are others today. "Early Money is Like Yeast"—have you heard that?

JOHNSON: Yes.

CAPPS: Okay. Well, there is a group, and it's non-partisan, but in truth, it's mostly Democrats they help. There is a group of women, grand supporters of women being elected to Congress, who formed a group called "Early Money is Like Yeast." And that stands for "EMILY." It's called "EMILY's List." They interviewed candidates for Congress, I don't know if they do it for other reasons. I was identified. You have to be pro-choice, and certain criteria, which was fairly easy for me to reach, I guess. They raised money independently and put their money behind certain candidates that they feel will benefit by it. They made, in my era, a huge difference for women becoming elected.

Also, there are women Members of Congress on the Democratic side who raised money for other women. And there are locally. We started a group. I told you about the Santa Barbara Women's Political Committee. They raised some money for local candidates that are women or good men. They've been known to support good men too, in certain races. That's the local one. There are groups, and it's worth tapping every one that you can.

JOHNSON: We wanted to talk a little bit more about your specific path to Congress and the research—

CAPPS: The specific what?

JOHNSON: Your specific path to Congress and the research that we've done because your husband passed away. That was a common way in the early 20th century, or the mid-20th century, right, for women to succeed their husbands.

CAPPS: Oh, yes. I kept saying to nurses, "Don't get there the way I did. Get there on your own."

JOHNSON: Was there any obstacle for you, running as a widow, trying to fill your husband's seat in Congress?

CAPPS: I didn't fill his seat. I filled the seat, which he had vacated by his death. But there were no coattails, as my friend, Bob Kerrey, told me. There were three of us widows when I was there that got some national attention. We were profiled for some news journals. Jo Ann Emerson—and our husbands had all died—the other two were Republican. Mary Bono succeeded Sonny Bono. He was from Palm Springs. He served a short time and was killed in a skiing accident, about the same time that Walter died. We both ran for Congress, but she was a lot younger than me, Mary Bono. But then she went on to serve as well. So did Jo Ann Emerson, whose husband [Norvell William (Bill) Emerson]—she was from Missouri—whose husband was a longtime Member of Congress and died. Now there are others. But there were many—Doris Matsui from Sacramento became a good friend. Her husband [Robert T. Matsui] served.

JOHNSON: For some of the earlier women—not those, but women in the middle of the century—there was an assumption that they would be placeholders, that, yes, they might win that special election.

CAPPS: Oftentimes.

JOHNSON: Right. Did you ever encounter that?

CAPPS: Well, I had primary opponents in every election. Oh, wait—no I didn't. When you're elected in a special—here's something interesting too. I ran in a special after my husband's death, and because the term of office is so short, I was on the ballot in California four times in one calendar year.

JOHNSON: For the women that you just mentioned, Mary Bono and Jo Ann Emerson, was there a special bond that formed between the three of you?

CAPPS: Yes. We got together every once in a while. In fact, Mary and I formed a sort of partnership. We were both part of an organization called Faith & Politics [Institute]. It's in Washington, DC.

ETHIER: So as the winner of a special election, you came in without the benefit of a freshman orientation. How did you get your office up and running so quickly? Did you have some familiarity because of your husband's service? Did you keep any of the same staff? How was that introduction?

CAPPS: Well, it was very piecemeal. I had immersed myself. When he was elected, I quit my job. I retired from being a school nurse. I worked for the school district for 20 years. But I went back and forth with him some, and I stayed in Washington, DC, in our little apartment sometimes when he would come back home on the weekends. I got myself immersed in the spouse's organization as best I could. And I was close to his staff.

When the seat was vacant, they stayed on. But it's really very odd when the seat's vacant until there is a special election. They all came back to work for me, and then little by little, the changes happened. It was a transition that was good, both in the district offices and in the DC office. We had three offices in the congressional district. The district is spread out, almost 200 miles from one end to the other, and then one office in Washington.

JOHNSON: Were there any Members that served as mentors, or offered you some helpful advice, when you first came in?

CAPPS: Many. Oh, so many. One of my dearest friends, Sam Farr—we both retired the same year—represented the district immediately to the north of mine, Monterey and Santa Cruz, California. We just were really good buddies. When Walter was elected, we didn't have an office, he reached out, and we used his office for a while. He took me under his wing, too. And Jim [James A.] McDermott represented a district in Seattle. I got to be friends with him as well through Faith & Politics. The three of us retired the same year. We've been good friends for a long time.

Congress has such friendships. Many of them are across the aisle. I like to tell [this] story about bipartisanship. When I came to Congress, my husband had just died. I received sympathy notes and encouragement from Republicans as well as Democrats. My daughter died two years later, at the age of 35, with two little kids, and that was really hard. She was sick for a year. I was consoled by Republicans equally as Democrats.

JOHNSON: So you really got to see the human side of your colleagues, then.

CAPPS: Oh, my goodness. We all get there the same way. We all have families. The differences are huge in policy. But the life experiences are so similar.

JOHNSON: Right. Before we get too far along, one question that we've asked all of our interviewees is about their district, if you could describe your district and then how it changed over your tenure in Congress.

CAPPS: Well, you know, it changes with every census, or it can. Mine changed a great deal. It is basically two central counties on the central coast of California, between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Well, the space there between is more than one congressional district. But it is actually mostly rural. They called it a gerrymandered district in the beginning. Now California has a commission that decides the districts, and it's more based on geography. That's a national topic now with a couple of states in our current administration because they can sway the electorate according to where people live. Bunching all the Democrats in one area, all the Republicans in another.

I, for a while, got this district that was mostly coastal, which happens to be a little more progressive than inland. I did have parts of three counties for a while. When I was first elected, and then when I retired, it was basically back to two counties, mostly rural, but with increasing urbanization of the coastal areas and big emphasis on protecting our environment.

My two important issues always were, in the beginning, healthcare, because of my profession, and in protecting the environment, stewardship of the environment, which came naturally to me. Having lived here a very long time as well and seeing some natural disasters, like our big oil spill, and wanting to be focused on renewable energy. I was fortunate. That's a campaign all unto itself, about how you get to exercise your areas of expertise that fits your district.

I wanted to be on the Energy and Commerce Committee from the day that I was very new—this is a little aside now, so you're going to have to bring me back to the

to the questions—but one of my first days in Congress after the special election, I found myself sitting on the House Floor. I heard my colleague from Denver, Diana DeGette, give a five-minute speech on the Patient's Bill of Rights. I was sort of dumbfounded. I couldn't believe they were talking about a topic that would be so dear to my heart as a nurse—hearing about healthcare and people's need to have access to healthcare and those kind of things, which were my passion.

When she finished her speech and came back to the floor, I sat next to her, introduced myself, and I said, "How do you get to give a speech like that?" She looked at me, and she said, "You've got to get yourself on the Energy and Commerce Committee because that's where the Health Subcommittee resides as well as the Energy Subcommittee." But at that point I was focused on the health.

I used to kid my staff and say I thought it was a campaign to get to Congress. I've got another campaign now to get to know John [David] Dingell [Jr.], the longest-serving Member of Congress, from Detroit, Michigan, who had been on the Energy and Commerce Committee—well, succeeding his father [John David Dingell], who had been on it forever. So I got to know John Dingell. He was very old-school. He served a very long time, and, most important, he was the Ranking Member. At that point, we were in the minority. But he was, unbeknownst to me, quite partial to nurses. I pointed out to him that there weren't any nurses on his Health Subcommittee. The next opening, I was asked to join. I was very blessed in that way because I got to spend a year of my congressional service—more than a year, probably—working on the Affordable Care Act with my colleagues. And though it was a flawed bill—and I was the first to say so—it moved our healthcare system forward immeasurably, I believe.

Then I also got on the Energy Subcommittee. We had, at that point, a nuclear energy facility, Diablo Canyon—it's being shut down now. And we have all these

natural resources, with the famous oil spills. We had rig oil spills offshore, but it's very damaging, threatening to marine life and our entire environmental system.

Those were my hallmarks as I came to Congress, and I was privileged to be able to work on those topics.

JOHNSON: Well, that's a great story because Grace and I were going to ask you how was it that you were able to get on that committee [Energy and Commerce], especially since you didn't have a lot of experience.

CAPPS: I worked hard. Again, it's always a little luck. It meant a lot to me personally to be able to do that. I didn't realize at the time what a prestigious committee it is.

JOHNSON: Right. We are close to an hour in. Do you want to take a break, or do you want to keep going? It's totally up to you.

CAPPS: Whoo! Okay, it does go by, doesn't it?

JOHNSON: It does.

CAPPS: Let's pause, and then when we come back at some point, since you didn't realize I wrote a book—well, I don't know if it matters, even, to you because some of what I am telling you I wrote about. But I wrote a little book, and maybe I could talk about that just for a second, even if it doesn't relate to what you want to put in.

JOHNSON: Sure. Did you want to do that now? Or did you want to take a break first?

CAPPS: Let's get started. I was part of Faith & Politics all the years I was in Congress. I did the pilgrimage to Selma, Alabama, and I was part of a little group that met for reflection on Thursday mornings. Doug Tanner was at the helm during my whole stay in Congress. [He] was the head of the Faith & Politics Institute. He's a really good friend. And we also worked on some of the same issues. I'm on the board of a

hospital in East Jerusalem. I started doing that just as I was leaving Congress. That's run by the Lutheran World Federation.

This publishing company, called Fortress Press, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, reached out to me and asked me if I'd be willing to write a book from the perspective of a person of faith but from my own perspective. I cringed because my husband wrote several books. He was a scholar, he knew how to do it. I had no background in how to do that at all, I still don't. But I plunged in to write not a scholarly text but rather a memoir.

As an aside, the [library at] University of California in Santa Barbara reached out to me posthumously to [donate] Walter's things. All of our papers, our legal agreements, are at the University in their collection. They made a special collection for the Capps. All of those formal papers went out there.

This little book that I wrote [*Keeping Faith in Congress: Why Persistence, Compassion, and Teamwork Will Save Our Democracy*]—not very long, less than 200 pages—is just my reflections. It's kind of a memoir of my time in Congress, of some of the things we've been discussing: my family, my perception, some of my travels as a Member, and various things. It took me about a year, off and on, to do it because I'm not very skilled at writing. And it's now published.

JOHNSON: Yes.

ETHIER: Great.

JOHNSON: Well, it's something we'll both like to read.

ETHIER: Yes.

JOHNSON: Thank you for telling us about it. In the Historian's Office, we have books written by Members, or about Members, so that would be good to have in our collection, definitely.

END OF PART ONE ~ BEGINNING OF PART TWO

JOHNSON: Hello, we're back. How are you?

CAPPS: Good.

ETHIER: Back to your entry into the House, how would you describe the atmosphere of the House when you were elected? Was it a welcoming place for a woman, in your opinion?

CAPPS: That's a good question because I was privy to many changes during the 18 years I was there. I was accepted and welcomed. I don't think many people thought I could win. And I wouldn't have thought I could win if I had been in their shoes. That's not a judgment at all. I believe [I was welcomed] by my party, particularly in my caucus from California. They were just elated!

This had long been a Republican district—this is now partisan, that's the easiest way for me to describe it. Of course, California now is pretty solidly Democratic as a state. But when I was first elected, it was pretty much half and half. We had Republican governors, we had [Arnold] Schwarzenegger, [George] Deukmejian, and Pete Wilson. Our party was trying to gain seats, and it was such an achievement when Walter was elected. Then when hopes were dashed as he died in office, and it was just his spouse, his wife, running for his seat—good heavens. I think it was such a surprise that I won. It was just, like, really a celebration in some areas.

Now, partisan-wise, it was certainly not a part of the goal of the Republican Party to have the seat stay Democratic. They sent good candidates against me every single

time. I did have to earn my seat every two years. But there was a sweetness about the special election that, as I look back on it, I was surprised—I think a lot of people were surprised to find me there.

JOHNSON: You'd mentioned before that there weren't many women when you were elected, many women in the House?

CAPPS: Not as many as now, for sure.

JOHNSON: Right. Because there were so few of you, did you feel that women Members gravitated towards each other?

CAPPS: Yes. Very much so. In fact, in part because of my nature, I worked across the aisle a lot. My staff encouraged me to. I watched the House change from being quite bipartisan in the beginning, with more moderate Members on each side of the aisle. I noticed this particularly on the Republican side because I had a goal. I didn't state it a lot publicly, but every bill I introduced I tried to do with a Republican co-author. That was for my sake, as well as for what I believed in. I wanted to champion bills that were bipartisan. I sponsored issues like women and heart disease because up until then, most heart research was done on men because it wasn't recognized that women had heart disease as much as, and in some cases more, than men. My friend, Mary Bono and I co-sponsored that bill for many years.

It was all after Newt [Newton Leroy] Gingrich and the Republican majority in 1994 that the partisanship reigned more strongly. It became more difficult to get Republican co-sponsorship. But there was a year that the cosponsor [of the women and heart disease bill] wasn't a Republican. Then fortunately, when we were in the majority again, it was folded into the Affordable Care Act.

Now, this didn't mean we couldn't be friends. We worked together on many projects. I was privileged to be a part of a very important bipartisan group or commission, the House Democracy Partnership. It was bipartisan and appointed by the Speaker, half the members Republicans, half Democrats. We were a delegation that worked through our State Department in partnership with countries where the democracies were just forming and who were willing to have us come in and work side by side with them to develop their house of representatives or library of congress. Oh, it was such a wonderful experience in my congressional life, partly because my committee [Energy and Commerce] was domestic-related, and this was completely visiting places I'd never would have dreamed of. The first country we visited, I had to look on the globe to find it—East Timor.

ETHIER: What were your impressions of the Congressional Women's Caucus?

CAPPS: I was very active in it. Became good friends with Cindy Hall and her assistant who are in charge. There's going to be a big party for her in Washington as she retires. I wrote something for it. There was a period of time in the last century when Democrats were in the majority for many, many, many years, before Newt Gingrich. They used to have a Women's Caucus that was part of the Congress, with Republicans and Democrats. But there were so many more Democrats than Republicans. Then the rules became different for organizations like the Women's Caucus. So the Women's Caucus became the Women's Policy, Inc.

There was continuity with Cindy. She had been the leader over the years. But I forget what her title was, even. So I got to know her right away, and there were always a group of Republican and Democratic women who wanted to do projects together. We revived it again.

You mentioned Cathy McMorris Rodgers [in a previous conversation]. She and I were the co-chairs for a term or so. We made a point that there would be a Republican and a Democratic co-chair. There was one caveat. We could never talk about women's issues of reproduction because we couldn't deal with the topic of abortion, and it's such a women's issue. Nevertheless, we did a lot of work together in education: educating girls, women in prison, women in the military. All kinds of bipartisan subgroups came together around different women Members' passions. It's a thriving group still.

It's an important part of women [being] in Congress, I believe. Not all women choose to participate, but many do. For example, on Memorial Day, there is always a ceremony at the Arlington Cemetery for women veterans, women who have served in the military, honoring different groups. Other countries have women's caucuses because many countries have rules, as they set up their memberships, they have a party list, and they have a certain defined number of women who were going to be elected to Congress. In democracies around the world, they always have a lot more women than we do because we're one of the few countries—there's just a couple in the world—where elections are direct. You elect, directly, the Members to serve, rather than going through a party list and through your caucus.

JOHNSON: You've definitely alluded to your background as a nurse, but we wanted to ask you a question about how you think this specific background of yours impacted your outlook as a legislator.

CAPPS: Very much. It colored everything. I see the world that way. I talked about the environment as a health issue, climate change as a health issue. I was interested in health. To me, I'm very interested in the debate now about Medicare for all or not. I believe healthcare is a right. I don't necessarily ascribe to Medicare for all, I'm not saying that. But I believe we need to make healthcare more affordable and more

accessible. And you can do that with a government like ours as well because of our opportunities. I'm glad it's such a prominent issue in this congressional and presidential election and am hoping for the best!

ETHIER: We read that you kept your nursing license current while you were in Congress. Why was that important to you and was that hard to balance to have to take that test every two years?

CAPPS: It was hard. But it was worth it, because I kept it forefront, and it was always a badge of honor. It was a way for me to establish a relationship with nurses in the Nursing Caucus and support groups in the country and to encourage them to be more involved in politics. Not necessarily partisan politics, but in realizing that nurses have a particular role to play in forming our policies, whether national or at the local or state level. Also, to keep it front and center for myself. So the whole time I was in Congress, I kept my license active.

JOHNSON: Can you talk about your role in the passage of the Affordable Care Act? And then also just a little about the issue of abortion and how important that was in the debate.

CAPPS: Abortion, when I was first elected, it was hardly a topic. *Roe vs. Wade* had passed. Then all of a sudden, I think, it was the rise of the religious right that became an issue. It became more about religion than health, which is interesting to me. The right to obtain an abortion, with restriction, is important. I liked President Clinton's mantra, that it should be safe, legal, and rare.

I'm a big believer in Planned Parenthood, and in educating—as a school nurse—having sex education as a part of health. It always should be the privilege of parents who want to exempt their children from this education at school. But it should be a natural part of education in my opinion. Availability of contraception as a healthcare

right, that was, I believe, an important part of the Affordable Care Act. Making family decisions based on that is very important. When you do it that way, you don't necessarily start with the question of abortion. It is a divisive topic. But if that's the question, I certainly wouldn't want the government to stand in the way of that kind of personal decision for an individual.

This is something I grew up with. Not that my parents and I never talked about it. It never came up. Nor did we spend much time on it in the district. We have a particularly good Planned Parenthood affiliate in our community. I'm very closely involved with them. But I didn't feel like I had to promote their issue or defend them. It was just a part of our life. It's quite different in California than it is in some parts of the country, I think.

ETHIER: You also served on the Natural Resources Committee. How did this committee assignment fit with your legislative goals and the interests of your district?

CAPPS: Very much so. When I was first elected, Energy and Commerce, in fact, generally is the only committee you're allowed to serve on, because it's a big one, both in time consumption and also in prestige. Natural Resources is an important committee as well because of all of the natural resources that I represent and how fragile many of them are. I worked hard to get on that committee at a time when many of the topics were being discussed, such as forest fire management, offshore drilling, protecting our natural resources in ways that we are coming up against, especially in my community. It's an increasingly important committee.

I wasn't able to get on [the committee] until later in my career, so I didn't achieve seniority. I had no idea—this is an aside—how important the seniority system is in Congress. I signed a term-limit pledge when I was first elected because it was all the rage then. I had no idea that it was so contrived, that pledge. I mean, a person can do

good in three terms. [But] Congress is a complicated place and to learn your way around is not easy for a freshman Member. I wanted to be productive for my district. But to choose the length of time to serve is, I think, so important, to be productive and not to overstay. I spent a lot of time thinking about that.

JOHNSON: How important do you think it is to have women Members on committees like Energy and Commerce and Natural Resources?

CAPPS: Super important. And fortunately, our current Speaker [Nancy Pelosi] was always a leader. There is a perspective—well, it's the same for both genders. Each gender has a unique perspective. Not overly so. Our common humanity is the overriding thing. But it helps us see the world in certain ways. You wouldn't want a Congress that's all men or a Congress that's all women just because you would miss that balance. We're not to the balance yet. We're not 50 percent. We're not to the balance in so many ways. But we're getting so much better.

JOHNSON: Did you find that women Members approached their community work any differently than their male counterparts?

CAPPS: It's hard for me to say for sure. I only have my own frame. But I've always noticed—and I noticed this as nurses because we're collaborative as a profession. Professors—that was my husband—and doctors, they're both good too. But they're not as—well, as soon as I say something like this it becomes a stereotype. Women tend to be more collaborative. We just are. I've noticed that. Because you need help taking care of your kids if you're a mother. You need help getting a job if you're going for something that's traditionally a man's world. We learn to work together. That's why EMILY's List is collaborative for supporting women running for office because we knew we couldn't compete one to one always.

ETHIER: Did you feel like there was a turning point for you when you felt like the focus had changed from you being a new politician elected under tragic circumstances to you forging your own independent identity as a legislator?

CAPPS: That's a good question. It happened in fits and starts if you will. I came very much under the cloud, or the mantra, of my husband's legislative career. But it lasted a very short time. They gave me his spot on the Foreign Relations Committee. He loved that committee. I did too. But I had to give it up as soon as I got on Energy and Commerce. It didn't take long before it was just what I had done not what he did before me. But there are many people who, even on my last day in Congress, remembered serving with him.

JOHNSON: How would you describe your political style?

CAPPS: My political style?

JOHNSON: Yes. Your approach to politics.

CAPPS: Approach—let's see. Enthusiastic. {laughter} From my partisan perspective, this administration is not walking on water. I buck up my Democratic friends in town who despair. I say democracy is a lot stronger than one person in the White House. Democracy will persist. I always have said that.

I had two favorite topics or issues I talked about in the life of the Member of Congress. One of the top two is if a veteran, or a member of their family—often it's a family member—comes to the congressional office and says, "So-and-So got a Purple Heart when they served here, and we can't find it. We don't think he ever was awarded it because it was won in the heat of battle." We take it upon our congressional office—every office does this—finds that medal, and you have this little ceremony where you invite the veteran and their family to come to honor the

person. They can sometimes make it a big party, or you just have it in your office, and you present them with the medal that they should have gotten, that they earned—a Bronze Star, various things. They're so grateful. Then you think, no, you're the person the country should be grateful to. You served, and you were injured, or this and that happened. That's one very special category for a Member of Congress. I had no idea that that would be so special.

Another one is that particularly in eighth grade, in California at least, students study American history. There's a kind of a tradition, it's almost a rite of passage in some schools, where they raise the money, they have bake sales and whatnot. Parents offer to chaperone or volunteer and get support from the community, or from somewhere, and come back to Washington, DC. They go to Williamsburg [Virginia], they go to various places. But one of the places they come to is the Capitol, and they want to meet with the Member of Congress. Generally, if it's a nice day, we stand on the Capitol steps, this little group of students, their chaperones, and me. And they want to ask me some questions. Of course, the first question is always, "Have you met the President?" Doesn't matter who he is. Then we go on from there.

It became a habit of mine to tell them, "Look down there at these Capitol steps. See, they're kind of worn in the middle. Many, many people have gone up these steps. In our country, you can have access to the Capitol. You can walk in. If you're elected, this is the way you go in and represent your district, in the House of Representatives." Then I say to them, "We are the world's oldest democracy, and that just means that we've made more mistakes than any other democracy, and we've had time to learn from them. Because our democracy is based on learning from our mistakes, I believe, as much as from any achievement that anyone ever comes to. So if we have someone in the White House that not everybody's excited about, or if we pass a law the very next Congress, some of the bad laws were undone, and that will

continue to be. That's what it is, it's messy. The process is messy, but it's fairly transparent. In some ways it could be more so." You can tell, I'm a firm believer not in my party particularly, but in the process.

JOHNSON: We read about—and I remember I was working here when you were still in the House—that you were often described as one of the kindest people serving in Congress.

CAPPS: {laughter} You know why that started? That started many years ago. Do you know there is a magazine called the *Washingtonian*?

JOHNSON: I remember that, yes.

CAPPS: They put out this thing. I didn't realize it until somebody read it to me. They highlighted the nicest Member of Congress, and the meanest Member of Congress. And lo and behold—I don't know what means they used to choose. I don't know if it was a survey, there's nothing there. But they published this, and they talked about what I had accomplished and who I was, a little bit of a vignette like I'm telling you. And ironically, [the *Washingtonian* named] my neighbor Bill [William Marshall] Thomas [the meanest Member of Congress]. At the time, he represented Bakersfield. If you know California, our geography, it's right next door to our district. He wasn't the Speaker, but he was right in line to be. He was head of the Ways and Means Committee. You know that's probably the most prestigious committee in the House.

JOHNSON: Right.

CAPPS: He wielded a lot of power. After that came out in the *Washingtonian*, my staff cringed and I cringed because we knew it would be bandied about. But we also knew there would be another side to it. Sure enough, part of the district that's not so progressive—well, now it's becoming more—but San Luis Obispo is in a [rural]

county to the north of us. The biggest town is San Luis Obispo, the city of. And their little newspaper put out a story, and it compared the two of us. The headlines read, "She may be the nicest Member, but look who brings home the bacon." {laughter} Because Bill Thomas had served, by that time, for maybe 25, 30 years. He had a long legislative history of projects that they had asked for from that area and that he had produced for them. I always took everything like that with a grain of salt.

ETHIER: On the flip side of that, the House can be a pretty challenging place to work. How did you cope with anger or frustration that you felt?

CAPPS: Like I did a lot of things in my life. I dealt with what I could. I don't mean to be Pollyanna about this, but I'm pretty mild-mannered. I've learned different outlets, physically—jogging or meditating, or whatnot—to keep myself balanced. You have to do that. Even on good days, the job is strenuous. As things were frustrating, I probably complained to my staff, but I tried not to do it loudly. I tried not to do it in the press. It's all self-preservation.

JOHNSON: You've asked us earlier just a little bit about the project and who we've interviewed. One of the members was Deborah [D.] Pryce. We had a very good interview with her.

CAPPS: Good! I'm so glad.

JOHNSON: We had heard that you had developed a relationship with her during Congress.

CAPPS: Yes. I don't know if she mentioned me, but she and I both experienced the loss of a child. Her daughter died during her time of serving. And she and I were part of a little group that met at C Street House—it's a whole other story. Linda Slattery is the spouse of a former Member, Jim [James Charles] Slattery, from Kansas. He's part of this group, it's part of the [National] Prayer Breakfast network. I don't know if any

of this rings a bell to you. But anyway, there's a place where a lot of guys live who are Members of Congress on C Street. There was this little group formed that she was part of. Her daughter died. I had lost my daughter a couple of years before. We just kind of bonded over that. We did a few things together. We were very different. She was prominent in the Republican Party. I think she was maybe the highest-ranking woman at that time.

JOHNSON: Right. She was [chair of the Republican Conference].

CAPPS: But there was a side of her that I could relate to, and I believe she of me, and so we formed a friendship. I went to her daughter's funeral, I remember.

ETHIER: What did it mean to you when Nancy Pelosi, a Member of your California delegation, became the first woman elected as Speaker of the House?

CAPPS: We were so excited, all of us. So excited. Just as I was this last year again, now from a different vantage point. She wrote the foreword to my little book. She gets vilified in many ways, but she's a real person. I say that in a genuine way. She is deep. She is a person of faith. She is good for our country to be Speaker now, is my belief, as it was when she was before. When she was first elected, without glass ceilings, that was quite a moment. That she was from California on top of that—we were all very proud of her. I know she's probably got detractors in California too. But she helped me campaign in my first race, and I played my part to support her as well.

JOHNSON: You had the opportunity to see her rise up the leadership ladder in the Democratic Party. How would you describe her leadership style?

CAPPS: I did watch that happen. I watched a battle royale between her and Steny [Hamilton] Hoyer, whom I consider also a dear friend. It's not easy, and it can be mean. But in the end, it was a good race. It played out. Every time she's had challengers. That's the

way it is. She's tough, and she's had to learn to marshal her resources too, as we all do. I don't know, did I answer that question? I don't think so.

JOHNSON: Yes, because you talked about the battles that she faced and then in each of those that she was able to attain. How would you describe her leadership style?

CAPPS: I think her leadership style is quite collaborative. I had to chuckle because she does not like to have [disagreements] go public. The press loves nothing more than to focus on what the current little squabble is instead of what our real goals are. [Our goal] in my opinion—this is partisan—but it would be to defeat [President] Donald Trump and to bring forth the issues whether it's the children in detention centers or all of the number of issues that are so important right now. To the degree that those squabbles deflect from that—and the press would love nothing more than to make that happen—then you lose sight of the goal. She is very goal-oriented, she always was.

Her [Democratic] Caucus meetings always showed that she expected us to have our differences but to pull together in the end against a common enemy, if you will, or toward achieving our common goals. I think she's an effective leader. She steps on toes, I'm sure. I never tried to get in her way, I never picked a fight. I always got along. I'm a pretty good foot soldier.

JOHNSON: You have been so patient with us, thank you. We just have a few wrap-up questions for you, if you have the time.

CAPPS: Sure.

JOHNSON: Why did you decide not to seek re-election for the 115th Congress [2017–2019]?

CAPPS: I thought about it for a long time ahead of time. You want the seat to stay on your side of the aisle, and you want to give advantage. I had picked someone. It was not

without controversy. I told my family first, probably a year before. I asked them to keep it confidential. Even in your family, it's hard to do that. Then when I felt like it was time, I spoke to my chief of staff, and I knew I could trust them. From then on, it got rolled out in a way that was effective for my party and for the succession and the traditions that I wanted to leave behind. It was hard to do, but I didn't want to stay too long. I had to get myself in a position to be able to leave first, so I did that.

I knew I'd miss so many parts of it. I miss the camaraderie, the back and forth. I miss the Republicans. I miss all that stuff. I miss everything. Not the travel, as I mentioned. I miss the work. But I also know it's time. I'm doing things I want to do now, too, that I couldn't do all of those years.

ETHIER: What were the most significant changes to the institution that you witnessed during your two decades in the House?

CAPPS: The lack of bipartisanship. The loss of bipartisanship.

JOHNSON: I wanted to ask you a question, just to go back a little bit about your decision [to not seek re-election]. Did your daughter consider running? You said she had a lot of experience, political experience.

CAPPS: Yes, she did. She has a lot of friends in Washington, DC, currently. She grew up there in many respects, post-college, with some young Clinton staffers who have all stayed in touch. They've had reunions of the Clinton staff once in a while. There's a network there. People had encouraged her to run. I did not. I was concerned about the coattail image that that would give. I also know that she has an eight-year-old, and she's a single parent. I know how stressful the job is, and it's not conducive to good family life. There is just no way around it unless your home is in Pennsylvania or Delaware. It's just hard. I believe she one day would like to be. She has remained political. She is serving on the local school board at the moment. I think she's seeing

now, as I'm fading into the background—and that's on my design—she will come more into prominence herself. Whether she'll ever run remains to be seen.

JOHNSON: It's certainly an issue that's come up a lot in our interviews with women balancing their family life and their political aspirations.

CAPPS: It's something that, again, I don't like to rag on the other gender, but that's one of the roles as women take their place, rightfully, alongside men in the workplace. The balance of child rearing is still more than 50 percent women. In some cases, like with my daughter, she's a single parent. Although her former husband, the child's father, is very much involved, and in that respect, they do a good job of co-parenting, I believe. But not every relationship is that way. Even couples with two married people, it's hard in some family settings for the child rearing to be really equally divided. There is just no easy way to do this. As I speak with younger women, I know that that's a huge ask for them to consider.

ETHIER: Piggybacking off of this discussion, what advice would you offer to any woman thinking of running for Congress?

CAPPS: I get asked this a lot. First of all, if they're young enough—and many are girls, which is wonderful—I say, get involved. If you're in high school, get involved in clubs, in activities that bring you with other people and let you form coalitions. Or you run for a school office or class president or whatever it is. You form alliances, and you figure out what your skills and your strengths are. Keep doing that within the political system if you feel a calling to do that or an urge to do it. It'll roll out in front of you. You have to make stuff happen. You've got to have enough drive to be able to do that.

I was raised to sit back and wait for people to ask, wait until you're spoken to. That's not far removed from my generation. But women are always still accused more of

being pushy. A man is called "assertive," and a woman is called "pushy" for the same activities. There's a way to do it where you cannot be off-putting, if possible. But believe me, as you've found out from talking with other women as well, being "Mrs. Nice Guy," or "Nice Gal," isn't necessarily going to be something you can hold on to forever.

JOHNSON: As historians, we're always asking people questions about the past, as you've seen in this interview. But there's one question that we ask you to predict the future in this series that we've done with women Members. There are now 131 women in Congress, 106 of those are in the House, so very good numbers.

CAPPS: Wow, yes.

JOHNSON: How many women do you think there will be in Congress on the 150th anniversary of Jeannette Rankin's swearing into the House? So that would be 2067. And how do you think we'll get there?

CAPPS: Well, I think anyone who wants to answer this question just needs to look back two years. You'll find one way that it happened. Not necessarily all positive. I think a reaction to something is what drives people forward, you know? Two steps forward, one step back. Two steps will probably continue to be the way it goes.

How we're going to get there—and maybe this is a hopeful thought—is that you get to a certain strength in numbers, percentage-wise or sheer number-wise, where women can see each other more clearly. It's not like you're looking off into the distance to find another person playing a similar role. We'll be together as a force. Then there becomes a force multiplier. I'm hopeful because it's like we're almost up on a hurdle where then you can look around and say, "Oh, we are all in this together." In many respects, I've felt that from the moment I was elected. But there

are times in your district that you feel, still, very solitary. When that begins to change because it has to change in other areas of culture as well.

Wherever there is repression, this experience that we're seeing now with immigrants, it pulls us all down as a nation, I believe, because there are girls in those camps who are being yanked from their mothers' arms as much as the boys. I'm focusing on something negative. That's a real blight. But then when a woman will go to the moon for the first time or a woman achieves some remarkable thing—they pull up a lot of other women with them when they do that. The Olympics is a good example.

There are examples along the way of "rising water lifts all boats," if you will. I'm sorry for all the clichés, but that [is how] we get to a point where we can really look around and see the mass of women who are doing important things.

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

CAPPS: I hope it is being a part of governing that is so much more inclusive than any of us dreamed it would be. Where the voices of the lowliest become important in a way that was never before accepted. I believe we still have so much of human potential that's untapped, harnessing energy from people working together. That's the genius, to me, of democracy and of our particular form of government with all of its flaws. Where we can continue, hopefully, to inspire another generation coming behind us.

JOHNSON: I just had one question based on your background. Since this project is in honor of Jeannette Rankin, and since you spent some of your younger days in Montana, had you heard of her before you came to Congress?

CAPPS: Oh, yes. Oh, my goodness, I had heard of her in Montana. I was not political then. But the whole state of Montana is proud of Jeannette Rankin. I don't stop and think first, was she a Democrat or a Republican? I watched the state change. It's only ever

been one House Member because the population is so sparse. But it was a Democrat [John Patrick Williams] who was elected when I was elected, and I got to know him. He was from Missoula, and I was raised about a hundred miles north of there. I went to high school there. It is a pretty conservative state now, it swings back and forth. Oh, it won't always be, you know? I go back for high school reunions to Kalispell [Montana, as] a Member of Congress and never talked about my job. Only my best friend in high school and I are together politically. She lives in Minnesota now. When I went to the reunions, I couldn't tell anybody I was a Democrat, or I didn't feel like I wanted to wear it on my sleeve. That's just the world we live in.

JOHNSON: Thank you so much. We really enjoyed speaking with you today.

ETHIER: Thank you for your time.

CAPPS: Thank you for your time, my goodness! I enjoyed it more than I thought I would. I thought, oh, two hours, that's way too long.

ETHIER: Yes, it goes by so fast.

CAPPS: It went by fast. I was talking about myself, but you were just indulging me.

ETHIER: We love listening.

JOHNSON: Yes, this is our favorite part of our job.