Donna F. Edwards

U.S. Representative of Maryland (2008–2017)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
June 29, 2018

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

"I don't believe in this idea of women's issues. I just don't buy it. . . . Or that if you're an African American that you only have to work on civil rights and social justice issues. I think it's really important to have a wide range of experience and gender representation and race and ethnicity representation across the wide swath of Congress. Because, as I said, in my view, if you are around the table, your experience alone, your lived experience, will enable you to see things through a different lens and that has to be part of the conversation."

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Abstract

From a young age, Donna Edwards felt drawn to politics and law. She followed the careers of Congresswomen Shirley Chisholm of New York and Barbara Jordan of Texas and in her interview explains how growing up in a military family—her father served in the Air Force—reinforced her commitment to public service and community activism. She describes her early involvement in state and national campaigns and how her interest in policy stemmed from family discussions around the dining room table.

As a community organizer Edwards built a foundation for her future House career by establishing a strong grassroots network and learning the ins and outs of local and national politics. Describing her entry into electoral politics as accidental, she actively tried to recruit a candidate to challenge the Democratic Representative in her Maryland district. When no one answered her plea, Edwards surprised herself and others when she decided to run for Congress. She discusses her first campaign, reveals why she ran again, and explains how she garnered enough support to defeat a sitting Member of Congress on her second try.

Edwards shares her thoughts on making history as the first African-American woman to represent Maryland in Congress. She also considers the role of gender and race in her elections and recalls the resistance she faced in the Maryland delegation as well as the Congressional Black Caucus, and from influential Members like John Dingell, Jr. of Michigan because she unseated a popular Democratic colleague. Edwards used her legal training when approaching committee work and legislation in the House, meticulously preparing for hearings and carefully reviewing bills scheduled for votes. She played an integral role in passing legislation to curb domestic violence and to promote health care reform. In her interview, the Maryland Representative talks about her personal connection with both issues. During her five terms in Congress, Edwards often worked closely with the Democratic Party, both as a member of the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee and as an active participant in the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. She offers insight on the committee selection process and her approach to recruiting candidates to run for Congress. Edwards also describes her decision to run for the U.S. Senate, the opposition she faced, and her thoughts on the campaign.

Biography

EDWARDS, Donna F., a Representative from Maryland; born in Yanceyville, Caswell County, N.C., June 28, 1958; B.A., Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, N.C., 1980; J.D., Franklin Pierce Law Center, Concord, N. H., 1989; lawyer, private practice; clerk, District of Columbia Superior Court Judge; executive director, National Network to End Domestic Violence; executive director, Center for a New Democracy; executive director, The Arca Foundation; elected as a Democrat to the One Hundred Tenth Congress, by special election, to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of United States Representative Albert Russell Wynn, and reelected to the four succeeding Congresses (June 17, 2008–January 3, 2017); was not a candidate for reelection to the One Hundred Fifteenth Congress in 2016, but was an unsuccessful candidate for nomination 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.

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Interviewer Biographies

Matt Wasniewski is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. He has worked in the House as a historical editor and manager since 2002. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, 2013), and *Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress: 1900-2017* (GPO, 2017). He helped to create the House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. Matt earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. 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.C.: 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.

— THE HONORABLE DONNA EDWARDS OF MARYLAND —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm with Matt Wasniewski, the House Historian, and we are very happy to be with former Representative Donna [F.] Edwards of Maryland. Thank you for coming in today [June 29, 2018].

EDWARDS: Thanks for having me.

JOHNSON: This interview is for a series that we're conducting to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first woman elected to Congress, Jeannette Rankin. And to start off with today, when you were young, did you have any female role models?

EDWARDS: I did. I mean apart from my family members, my mother and my grandmother, who are amazing women, but I looked up to people like Shirley [Anita] Chisholm and Barbara [Charline] Jordan. And I used to say I wanted to be like them when I was a little girl, and so it turned out kind of true.

JOHNSON: What drew you to them in particular?

EDWARDS: I watched all, almost every minute of the Watergate hearings that August summer [in 1974]. I don't know what other young people were doing, but I was watching the hearings. And I was just enthralled with Barbara Jordan: the power of her voice, her questions, all of that. I just thought I never knew that black women could be like that.

And then, of course, I paid attention to Shirley Chisholm. She was the first African-American woman elected to the Congress, and I knew that growing up. She inspired me because she had such moxie. Even as I got into politics, people used to describe me as like Shirley Chisholm, and I thought that that was good for me—good for me, good for her.

JOHNSON: What did you want to be when you were young?

EDWARDS: Years ago, I got into a little huff with my parents, and my dad thought I was just being incredibly stubborn and didn't want to listen. He asked me to sit down and just write on a piece of paper what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote on that piece of paper—I think I was about 12 years old—that one day I wanted to be a lawyer, and I wanted to be in politics. I was about 12 years old and at the time acting 12, and when I ran for office, I was 48 years old by then. There was a lot of time that had elapsed. I had not really thought about that since then. I tore off that strip of paper, and I put it in my jewelry box—one of those jewelry boxes where the ballerina twirls around and *fleur-de-lis* or something is playing. I put it in there, and it wasn't until after I won my election that I found that piece of paper still in the jewelry box that I had torn off from when I was about 12 years old.

WASNIEWSKI: Your father served in the Air Force. Mine did as well. Just wondering, how did being raised in a military family influence your upbringing and your outlook?

EDWARDS: I think it certainly clarified my commitment to public service. My dad was all about service. He served nearly 30 years in the Air Force, and so my entire growing up years we were moving from one base to the next base to the next

base. We lived some internationally and, of course, across the country. I got to live around a lot of different people, and it was a tremendous background to have coming into politics because I got to live around people who were completely unlike myself, had grown up in different regions of the country, and our dads all had to work together, and so we had to live next door to each other and go to school. That was at a time when most kids went to the schools that were on installations, the DOD schools, Department of Defense schools, and so I did too. It was a very closed kind of community, but I think my dad's service taught me about service and my mother as well because all the time when dad serves mom serves.

My mother was a Red Cross volunteer. She always did the Girl Scout stuff for us, which was great. I have three sisters as well. One time I volunteered my mom for cookie chairman, and she didn't really know what that meant until an 18-wheel truck drove up to our house and unloaded all the cookies in our family room. But they were all distributed. But both of my parents really served. In fact, my mother was a Red Cross volunteer when we lived in the Philippines. And I became a candy striper, and my job was to deliver mail to service members who had been injured on the battlefield in Vietnam and to read to them—some service members who had lost their sight or otherwise couldn't read—and I loved to read, and I, so I would read to them.

WASNIEWSKI: Just so we have it for the record, what are your parents' names?

EDWARDS: My parents' names, classic American, right? John and Mary Edwards. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: You mentioned having role models early on, Shirley Chisholm and Barbara Jordan, but then a long kind of layoff before you got active in politics. How did your interest in politics evolve?

EDWARDS: I think I always had an interest in politics. When I was, I think, 15 years old, I volunteered on my first campaign. It was a gubernatorial campaign out of New Mexico, where we lived, stationed at Kirtland Air Force Base. I volunteered on that campaign, and it was scrappy, and the candidate ended up winning, which was really a great feeling. I had always actually volunteered on political campaigns through high school. I was part of the Peanut Brigade for Jimmy Carter. He was the first President I voted for. And so I always loved politics.

Around our dinner table we talked politics all the time. We were not allowed to watch television at dinner, and so we talked politics. And in fact, at our dinner table, each one of us, there were six of us, had to bring an issue of the day, and it really didn't matter how little you were. And then we'd get to discuss those issues around the table. And so we discussed foreign policy issues, and we discussed domestic policy. So I feel like my interest in politics really was more in policy because it stemmed from the dining room table.

WASNIEWSKI: Was there anyone in that process as you grew older who served as a first political mentor?

EDWARDS: You know, such an interesting question because the people, and particularly women, that I've looked up to, I've never known them in particular. I would say I got into politics, into real electoral politics as a candidate, quite accidentally. I was very heavily involved in my community, organizing in my

community, and it was from that and the frustration of that that led me to run for Congress. And unfortunately, because I was running as an outsider, I had never been involved in local Democratic Party politics at all, and so I didn't kind of grow up in the system and came at it from the outside. So, I don't know that I had political mentors per se, but I had a lot of mentors in the nonprofit sector. I worked in the nonprofit sector. I worked in the nonprofit public policy think tank sector. And so I always knew a lot of people who were deeply engaged in politics and policy, and they were kind of my backbone for the way that I got involved in electoral politics.

JOHNSON: When you ran for Congress in 2006, your first campaign, were you recruited by anyone to run?

EDWARDS: No, I wasn't recruited at all. In fact, I was so frustrated with the Member of Congress who was representing us at the time that I went around trying to recruit other people to run, and nobody would run against him because they thought that he was unbeatable and there was a huge machine. And so I remember very clearly, it was actually Good Friday, and I was standing in front of my mirror, and I was just getting dressed for the day, and I didn't have a huge day in front of me, and I looked at myself and I said, "Why don't you just run?"

And so I drove to Annapolis that day. I think they were going to close at noon, they were going to close early, and I drove to Annapolis, and I filled out a couple of pieces of paper. I think I had to write a $100 check, and then I became a candidate. But the funny thing is I didn't tell anybody about it right away. I went through the weekend, Easter Sunday, with my family and finally on Monday, I said I have to tell people because people will actually

know, and so I started telling first my family. They were totally taken off guard and surprised, and they had no idea what that meant or what kind of commitment it would mean for them. Then I began to communicate with community leaders all across the congressional district that I knew to help me out. It was a very scrappy grassroots campaign.

JOHNSON: You surprised a lot of the experts because you were so competitive in that campaign. What lessons did you learn that helped you down the road?

EDWARDS: I think losing that campaign was actually really helpful to me and instructive in winning the next one. I started out—I think somebody measured—I had five percent name recognition, and I came within a couple of thousand votes of defeating a longtime incumbent [Albert Russell Wynn] in a Democratic primary. And because that primary happened in September—we switch off our primary years and presidential and off years—the next primary was going to be in February the following year. So I pretty much in my head decided right away that I would run again.

I didn't know that most women, after losing in particular, do not run again. There was no question for me that I would do it again. I had to go back to work though because I'm not independently wealthy. I've always worked for a pay check, and I was working at a foundation at the time, and because we were doing a lot of funding of public policy work, I actually had to take a leave of absence without pay for that entire summer that I ran. Then I went back to work, and then I had to take another leave of absence for about six months, so double the time before, and so it was quite challenging to be able to run. I don't know that I would necessarily recommend that, but it was

financially just very challenging. It was right at the time that my son was getting ready to go off to college.

WASNIEWSKI: Was there anything about—any kind of turning point moment in that 2008 primary campaign where you felt like you turned a corner, or you look back on it, and it was a really important moment?

EDWARDS: Looking back on the 2006 election, there was a very controversial ending to the election. There were some ballots that were missing, and when I went to bed that night, I was actually winning the election, but the next day I lost it. It was very controversial. And because it had come on the heels of 2004 and the rest, I made a decision then. I could have contested the election, and I made an affirmative decision not to do that but to just make an announcement that I had conceded the race. And I think part of what happened is that sometimes people don't want to vote for a loser. They don't want to vote for somebody they don't believe can win, and I think what happened in 2006 is I demonstrated that I could win. And we went from like a two-point loss to I think a 23-point win in 2008. It was a wide swing, and I think that was about confidence of people being able to cast their vote for somebody they believed would be a winner.

WASNIEWSKI: Did you receive any helpful advice from folks, either in the party or outside the party, as you ran those campaigns?

EDWARDS: No, none. In fact, it's a funny story. In the 2006 election, I believe it was, may have been 2008, the [Democratic] Leader, Speaker [Nancy] Pelosi, actually came in to the congressional district and did a fundraiser for my opponent. And when that happened, and we got word of it, we actually used

that as motivation to raise money. We actually ended up raising more than my opponent did with the Speaker in there. After I won the election, I met with Speaker Pelosi, and I remember meeting with Congressman Rahm Emanuel, and it was very tough, but I think that they began to see me as somebody who could bring substance and value to our caucus. I wasn't interested in slaying any dragons or having any fights afterwards, and I became part of the team.

I think that is what happens very often. You see candidates who run against the political establishment, but once they win, they're part of the team. And that's what happened with me, and I think it put me on a path over the course of my congressional career to end up in the leadership circle with Leader Pelosi, and so it was a relationship that evolved over that period of time.

JOHNSON: How important an issue was gender in those early campaigns for you?

EDWARDS: I think it was really important. I mean there had never been, certainly, a black woman Congresswoman from Maryland, and I was the first. I think any time you're breaking any barriers—it seems odd to say those things as first in 2008 or in 2018, but I was a first, and I think that made people step back.

In fact, I can remember after I was elected, people didn't know what to call me. Sometimes they would call me Congresslady, sometimes they would call me Congresswoman, sometimes they would just stumble and call me Congress Donna—all kinds of things because there was not a word for it, at least in our congressional district and in our state. And that still actually

happens. So I'd just say, "Just call me Donna," because it was too confusing. I think that when you break barriers that there's always some resistance to it and certainly in those races gender was a factor.

People would talk about the jewelry that I wore, or they would—I was advised not to wear dangling earrings. I don't think I'd advise a man not to wear dangling earrings, but that was the advice that I was given. I wear a lot of color. I have on yellow today. And people would say, "No, you really need to stick to blue and black and gray," and those are not my colors, so I didn't. So things like that that are just odd, just really odd, but they happen. And a lot of those things you just have to let them roll over.

I also tend to look a little bit younger than I actually am, and I remember when we did focus groups for my first election, they would put up pictures of me, and then they would describe me as having a son who was ready to graduate high school. And you could see the faces, particularly of the women, immediately they would start doing the math because they would assume that I was maybe 35, and then they'd say, "She has a 17-year-old and so that must have meant that she was a teenage mom."

So we decided early on that every speech I gave I had to say my age, which is very bizarre for a 48-year-old woman and then in the second election for a 50-year-old woman to just straight up announce that you're 50 years old. But that was just to take part of the conversation off the table so that we could get to talking about substance because I didn't want there to be any kind of barrier between me and the electorate based on my jewelry or my age.

JOHNSON: And those were all factors based on your gender, but what about your race? Was that an issue that you encountered as well?

EDWARDS: It wasn't really. The district I represented, the Fourth District, was a majority African-American district. I would say that was maybe more of a factor when I ran for the U.S. Senate on my departure from the House, but in the congressional race, in the House race, I don't think that that was a factor. It was an interesting and challenging kind of district because the one part of the district was majority African American in Prince George's County, Maryland, but the other part of the district at the time that I ran was Montgomery County, which was a majority white county at the time. It isn't now. And then, when the lines were redrawn, it was Anne Arundel County, which was also then a mirror image except not politically with Montgomery County. I would say the race issues came up more, but not profoundly so.

WASNIEWSKI: How about fundraising? Was that a barrier in those early elections in 2006 and 2008?

EDWARDS: Fundraising has always been a challenge for me. I think it is, frankly, for a lot of women candidates. I had the benefit of having worked on a lot of national issues with organizations across the country, including my work starting the National Network to End Domestic Violence. We had affiliates in all 50 states, and so I had more of a national profile and had the ability to go to some sources that I think sometimes first-time candidates or House candidates really don't have. So I was able to tap into those because traditional, either corporate PAC sources or those sources, were not really available to me. And I also am a bit of a—I describe myself as a very principled candidate—and so I would say offhand I didn't want to accept

certain types of contributions, and so that would foreclose them. Because the politics just were not right for me, the policy wasn't right for me, and so that closed off a certain level of fundraising.

But it's amazing when you don't have as much money, I think you use it more wisely, and you're careful about how you spend it and what you spend it on. In the first election that I ran, I don't believe I was able to run any ads at all. The second election I was able to do a little bit of television and some mail, and I ran a truly grassroots campaign. I was at Metro stations shaking hands with voters. I was in the grocery store parking lots, wherever I could find voters. I visited civic associations, homeowners' associations, and other kinds of nonprofit organizations, any place that I could find voters. And those are the kind of things I think you have to do when you're not as heavily resourced.

WASNIEWSKI: Almost every former Member we've interviewed for this has said that funding is an issue for women, although they all seem to have different variations on the answer as to why. Why do you think—access to funds or the ability to ask, what do you feel is the barrier there?

EDWARDS: I think it's in part where we come from. If you talk to many women Members in particular, we don't come from the traditional sources where there's money. Big law firms—we're really mostly not partners and senior associates at huge law firms, which might be a source of sort of basic funding. We don't know people who have extraordinary amounts of money, the traditional sources for money. And I think that makes it really challenging to get a foot in. We're often not really part of the party apparatus that would enable us to raise money. Often coming from the outside as I did, I'd be

foreclosed, and I was, to all of that Democratic Party money. So I think there are a lot of explanations for it.

I think it is hard to ask. I had to learn to do it. I had run nonprofit organizations, I had been in philanthropy, so I knew about how to give away money, and I knew about how to ask for money for a cause. What I didn't know is how to ask for money for myself, and so I had to really learn that. I feel like I did learn that over some period of time, both in the campaign and since then, and I became quite prolific at asking for money for other candidates when I was heavily involved in the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee [DCCC]. I was the vice chair of the DCCC, and I learned to raise money and how to teach others to raise money from other people.

JOHNSON: So your primary was in February that you won in 2008. And then your predecessor ended up resigning, so there was a special election. What is it like running in a special election for people from the outside that wouldn't understand that whole process?

EDWARDS: I'll tell you, that entire year was ridiculous. I ran four elections that year. In fact, in order to get to the special election, our general assembly in Annapolis had to pass special legislation to enable that election to happen. And I think it passed at 11:58 before *sine die*, something like that. So then the special election took place, and you turn out many fewer voters than you would otherwise, but you still have to run an election. And it was in the dead of—well, not dead of summer, but it was almost summer. It was really hot, that much I know. And then going to the fall, we had a special general election

that was combined with the general election that enabled me to be sworn in in January.

So I was actually sworn in on June 19th. I chose that day. For African Americans June 19th is very significant. It's Juneteenth. And I had a choice of days on which I could be sworn in, and I chose that both for the history of the date but also for the history of the moment. So it was really quite exciting to come into Congress.

JOHNSON: With that excitement, what was it like for you though, not having the time that most new Members have or the orientation? How did you start your career in Congress?

EDWARDS: Because it was toward the end of a session in an election year, we know that things do slow down then, and I had a little bit of time to try to get my office together. And people told me, "Oh, take your time, there's nothing going on between now and the end of the year." It turned out that that was the year that the financial crisis happened, and so the fall actually ended up being a lot busier than we had anticipated. In my congressional district and particularly in Prince George's County was almost the epicenter of the foreclosure crisis. And while many congressional offices had never really handled issues related to foreclosure because that's considered sort of very local, our office began handling foreclosure cases: calling in to banks, to mortgage companies, to try to help out homeowners in the district. And we were flooded. We had a full-time staff person doing nothing but handling foreclosures in that time period that everybody said was going to be quiet and sleepy.

And I never did get to do that [New Members'] orientation. Not only that, but I had planned to do the orientation for the incoming class, but I couldn't even do that then because of what was going on. And so I talked to a couple of colleagues to try to learn, but I had a very rocky start. And when I think back on it, it's amazing that we got through it. But it was a really rocky start, not really knowing what to do. Also, at a time where it's very difficult to hire staff because people who are in their jobs, they're in their jobs for at least the session, who know what's going on. And so it became difficult even to bring on staff at the most basic level in the congressional office. I don't think I'd like to repeat that.

JOHNSON: I don't blame you.

WASNIEWSKI: Were there any Members who served as mentors for you or gave you advice in those early months?

EDWARDS: There were some, but I would say not a lot. Keep in mind, because it was the middle of June, there were breaks that were being taken, people were going back to their congressional districts; we were not meeting as often. Then the fourth of July break came, which was significant, and then the August recess came, which was also significant. And so there was actually not even a lot of time to get to know people who could offer me some advice and counsel. So we winged it.

JOHNSON: You mentioned earlier that you made history by becoming the first African-American woman elected to Congress from Maryland. What did that mean to you personally, and then what do you think that meant to women in your state and then across the country?

EDWARDS: I actually didn't know that that was true when I was elected. I hadn't even thought about it. Nobody had really talked about it. It was only after the election—the special election—that people started talking about that. And I actually had an intern start doing research because I didn't believe it was true. I thought in a state where Sojourner Truth passed through and Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and Thurgood Marshall, I was like, how could that be true? But it turns out that it was. And so I talked about that, and I know in our state I think it opened up doors for an awful lot of women who then decided that they wanted to be engaged in politics. I know locally we saw an explosion of black women running for office on our country councils, in our legislature, and at the county level, so I'm proud of that.

Across the country I became recognized for that, and so I've spoken at so many institutions, educational institutions and conferences and things, and people identify that. So it's really important, and I'm not the only one, but there are—when you think about black women who served in Congress an awful lot of them are firsts in their states. So it's a point of pride.

I actually had a young girl come up to me the other day, and she was telling me that she had read about me in her social studies assignment, which is kind of daunting. But she just wanted to take a picture. When I go and visit classrooms, particularly the girls, the boys also because they see their moms, but the girls in particular, really wrap themselves up in that, and they know about it. So it's a special responsibility.

WASNIEWSKI: You've talked about how hectic it was the first months on the job getting settled in, but specifically looking back on your coming to the House, was it a welcoming place for women legislators in particular . . . did you feel?

EDWARDS: I don't feel it was unwelcoming, but I think I had the sort of double duty of having defeated a longtime colleague, and so there was some resistance to me because of that. And I would say that that is particularly true within the Congressional Black Caucus [CBC], which is a very closed, small caucus of Members, and I defeated their guy. And in some ways, I think some people never really got over that. So that was difficult, and so I'm not sure that that was about gender, but about the fact that the Congress really is in some ways a small community and a very protective community in a way, and somebody like me that kind of comes in and sideswipes the community, it becomes difficult. But people got over that.

I remember a really great conversation I had one time with John [David] Dingell [Jr.] who was the Dean of the House. And we were sitting in the Democratic Cloakroom, and he said, "Can we talk a little bit?" And so I sat down, and I said, "Yes, Mr. Dingell, that would be great." He said, "No, I'm John." Well, nobody could ever really call him John, but he said that. And then he looked at me and he said, "You know, I've wanted to get to know you because you beat my friend who was like my son." They served on the Energy and Commerce Committee together. And he said, "But you know what, you're a Member now, and I want to count you as a friend." And we were from that day forward.

Then I did a little thing for him where a group of students from his district, the marching band, was coming in for the [Barack] Obama inauguration, and somehow or other somebody had snookered them into staying at a hotel in West Virginia, pretending that that was close for them to be at the staging grounds at 4:00 in the morning. I got wind of that, and I arranged for one of our high schools to open up. And the Parent Teacher Association brought

them pizzas, they opened up the gym, they all put their sleeping bags out there, and they had a good night's rest and could get into the staging grounds in about 20 minutes. And John Dingell never forgot that. I remember when I visited his congressional district one time for a speaking engagement, and he arranged for the marching band to meet me on the tarmac at the airport, and we have been good friends since then.

WASNIEWSKI: That's a great story.

JOHNSON: You mentioned Shirley Chisholm in the beginning of the interview, and she was famous for saying that she had two obstacles as a legislator: her gender and also her race. Was that something that you also have found in your political career?

EDWARDS: I have. They're not hurdles that can't be jumped, but you definitely have to confront them. It's challenging because sometimes I know that it's been written about me, I've been described as, quote, "the angry black woman." And I'm not at all, but I think people can make judgments, and you have to try to just sort of move that stuff away and break through the barriers. But it can be really challenging.

JOHNSON: She also said that gender was a bigger obstacle for her. Is that something that you found as well, or was it a combination?

EDWARDS: It's hard for me to separate them, to be quite honest with you. It's really difficult to separate because when things happen or when you have to face some challenges, you don't know whether really it's about race or it's about gender. I think, certainly when I was first elected in Maryland, there was just

a perception that people who are in Congress are men, they're not women. And in our delegation, Connie [Constance A.] Morella was the last woman to have served before I was elected, and so there was a wide gap—I can't remember, maybe it was about six years. I remember when I first moved to Maryland when I was coming out of high school going to college, and my first election we had four men and four women in our House delegation, which was highly unusual. By the time I left there was one woman in the House delegation, and that was me. It's amazing to me that over that period of about, what, 35 years that we went from an even number of women in our House delegation to none. And now today in our entire delegation, House and Senate, there's not a single woman in the Maryland delegation. I want to think seriously about why that has happened and that the barriers are still there for women to run and win in these congressional seats.

JOHNSON: What was your relationship like with the Maryland delegation? You said you were the only woman from the House.

EDWARDS: It was complicated. It was very complicated. I think sometimes I would walk in, and while I wouldn't describe them as racy jokes, that it was just a camaraderie among the men that I was not entirely a part of. And it's hard for me to know whether that was because of the way that I came in or other things, but sometimes some of the language could be a little bit on the edge. Not quite salty, but getting close. I remembered a couple of times having to chill that. But I think as a woman Member, you have to make a decision about when it's appropriate to do that or not because you don't want to cause greater harm down the line, and I don't know that men make those judgments at all.

WASNIEWSKI: Just to follow up on your observation about women leaving the congressional delegation over time, what do you think the barriers are to women in Maryland running for congressional office? Why has that changed?

EDWARDS: You have to be in the pipeline. And not just in the pipeline, but adopted by particularly—the party apparatus, I think, plays a huge role in that. And it's still a question of recruitment, and so I notice that even when an open House seat came up in this last election, there was no active effort to recruit a woman. A woman ended up running in the Sixth District seat in Maryland, but she lost. But there was no active effort to recruit a woman. Or I've noticed—and I noticed this when I was with the DCCC—that whenever there's an opening or a spot, party regulars go to people that they know, and all the people that they know are men, and the men identify other men. As long as that continues, then I think it makes it really difficult. I am really excited that in 2018 there are just an extraordinary number of women who are running: women who've already won primaries and will go on to a general election. And so I think we will see some more now.

In our state, it's actually hard to know where those women will come from and when it is that they'll fill those seats because Maryland has—it's a heavily Democratic state, and so most of the congressional districts are represented by men who are Democrats, and that would mean another woman would have to come forward to do what I did in 2006 and 2008, and it's hard to see how that happens.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you think part of it, too, is that women, and particularly African-American women, face more scrutiny in running for political office or even winning and then serving in office, that they're facing more scrutiny?

EDWARDS: Yes, I would say if anybody took a look at the ink that has been written about me versus the ink used on any of my colleagues in the Maryland delegation, you would find an extreme differential. So there's a spotlight and a lens. So, for example, I think that women—because I would show up at something that my male colleagues would never attend, and it was almost a requirement, an expectation, both on the part of the constituents but an expectation, but there was never an expectation that they would show up. And I learned that that was just kind of the nature of the game.

WASNIEWSKI: We're about 45 minutes in. Do you need to take a break?

EDWARDS: I'm good.

JOHNSON: One topic that we've been asking all of our interviewees is about the Congresswomen's Caucus, and you had a chance to co-chair that one Congress. What was that experience like for you?

EDWARDS: I think that there are very few ways in which women Members can do things sort of jointly, and the Bipartisan Women's Caucus is one of those. It's also an opportunity where, even if you're not going to work on legislation per se, that you get to know the other women Members as people and not as Congresspeople. I think that's important to build those kind of relationships, and I developed some amazing relationships in my tenure as co-chair of the Bipartisan Women's Caucus. One of the things that we worked on together was in the midst of a major political contest between the Democratic Leadership and the Republican Leadership over the Violence Against Women Act reauthorization. I actually worked with my Republican co-chair to make sure that we had a unified voice on the need to reauthorize the Violence

Against Women Act, and I think that that actually contributed to the reauthorization moving forward.

And there were other opportunities to look in depth at things related to women's health care: not the hot-button issues, but heart health, which is extremely important, or diabetes or elder care, those kind of things. And it allowed us in a bipartisan way to begin to look at those issues and some of that did actually result in legislative initiatives.

I worked closely with Cathy McMorris Rodgers to develop a task force on Afghan women, and how that came about was from a bipartisan congressional delegation trip of women that we took to Afghanistan. We came back together and said, "We should form this task force within the Women's Caucus" so that we could continue to pay attention to what was happening with Afghan women as business owners, as leaders and advocates, as parliamentarians, and to bring some voice to them in moving forward of what was then a peace process.

WASNIEWSKI: Was there any particular memory from that trip? A lot of people who we've spoken to talk about CODELs [congressional delegations] and how important they are in terms of getting to know your colleagues. Any memories stand out particularly from that trip?

EDWARDS: I think I did four of them, of the Mother's Day trips. They were arranged over the course of Mother's Day. Those were some of the best experiences that I had in the Congress. It's how I got to know my colleagues that otherwise you're standing on the floor facing off against or in a committee hearing, and we became friends. We were able to see issues together. When

we visited a school with all girls who were learning and in school for the first time in a couple of generations, we were able to observe that together and the power of that, what it meant, and make a commitment then to those girls. And so I cherish that because they were really important moments.

But I've had other CODELs, too, while I will say helped me to get to know my colleagues in a different way. It is different when you're sharing the same experience; it's different when you're sharing meals together, when you're traveling together. It is how, for example, I got to know House Speaker Paul [D.] Ryan, and his wife Janna, because of a CODEL that we were on. And that was long before he became Speaker. And it's hard to demonize somebody when you know them in that way…not to not disagree with them, but to demonize them.

WASNIEWSKI: Just to shift back to the Women's Caucus, what role do you think it plays in the institution in kind of a macro sense?

EDWARDS: It is the largest bipartisan caucus in the Congress. There was a time—I think in these last years it has become more complicated to work on anything in a bipartisan way, and I think that's a reflection of what is going on in the country, and then that becomes reflected in the caucus. I remember as an outside advocate working with the bipartisan caucus when I was working with then-Congresswoman Connie Morella on the Violence Against Women Act, and I worked really closely with a bipartisan group of women who shepherded through the legislation, both the authorization and the appropriation. Jo Ann Emerson was a partner in that. And so seeing that from the outside made me really want to work with the caucus from the inside. I think I would like to see it revive in terms of its relevance to

bipartisanship because I think it could be an important marker and frankly the more women we get in the Congress on both sides the better.

My worry is not that Democrats can't elect more women; my concern is whether Republicans can elect more women because I've always said that I believe that we need more women on the other side, and that would enable us to work more closely together, in much the same way that you see over on the Senate side where the women actively work together—they meet together. There are so many more women in the House that make that kind of thing impossible to do so regularly, but it does provide an avenue for us to work together.

JOHNSON: I wanted to ask you, because you had such an early involvement in bringing attention to domestic violence, what was your reason for that? Why was that issue so important to you?

EDWARDS: I think the first time I can recall thinking about domestic violence was as a little girl living on a military base—where if you know anything about military housing, they're side by side, the walls are thin as paper. And I remember my sister and I shared a bedroom next to the master bedroom of the house next door, and we could hear what was going on. I remember my father at one point intervening. I remember the military police coming and taking the dad—we knew their children—away. Then he came right back to the house and would start all over again. Certainly as a little girl, I wasn't thinking I'm going to grow up and work on these issues, but I do remember that moment when I thought why does this happen? And I didn't understand, and it made me scared. Over a period of time, I'd had experiences where I'd had either friends or co-workers who were experiencing

violence. And when I was in my early days, not long after undergraduate school, I decided I wanted to take training and volunteer at a local domestic violence shelter. And so I worked on a hotline as a volunteer taking calls at night, trying to get women from where they were into a shelter and working with them in programs.

It was always an interest of mine, and then I took that volunteerism up to my time at law school where as a law student working in a clinical program I represented women seeking protective orders. I did training of local law enforcement and sheriffs around issues of domestic violence. And then when I got out, I just knew that I wanted to stay focused on that even though I had some other jobs. I then worked with some women from around the country to start this organization called The National Network to End Domestic Violence, and we were instrumental in the passage of the first Violence Against Women Act in 1994. I'm really proud of that because that law has made such a tremendous difference in raising the visibility of domestic violence, the law enforcement and prosecutor response to domestic violence, and all kinds of social services around there. Now, we're not done yet. There's still a lot of work to do, but it is amazing to see, 25 years later, the difference that one law with a lot of force behind it can make in the lives of women and children.

WASNIEWSKI: Before we get too far away from it, I want to just back up from legislation and you had mentioned the CBC earlier, and it was a difficult relationship coming in. But to step back and look at that organization, because it's older than the Women's Caucus even, what role has that played in the institution, the Congressional Black Caucus?[1] Is it similar to the role that the Women's Caucus has played?

EDWARDS: It's very different because it is mostly Democrats. Occasionally, there's a Republican Member, one or two Republican Members, but it's mostly Democrats. It is a force within the Democratic Caucus in terms of pushing our caucus to be a better caucus. It gets described as the "conscience of the Congress," and I think that that is true. It faces some challenges. I think some of the other caucuses are growing, and the Congressional Black Caucus could potentially play a stronger role in terms of pushing legislation. And it certainly, if it wanted to assert itself, could block legislation as well. The leaders of the Black Caucus have often played the role of trying to mitigate any harm that might come out of a broader caucus effort and to put issues on the table that wouldn't be there otherwise.

When I think, for example, back to the Affordable Care Act, one of the roles of the Congressional Black Caucus was to insert issues related to communities of color, working with the Asian and Pacific Islander Caucus and also the Hispanic Caucus to do that. The result of that has made a tremendous difference in the lives of people of color all across this country and certainly in communities that I represented, black and Hispanic communities. And so there you can see where having a different voice around the table can result in getting better legislation that benefits people. I believe what Shirley Chisholm also said, which is that if you don't have a seat at the table, bring a folding chair. The idea is that all of us need to have a voice at that table.

WASNIEWSKI: When Shirley Chisholm—to bring the name up again—ran for President in 1972, she actually angered a lot of her colleagues on the CBC because they thought that she had kind of—it wasn't her turn to run for higher office.

And I'm just wondering what you think over the history of the organization in your experience the role of women has been. Has that changed over time?

EDWARDS: I look back at that because I reflect on Shirley Chisholm's experience running for President, and my own experience running for the U.S. Senate, where I got some of the same pushback. And I think it's unfortunate that when black women decide to step up and match their goals and ambitions with the politics of the moment, that they get pushed back; you can just bet that any time, frankly, a white male decides that he wants to get up and run for President, having served two years in the House, everybody's saying, "Oh, look, he's running for President." So we're not quite there yet, and not even from 1972.

I also remember having a conversation with Carol Moseley Braun where she described a very similar experience of stepping up to run for that U.S. Senate seat in Illinois. And you asked me earlier whether there was anyone who had given me advice, and I should not have left out Carol Moseley Braun because she was so tremendous in talking to me and helping me think through the run for the U.S. Senate, and she talked to me a lot about the experiences that she had at that time. And I'm really grateful for that because I do think that as a black woman I should be allowed to have an ambition as well.

JOHNSON: I wanted to switch gears and talk a little bit about your committee service and how you received your initial assignments on the Science and Transportation Committees.

EDWARDS: Coming in in a special election there are not a lot of opportunities because you serve where there's space available or it can be created. But I was actually

really delighted to be able to get an assignment on Transportation and on Science and Technology. On Transportation the reason is because I live in the metropolitan Washington region. We are consumed by what happens with our transportation. It was at a time when we were trying to figure whether there was going to be funding for the purple line connector around the metropolitan region, and that was an important issue for us.

The Transportation Committee also had a subcommittee, the Economic Development Subcommittee, which is arcane, but the General Services Administration falls under the jurisdiction of the Transportation Committee and the Economic Development Subcommittee. In Prince George's County and in Maryland, we had had a rather contentious relationship with the General Services Administration because they were not leasing and allowing leases and opportunities in Prince George's County, a majority African-American community. And so that actually enabled me to put forward an agenda with the General Services Administration by making them answer questions about why there was this kind of disparity and pushing them to open up the doors of opportunity for this majority African-American county. I used my service on the Economic Development Subcommittee and on the Transportation Committee to advocate for things that were important for our congressional district, so I loved being on that committee.

And then I served on the Science and Technology Committee, and what some people don't know about me is that I have a history. I spent six, almost eight, years with Lockheed, working in the space program, first as a writer and analyst and then a project engineer at Goddard Space Flight Center. So I had a history in aerospace, science, and technology. S&T [Science and Technology] had jurisdiction and authorization over the space program, and

so it enabled me to come full circle with my knowledge and experience and sitting on the contractor side and also knowing the government side. It really helped me to ask and answer questions around something that not only impacted our congressional district, but really when you think about investments in NASA and technology impacts, the way that we should grow in the 21st century. I liked being on that committee because it was about thinking about the future, decades into the future, and my experience in the Congress is that mostly we were thinking about next year, but on Science and Technology we were thinking about 20 years, 50 years from now.

WASNIEWSKI: And you also served on the Ethics Committee in the 112th Congress [2011–2013]. What did that teach you about the institution, that experience?

EDWARDS: I actually welcomed my service on the Ethics Committee. Before I came into Congress, I had both worked at and funded nonprofit organizations that were government oversight organizations looking at congressional ethics, campaign financing. And so that was, in some ways, a continuation of work that I had some experience with. I took it really seriously because I believe in the institution. And when I was on the Ethics Committee, though, we had some really challenging cases in front of us, and I think it is quite a challenge to deal with these issues when you are making judgments about your colleagues. I have to say that I believe that my service on the Ethics Committee, while I don't regret it, that it contributed mightily to some very tough relationships with some of my colleagues.

WASNIEWSKI: In any of your committee assignments, was it ever your impression that you had to work harder, and do your homework, and come better prepared than male colleagues simply because you're a woman?

EDWARDS: I don't know about that, but I always came prepared. I read testimony; I read background material. My staff would be crazy because they'd prepare questions, but I would prepare my own. I listened to the testimony. I rarely, rarely ever missed an oversight hearing. I took my service on those committees seriously. And I think when I hear now from people who were witnesses on the committee, they will say to me that I was really tough, but I was very engaged. I just loved the process, and so I couldn't imagine not showing up for the process.

I think the thing that surprised me the most when I came to Congress is that I thought everybody did that, and I was surprised to find out that was not true. It was disappointing to find out that that was not true. Or when you go to the floor for a vote, most of the significant legislation I pored through. I would go and ask questions of the people who were on the committees about what they knew or learned while they were drafting and working on the legislation. And so in some ways that really helped me because my colleagues would come to me and ask me when we were preparing for a vote, and they would come to me and ask me about legislation because they knew that I studied it, and I paid attention to it. So there's an upside to doing your homework.

WASNIEWSKI: A measure of influence.

EDWARDS: Right.

JOHNSON: How important do you think it is for women to serve on all the different House committees, all the different areas that Congress focuses on?

EDWARDS: It is. I don't believe in this idea of women's issues. I just don't buy it. And in some ways my time in Congress—or that if you're an African American that you only have to work on civil rights and social justice issues. I think it's really important to have a wide range of experience and gender representation and race and ethnicity representation across the wide swath of Congress. Because, as I said, in my view, if you are around the table, your experience alone, your lived experience, will enable you to see things through a different lens and that has to be part of the conversation.

JOHNSON: So do you think that some issues would not have been brought forth if women weren't serving on committees?

EDWARDS: I think it adds an important voice, and whether an issue or other wouldn't be brought forth, I can't identify that, but what I will say is that you think about things differently. I'll give you an example. When I was on the Transportation Committee, we were looking at issues related to transit and buses and Metro, that sort of thing, and I had had an experience with transit when I was raising my son. I didn't have a car, I was struggling, and I was standing on the side of a road, waiting for a bus, the side of a highway with a kid in a stroller waiting for a bus to pick me up. I don't know who else brought that experience to the table, but when people were talking about not providing resources to communities to develop their transit systems, I brought that experience to the table. And so I think that anyone's lived experience is really important, which is why we have to have more divergent voices in the Congress.

And my concern, frankly, is around money. We have more Members of Congress coming in now who are themselves independently wealthy and

that, I don't think, is healthy for the institution. And it's not that they shouldn't serve, it's just that I believe that the doors have to be open for people who come from every income level, from every racial and ethnic background, from every gender. That's an appropriate reflection of our country. And the system of running for elective office, the amount of money that needs to be raised, the increasing party insiders deciding who's in and who's out really is a negative contributor to getting a more diverse Congress.

WASNIEWSKI: So one of the major issues while you were in Congress was health care and the Affordable Care Act, and we're wondering what, from your background, in terms of advocacy but also personal experience, shaped your view of the way that that bill came together and the way it was debated?

EDWARDS: When I ran for Congress, I ran on trying to deliver a better health care system for the people in my district, my state, and the American people. That was one of the pillars of my argument for why voters should choose me for Congress. And I often told the story, it's widely known, that I went through a period of my life when I struggled financially, I did not have health insurance. I crossed my fingers, I didn't think I was going to get sick, and I was wrong. I got really sick from a respiratory infection. I passed out in a grocery store in front of the produce, and I had to go to the emergency room. They put me on a respirator; they gave me all kinds of antibiotics because what had started out as a virus turned into a really severe infection.

And it was great, I survived; they did what they were supposed to do. I had no insurance. I got a bill that I simply couldn't afford, and I tried to pay it back, and I tried to pay it back. I would juggle paying my mortgage, paying

my daycare, paying my student loans, and I almost lost my home and everything because of that health care bill.

And I'll never forget that, and it contributed greatly to the way that I think about the health care system because the reality is if I had been able to go early on and get $20 worth of antibiotics, it would have saved me thousands of dollars, and it would have saved the system thousands of dollars. And that experience, even though it happened a long, long time ago, really shapes the way I think about the health care system and the way I went into thinking about the Affordable Care Act [ACA]. I wanted to have a single payer health care system. I thought that would have been the best way to go, and many of us among Democrats were trying to have that battle within our caucus, and we lost that fight. And as a result, we have the ACA, but I knew that we may have lost that fight, but I was going to try to inject whatever it is that I could in the Affordable Care Act so that it would really make a difference for people because that was going to be the vehicle, and my view was let's just try to make it the best we can.

I remember taking that draft home, and I read every single page of it. I have it. It has little sticky notes on the side. I'm a lawyer, so we like sticky notes and highlighters. It has yellow, pink, and orange highlights all through it so that I could keep track of what I was doing. I thought about it a long time, and I remembered we passed a credit card reform measure, but we delayed the implementation. And in that period of delay, the credit card companies started raising credit card rates, and they started denying access to credit. And I thought about that in terms of the ACA because we also had a similar delay in terms of implementation. I said what's to prevent insurance companies from doing the exact same thing? And I sat down, and I made some notes

about that, and I searched through the draft, and I couldn't find anything that would prevent insurance companies from doing that.

I was a freshman, and I didn't serve on any of the relevant committees. But I went to our caucus, and I talked to the chairmen, the three chairmen, of the committees, Energy and Commerce, Ed and Labor, and Ways and Means, and I described the problem. I described it to Speaker Pelosi, and I said, "I think I have a fix." And so I kind of wrote, although I didn't realize I could send it to leg counsel—anyway, I learned from that—and came up with a fix that enabled health insurance commissioners in the state to review rate increases by looking at the actuarial data to make a determination that the increase is justified. And they ended up inserting it into the ACA. The very first year that that provision was used in the state of Maryland saved Maryland consumers over $60 million. And state insurance commissioners that are doing exactly that, reviewing those requests for rate increases, are doing the same thing. And before the ACA, insurance companies just submitted their rate increases, and the states basically just rubber stamped them. I think that has made a huge difference in terms of affordability in the Affordable Care Act.

WASNIEWSKI: On another occasion we had talked about you presiding over the House a lot, and one of your memories was the day of passage in the House for ACA. Can you talk about that a little bit and how you were designated to preside?

EDWARDS: I think the designation to preside had everything to do with—well, I had presided over the [House] Chamber quite a lot, and apparently it was something that I could do. And I loved doing it. I loved the responsibility of that. So part of it was that, but the other part was the role that I had played

on this one little thing. And so the presiding officers are chosen by the Speaker of the House—Nancy Pelosi at the time—and she chose four Members to preside, and I was shocked that I was one of them. And I was a freshman and a black woman, and that was something special—and also presiding with John Dingell.

I remember this one moment: John Dingell came to the floor, and I was presiding in the chair. And there was John Dingell speaking about the Affordable Care Act and describing how he had introduced health care legislation when he first came into the Congress, and that his father [John David Dingell] had introduced it before him and that there he was standing there to usher in the passage of the Affordable Care Act. And I remember being in the chair at the time, and I was standing and listening. I was listening to him, and it was one of the most powerful moments that I've ever experienced because it was the arc of history right there in the House Chamber, and I have a gavel. {laughter} I use the gavel that I was presented with. I had gaveled in the Affordable Care Act, but it's also the gavel that was used to close it out when it came back.

WASNIEWSKI: From the Senate?

EDWARDS: From the Senate.

WASNIEWSKI: We know a curator who might like to talk to you at some point. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Well done.

WASNIEWSKI: I'll get that one in.

JOHNSON: You've referenced your work with the DCCC a few times during the interview. Can you talk a little bit more about that, exactly what your role was with the organization?

EDWARDS: When I first came in, I really wanted to be a part of electing more Democrats into the House. And so as a freshman, I jumped right in to trying to help the DCCC, trying to help in terms of raising money, making contributions to the DCCC, and showing up at meetings. And that then became an avenue for me to gain in leadership within the DCCC. What I loved about it were, one, talking to prospective candidates to recruit them, but also identifying candidates that hadn't come through the traditional sources by calling my friends in organized labor and my friends in the nonprofit sector across the country saying, "Who do you know?" and "Do the people you know fit the mold and could potentially run?" And I remember one year when I was the head of the Red to Blue Program, which is a program within the DCCC to change districts held by Republicans to districts held by Democrats. And during that year we recruited more women than had been recruited in any other cycle, and I think it's because I was part of it.

Like I say, when you're around the table, you can challenge some of the staff or other recommendations and say, "You know, maybe there's somebody else out there. Let's take a look at this person. Or why aren't we considering another person for the race?" And so I did that, and then I kind of moved up and became a vice chair of the DCCC, and worked really, really closely with Steve Israel. We remain friends to this day based on that experience working together. I traveled out to states both to help raise money, but also to help support candidates, particularly ones in some of these districts that are really borderline, where they need to mobilize African-American voters, women,

progressives. I was a go-to person to go to those districts, and I went to districts from Nebraska and Ohio, to California and Florida. I went all over the country on behalf of these candidates, and I enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, I think because of the role that I played in the DCCC, even today, and I'm not a Member, candidates, prospective candidates, will give me a call and just ask for advice about running in their district. I can think of a couple now who survived their primaries, and so I'm excited for them going into a general election.

JOHNSON: What characteristics do you think make for a good candidate, someone that can be elected to the House?

EDWARDS: I think candidates who are reflective of their districts both in terms of policy and politics. And so I'm not one of these who says we should have a litmus test on candidates, but they should be reflective of the district, and they should reflect the broad democratic values that we have. I think sometimes people who come from kind of unsuspecting places—I can think for example of a couple of women that I've been working with who are former military officers, and they're running, and they wanted to know, "How do I do this? I've never even engaged in politics before." And they make great candidates. I think moms with children make great candidates. They can identify with the people who are in their district. And I never have really believed in playing in primaries, and I know there's a lot of controversy about that. But when I worked with the DCCC, I always pushed back against recommendations to choose winners and losers in primary elections because I think voters should be able to do that. And maybe that comes from my experience of having run in a Democratic Party primary.

And then working with all of the candidates to try to make sure that they have what they need, that if they need campaign staff or if they need access to other resources to figure out how to raise money, if they want to hire consultants, well, who are those consultants? Trying to make sure that we—I always try to make sure that we're identifying consultants who are not the usual suspects so that they have the time to spend with these candidates, especially first-time candidates.

WASNIEWSKI: You also served on the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee. Not a lot of people off the Hill know what that's all about. Can you talk a little bit about the role that that plays in the institution and what your responsibilities were?

EDWARDS: It's a very insider kind of committee, but a very powerful one. The Democratic Steering and Policy Committee makes decisions about who goes on what committee and then works to formulate the policy ideas of the Democratic Caucus. And I was a co-chair along with Rosa [L.] DeLauro from Connecticut, and she taught me a lot because she had been on the Steering and Policy Committee for a number of years. And it was quite a thing for Leader Pelosi to identify me as a co-chair of the Steering and Policy Committee. I think in part it stemmed from my work with the DCCC and from my leadership in the Congress. The Steering and Policy Committee co-chairs are part of her small leadership team, meeting every week to talk about policy, to talk about what's going on in committees, to talk about what is going on on Capitol Hill.

JOHNSON: We've been asking our interviewees a wide variety of topics. We're just trying to touch upon as many parts of your congressional experience as possible.

EDWARDS: You know, one thing that you didn't touch on, which goes from Steering and Policy, is that I multiple times escorted the President of the United States into the chamber, which my understanding is that had really not happened. And so I remember when the Leader [Pelosi] asked me to do that. I was like, oh, no big deal. And then people started telling me, some of my colleagues, especially my colleagues in the Black Caucus, that that just had not happened. So I don't know whether that's true or not, but it might be worth looking into.

WASNIEWSKI: That an African-American woman had not done that?

EDWARDS: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: I wouldn't know off the top of my head. Actually, can you talk about that process a little bit? How you were picked and then physically what you do? Do you just meet at the back door, or do you meet at the ceremonial office?

EDWARDS: Such a fun thing, yes—so to finish up on the Steering and Policy Committee. The Steering and Policy Committee makes those determinations. It's part of the leadership team and then holds policy hearings. I presided over a number of policy hearings, for example on the Flint water crisis, which are independent of the standing committees of the House, but it's a way to inject a Democratic view on various public policy issues. And we coordinate among the other Members of the committee, and there are a wide range that represent regions of the country and rural and urban areas so that we can make sure that when we're making choices about committee assignments it isn't just about whether you want it. I have a

binder full of letters from Members making their case for why they wanted to serve on one committee or the other.

We take those letters, and we review them. We look at people's background, we look at recommendations coming out of the various regions, and we look at the committee itself and say, "What are we missing on this committee that could be served by one Member or other?" And of course, if a senior Member moves because a freshman has come in, it means it creates another assignment on another committee. So in some ways, it's kind of like a puzzle in filling all these pieces together and has everything to do with the majority determining what the ratios are on the committees, the number of people, the number of vacancies there will be, and that changes depending on elections. So if you get more folks who are elected from one party than the other, then that changes the ratios. It actually might mean that some people lose a committee assignment if they're most junior, and then they have to be placed on another committee. But it is quite the puzzle piece to fill out. And then Members are very nice to you when they want a particular committee assignment, and then it happens, and it happens.

WASNIEWSKI: It's a way to really learn the institution at another level.

EDWARDS: Yes. I loved it because also learning what each one of these committees does and what their broad responsibilities are because you want to make sure that you have Members who also can add some value to the committee. And some of them are committees where, frankly, Members want to be on them because they might believe it enables them access to certain resources to try to raise money from the industries or players who come before those committees. So I didn't realize that before I started doing it. And so there are

some committees that are known as committees where the Members can raise a lot of money, and then there are others where they can't. Most Members don't care. Most Americans don't know that.

WASNIEWSKI: You talked about being appointed to the escort committee for bringing the President into the [House] Chamber. Can you talk about that process a little bit and then your memory of the first time doing that?

EDWARDS: After I came onto the leadership team as the co-chair of Steering and Policy, I became one of the Members who was allowed to escort the President of the United States into the chamber. And I remember the first time I was notified by the [Democratic] Leader's office, and I didn't even know what it meant. I just knew it happened because I'd obviously been in the chamber before when that happened, but I didn't know what went on behind the scenes. And so your name is called after the appointment is made from the presiding officer. Your name is called, and then all the names that are called are funneled back around to the back of the chamber and into the ceremonial office where the President of the United States is in the office, usually standing behind a couple of flags. Each one of us who are Members go, and we shake his hand, a photograph is taken, and then we assemble in line. And there is no order.

The House and Senate Members—I guess maybe it should be by seniority, but sometimes it's just jockeying for position. And you assemble, and then you file two by two into the House Chamber. The doors of course open up, and your colleagues are lined up in the chamber because they're waiting to greet the President, and they all shake your hands too as you're coming in. And so, shake hands, you greet your colleagues, say, "Oh, it's great to see

you." Then finally after that, the President of the United States comes through those doors.

WASNIEWSKI: Remarkable experience, yes.

EDWARDS: It's so fun. And the same thing happened when heads of state visited, and so I was assigned when various heads of state visited. One of the great things about leadership, things that happen, you get an assigned seat on the floor so you don't have to worry about scurrying in in the morning and leaving a scarf to mark your seat. And there was a wonderful photograph that was actually taken of the Pope [Francis] looking at me, and it was in *Politico*, and it's actually glowing. Maybe that's what happens when the Pope greets you, but it's this glowing picture of him looking directly at me and me looking at him. It's wonderful.

WASNIEWSKI: Not a perspective many Members get to have.

EDWARDS: No. And even when I was a freshman Member after the 2008 election, January, when the President [Obama] first came to the Joint Meeting of the Congress, I, by accident, because there was no other seat left, I sat at the very first seat at the top where the President comes into the door, and it turns out that I was the first Member of Congress to greet the President on the floor of the House. And so when President Obama came through, I shook his hand, and I told him to break a leg.

WASNIEWSKI: Thanks so much for bringing that to our attention. That's a perspective we haven't had before.

JOHNSON: Another different experience, not quite the same, but we know that you played in the Congressional Women's Softball Game and that you were on the inaugural team [2009]. Can you describe what that experience was like and then also the importance of women having the opportunity to be part of these experiences?

EDWARDS: I think that almost more than anything the Congressional Women's Softball Team was a way that we brought women Members together. We would start practice at, I don't know, 7:00 in the morning, before we had to be showered and into our committee assignments. We would practice together for weeks leading up to the softball game. And we made a decision early on that we weren't going to do it the way the men did it where they played Republicans against Democrats. We decided that we were going to play on a bipartisan bicameral team and that we would play against our, what we would describe as common adversary. Not really true, but we would play against the press corps.

So there were women Senators who played, Republicans and Democrats, and on the House side, and it was great camaraderie. Then we'd all scurry away from the field, rush to get our showers, and most Members live in Washington, DC, and so they go back to their apartments or homes in the city. I lived outside of the city in Oxon Hill, Maryland, and so I couldn't go back home and change. So I would go to my office and wash up, get dressed, and then go to my committee assignments.

But the process of practicing together and playing together was really tremendous. It also led to Members working on legislation together. I remember working particularly on an issue related to fibroid disease among

women with now-Senator Shelley Moore Capito. It was because of a conversation that we actually had in the cage at the practice field. So there were opportunities to engage in work together, but mostly it was a way for us to know each other, to love each other, to be supportive of each other.

JOHNSON: I saw an article, too, that said you played in the Congressional Football Game. Is that true?

EDWARDS: I did.

JOHNSON: What was that like?

EDWARDS: {laughter} That was a different experience.

JOHNSON: What was that like for you?

EDWARDS: I was the only woman Member to play on the team. I love football. I've always loved football. When I was 12 years old, I played football, but then they wouldn't let me play anymore because I was a girl, and I've always been a little annoyed by that. And so when the opportunity came to play on the Congressional Football Team, I actually thought other women were going to play, and so when I showed up and it was all male Members, I was a little hesitant at first. But they were like, "No, come on, you've got to do it." And so I did.

I'd get up in the morning, practice with them. We'd practice on the west front of the Capitol, and we did that, and then I went out and played with them. We had a couple of professional football players who played with us,

and there was one woman who plays in a professional women's football league. And she played with us, and her name was Donna too. So they would call us Donna One and Donna Two, or she was Big Donna, and I was Little Donna. So that was great. And when we played that first year, I actually won the Most Valuable Player award, so I don't know if they were giving it to me as a sympathy award or because I actually really played.

WASNIEWSKI: You've mentioned her a number of times now, but Speaker Pelosi, can you talk—it's kind of a two-part question. Observations about her leadership style, but then also the importance of having a woman serve as Speaker of the House. What did that mean to the other women in the caucus or House-wide?

EDWARDS: For me, coming in, I was sworn in as the first African-American woman representing Maryland by the first woman Speaker of the House. That just blew me away. When I got to know her, one, I think we share a lot of our politics. We really do share as progressives. And so there was a natural alliance. But I watched her work, and I watched her bring along, navigate, nurture, understand all the various elements of our caucus. When we say that we're a big tent it's really, really true. But that also means that you have to have a leader who understands that.

And I watched her work. I remember just observing her during the Affordable Care Act and observing the way she did one meeting after another meeting with different factions and groups to bring people along—and then making the kinds of changes that would keep everybody in place. I watched her count votes. She is a vote counter like nobody else. She knows where

every vote comes from. She knows the ones that she can afford to give away and the ones that she has to keep, and she keeps track of it.

Then I watched her in campaign mode. So when I was on the DCCC, I did a lot of fundraising travel, events with her where she was the draw and the rest of us were the cleanup players. And I watched the way she talked with donors and helped them to understand what it is that we were trying to do and why it is that they were so important. You know, man or woman, she is going to go down as one of the most effective Speakers ever having presided over, served the House of Representatives. It doesn't have to do with her gender. She's just really, really good, and she's tough. One thing that I didn't understand about her before I came in is that she knows policy in detail, and I admire that. Because sometimes you get people who can do politics or they can do policy, but they can't do both, and she can do both, and I think it's the reason that she's been such an effective leader.

JOHNSON: Did you have any aspirations to go into the leadership while you were in the House?

EDWARDS: I thought about it. I made the decision basically at the eight and half year mark that I was going to run for the U.S. Senate. And I could have made another decision that I was going to stay in the House and then try to go into leadership. My view on this is I always just wanted to figure out a way that we could just be more effective as a Democratic Caucus and that we could have more Democrats doing it. If that meant serving in leadership, then that would be fine. If it meant being one of the backup players, that would be fine too because I believe in our values. I wanted to see that reflected in law and in the things that can make a difference to people. So did I aspire to

leadership? I really aspired to us having a much more Democratic and effective caucus.

WASNIEWSKI: We just have some wrap-up questions. You talked about deciding eight and a half years in that you were going to run for the Senate. What was behind that calculation to run, to leave the House?

EDWARDS: I looked at our state [Maryland], and I saw Senator Barbara [Ann] Mikulski was retiring. She's the first woman elected on her own to the U.S. Senate, and I thought that it would be really unfortunate not to have a woman replace her. I looked around at our state, at our delegation, and there were not a lot of options there. And so I made a calculation that I would run. I knew that I would run a formidable campaign and try to make as compelling an argument. I also knew what the stakes were and that I would have to give up my House seat, and I thought about that for some time.

I think when I came into Congress, I described myself as an accidental Congressperson. And so I don't know that I ever intended to be there for the 20 or 30 or 40 years that some others served. I had always sort of looked at it as basically 10 years. I look at some Members, and I didn't want to get to the stage where I wasn't as effective as I was in the beginning. And I could see that happening with some who had served for many, many decades. Other people, that didn't happen, but I didn't want to be that person.

So I made a decision to run for the Senate, and I was not successful. People have asked me whether I regret not being in the House. I loved the House, make no mistake about that. I loved every single bit of it—even the days that were tough—but I was ready to move on. So you don't get to regret the

things that you do. You get to learn from what you do to do something else. So I figure there's some other stage that's going to be created. I just don't quite know what it is yet.

JOHNSON: When we talked to you about your early House runs, we asked about the role that gender and race played in those. What about in your run for the Senate?

EDWARDS: Oh, so much. I mean, it's so interesting because I think one of the critiques of my Senate run is that I talked about being a single mom and an African-American woman, and that that was viewed as a negative. That's still troubling to me as to why because that is my life experience, that is my lived experience. It is what contributes to the way that I think about what our obligations are as public servants. And so I would say yes.

I remember reading one time in a newspaper that I was overly aggressive. That was the word that was—that was the terminology that was used. That is a very gender-laden description. Because I was passionate about an issue, because I was pushing forward something that I believed in? I cannot believe that a man would ever be described as overly aggressive. And so yes, I think that sometimes the way that gender and race play out, especially now—well, maybe not so on the national level—is in a much more subtle way.

But I also think I ran against somebody whom everyone thought was his turn. I would say if that is true, when will it ever be a woman's turn because she might not ever be at that stage. I was identifying if it's his turn, when it will be my turn? I couldn't figure out when that would be, so I had to take my turn when I thought that I should. But I would say race and gender

played a role in that race in a very subtle way sometimes, and sometimes overly aggressive, not so subtle.

WASNIEWSKI: We've asked you a lot of questions about your past and background, but we ask everyone a question where we ask them to prognosticate rather than talk about the past. Right now we have 113 women in Congress: 90 in the House, 23 in the Senate. In 2067, when we celebrate Jeannette Rankin's 150th anniversary, how many women do you think we'll have in Congress?

EDWARDS: In 2067?

WASNIEWSKI: Almost 50 years from now. How many and how will we get there?

EDWARDS: I'd say it would probably be at about 150, and I think there are ways to get there. By making sure that when we lose women we replace them with women and that we add. That's what it is, it's addition, subtraction, and that it has to be intentional. I believe that any time you're trying to change that kind of dynamic, it doesn't happen by accident. It has to be intentional—intentional in recruiting, intentional in funding, intentional in supporting. And I think if we have that kind of intentionality, then it's possible for us to get there. Now, that's still not quite parity, is it?

WASNIEWSKI: One of the things, just to follow up on that, that Leader Pelosi often refers to is the lack of civility in politics. Do you think that's a discouragement for women, or not so much?

EDWARDS: It's been said, it's not beanball, and so it can be brutal. I've experienced that brutality. It didn't make me not want to do it; it just toughened me up a

little bit. And you know, sometimes the things that are happening to the American people are not very civil. And so I believe in the fight, and sometimes that means that you're going to get, and other times it means you're going to give. And I think the women of the 21st century are prepared to get and to give. When I talk to young women, I hear a different way to engage, and people are not—I think young women are not as afraid of the fight. So I don't worry about the incivility because when you are struggling to put food on the table, and your children can't go to a doctor, and you're taking care of a parent who's aging, and you're still trying work a job and raise a family, or you can't get a promotion at a job, it's pretty uncivil.

JOHNSON: Based on all of your experiences, what would you offer as advice to a woman who's thinking of running for a seat in Congress?

EDWARDS: Don't wait for someone to ask you, just do it. Don't wait to be chosen. And work twice as hard, even today, work twice as hard.

WASNIEWSKI: Was there anything unexpected or something that surprised you about your House service?

EDWARDS: I talked before—I'm a reader. I read things. It's how I take things in and study. I was surprised by, not among everyone, but the general lack of studiousness. I don't know if that's always been true in the House.

I did find that frankly the women Members were always far better prepared than their male colleagues—always, always, always. And the other thing I found is that I ended up having relationships with people that in a million

years if I were walking down the street I would never, ever have found them in my circle.

Funny story—Lamar [Seeligson] Smith from Texas, who's retiring, and we'd butted heads on the Science Committee, but we really liked each other a lot, and we traveled together to Antarctica. It was the best thing. And we just became friends, and in my last run for elective office, he wrote me a check. {laughter} And Lamar and I don't see eye-to-eye on almost anything except both of us want to go to Mars. That's all. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: Opportunities to make new friends.

JOHNSON: I just had one last question about what do you think your legacy will be as far as your service in the House? So years from now if a student opens up—well, they won't have books at that point—if they're on a laptop and they see your name and your biography, what do you think it will say about your legacy in the House?

EDWARDS: It will say that I served with conviction and passion and that I was principled. And I hope that somebody will write in there that I helped kids eat dinner in Maryland who were poor.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you so much for your time.

EDWARDS: Thanks.

WASNIEWSKI: That's all the questions we've got.

EDWARDS: This was fun.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes, and this is great. Really appreciate it.

EDWARDS: Thank you.

NOTES

[1] In 1971 the 13 African-American Members of the House founded the Congressional Black Caucus. Six years later in 1977, the women Members formed the Congresswomen's Caucus, later called the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues.