The Honorable Mary Rose Oakar

U.S. Representative of Ohio (1977–1993)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

March 2, 2017

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

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, Mary Rose Oakar came to Congress having fostered strong community ties as a teacher, a member of the Cleveland city council, and a well-known name in the local Democratic Party. Oakar ran for Congress in great part to improve public housing in Cleveland. With no money for television advertisements she ran an effective grassroots campaign where she traversed the streets of Cleveland and nearby suburbs in a decked-out Ford Model T distributing her distinctive rose pens at church card parties, bowling alleys, and other events where potential voters assembled. During her eight terms in the House, the Ohio Representative remained closely connected to her district, addressing issues of local importance, while also earning a reputation as a powerful spokesperson for women, children, and the elderly.

As a Representative, Oakar advocated increased women's rights such as pay equity and better health care for women. A determined, and at times, tenacious legislator—as evidenced by her refusal to back down when promised increased funding for mammograms—Oakar openly embraced the idea of representing women across the country and the world. During the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas debate in 1991, she joined other women Representatives in attending the highly-publicized congressional hearings and meeting with Anita Hill during breaks in her testimony. A founding member of the Congresswomen's Caucus, she describes how she helped recruit other women Members to join the organization and reflects on the early years of the caucus. Oakar also recalls efforts by women Representatives for equity within the institution to gain access to the gym and pool used by Congressmen. Mirroring her ability to forge strong relationships in her district, Oakar skillfully worked her way into the Democratic leadership. She outlines her responsibilities in the Democratic whip organization and her successful run for secretary of the Democratic Caucus—a position left vacant when Geraldine Ferraro ran for Vice President. Oakar offers a behind-the-scenes look at leadership campaigning (including an unsuccessful bid for Democratic Caucus chair) and shares how Ferraro encouraged her to demand a seat at the table (literally) when the Democratic leadership met with the President at the White House.

Biography

OAKAR, Mary Rose, a Representative from Ohio; born in Cleveland, Cuyahoga County, Ohio, March 5, 1940; graduated from Lourdes Academy, Cleveland, Ohio, 1958; B.A., Ursuline College, Cleveland, Ohio, 1962; attended Columbia University, New York, N.Y., 1963; M.A., John Carroll University, Cleveland, Ohio, 1966; attended Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, London, England, 1964; attended Westham Adult College, Warwickshire, England, 1968; faculty member, Cuyahoga Community College, Cuyahoga, Ohio, 1968–1975; member, Cleveland, Ohio, city council, 1973–1976; Democratic State central committee, 1973–1975; alternate delegate, Democratic National Convention, 1976; elected as a Democrat to the Ninety-fifth and to the seven succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1977–January 3, 1993); unsuccessful candidate for reelection to the One Hundred Third Congress in 1992; business executive; consultant; member of the Ohio state house of representatives, 2000–2002.
Read full biography

Editing Practices

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

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

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

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

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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 MARY ROSE OAKAR OF OHIO —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm here today with Matt Wasniewski, who is the House Historian. The date is March 2nd, 2017. We're in the House Recording Studio in the Rayburn House Office Building. And we are very pleased to be here with former Representative Mary Rose Oakar of Ohio. This interview is part of a series that we're doing to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the election of the first woman to Congress, Jeannette Rankin. So thank you for coming in today.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you.

OAKAR: What an honor. And I think it's wonderful that we're commemorating Jeannette Rankin who voted consistently against war all the time and was quite a pioneer. What a tribute to the state of Montana to have the right for women to vote. My mother was 10 years old before she could look forward to voting in 1920 when we had the [Susan B.] Anthony Amendment.

JOHNSON: One question that we typically start off with is asking about any female role models that you might have had when you were young.

OAKAR: Well, I think my mother, my older sister, and some of the teachers I had when I was in school. I had some religious [teachers]—I happened to have gone to Catholic schools—that were fabulous, just fabulous, and never made any money. They just sacrificed themselves for educating women. And I was talking to some of my colleagues last night. I went to a women's college in undergraduate school. It was interesting that so many of the Congresswomen when I first came [to Congress] went to women's colleges: Barbara [Ann] Mikulski, Barbara [Bailey] Kennelly, I think Nancy Pelosi, the former

Speaker. It was very interesting. And we wonder why. Well, I think we were taught leadership. We were not distracted until we went beyond the college campus. {laughter} But nonetheless, I found that kind of interesting. Mary McCarthy, I think, wrote a book about it.[1]

JOHNSON: When you were young, what was the expectation of what you would be when you grew up to be a woman?

OAKAR: Play baseball. {laughter} I wanted to be a tennis player, baseball player, an actress. I suppose I liked teaching, which was my profession for which I was trained. The one thing I feel very strongly about giving young people, which my parents gave to the five of us, was self-confidence. And they were never restrictive about what we wanted to do. I think that when you give a child confidence that you can do whatever's right for you, that's something very special. Any time I speak at a graduation, I always mention that that is the quality that I hope they have, so that they can go on to bigger and better things, if that's what they want to do. It's not restrictive. It could be anything. But I think that that was what they gave me.

So I kind of evolved because when I was in college and even in high school, teachers would say, "You have leadership qualities." And I was always—not always—but elected the hardest elections, I was class president in the college that I went to, and then student government president. When I was student government president, I got to travel and meet other students. And that was the '60s, those roaring '60s. We really wanted to change the world. We wanted peace, and we wanted to have social justice. And I think that experience was magnificent for me. So I had leadership opportunities when I was in high school and college. So I think those aspirations, it prepared me, never thinking that I would run for public office, it didn't occur to me.

WASNIEWSKI: Was it the outside civil rights movement that really inspired you to move into politics?

OAKAR: Well, civil rights, but I never went to the South. But I'm from Cleveland. And we were oriented—it's kind of a porch culture in cities like Cleveland. We were very oriented toward our neighborhood. I came from a very diverse community, which I love. It's called Ohio City. It's in the city of Cleveland. I went to school and grew up with people of all backgrounds and races. I think that dealing with my peers was a great experience in preparation for being in public life. It's hard to believe, but true, I just finished my almost 30th year of public life.

WASNIEWSKI: Were there any individuals who served as political mentors or inspiration in politics, particularly?

OAKAR: Definitely Tip [Thomas Philip] O'Neill [Jr.]. Tip was my mentor, and I'm sure to several others. What I loved about Tip O'Neill, he could call you "fellas"—I was 1 of 16 women in Congress in my first year—and you didn't mind because he was so fair-minded. The Women's Congressional Bipartisan Caucus—which was founded the first year I came to Congress—went to him and said, "You don't have a woman on Appropriations, Ways and Means, and we can't find any women in the FBI, or there has never been a woman Secretary of State."[2] It was a glass ceiling for managerial positions. And he would say, "You know, you're right." He'd do something about it. I think he was just a fabulous person. So he was a mentor to me. There's no question about it.

I have a story about him if you want me to tell it. When I was a freshman—one of the reasons I wanted to run for Congress was that I had 16 percent of public housing in our county on two tracts of land that a lot of people

neglected, but it was a federal project. And they had their own police force. So whenever there were crime problems, you couldn't do anything about it with the city. I was a councilwoman at the time. Then they didn't have locks on the doors, and they weren't well kept up. And seniors were being mugged, and women were being assaulted, and kids were on drugs.

So I came to Washington with some of the individuals who lived in public housing and asked HUD [Housing and Urban Development] if we could do something about this situation because I couldn't do it on a city level because they claimed they didn't have jurisdiction. And they said, "Oh, yes, it's turf reclamation; let's reclaim the turf"—all this jargon. I thought that's it for me, I'm going to . . . and there was an opening. My Congressmember was running for the Senate. So I thought I'm just going to run to bring that issue up because it's a federal issue. Then I realized there were other issues.

I had more volunteers probably than anybody else—not as much money. You can win sometimes without a lot of money. I was a good grader when I was teaching, so my former students both in college and high school were very kind to help me—my former classmates and people from my neighborhood all volunteered. There's real loyalty—and I still live in the same neighborhood in Cleveland—people I grew up with and their kids, all volunteered.

That's what motivated me to run—public housing that was not taken care of. So when I was elected to Congress, I got on the Banking and Urban Affairs Committee because I wanted to do something about community development and things like that. That was my first piece of legislation for HUD programs to improve public housing.

JOHNSON: When you decided to make that jump to run for Congress did you receive any helpful advice from people?

OAKAR: Actually my party discouraged me. It was very interesting. I went to the party chairman, and he said, "You know, go see this judge; she's a real trailblazer." The judge was Judge [Jean Murrell] Capers who happened to be African American and a Republican—I'm a Democrat. "Go see her, and she'll give you advice, but you ought to wait a little while." They had their person picked out. So I went to see Judge Capers. And she said, "What did he tell you?" She said, "You go, girl. Ignore that man." {laughter} She was very encouraging to me.

Also the council president (I was then a city councilman), George Forbes, gave me advice. It's an interesting thing, and I don't want it to be misinterpreted, but he said, "If you start going and say, 'I'm the only woman ever elected from my party in Ohio,' and all that stuff, everybody's going to know you're a woman. Do not use that woman thing. You can talk about the issues, but don't promote the fact that you're a woman, and these other fellas in the race are all men and so on, and so forth." And he helped me as the head of the city council to call on me and so forth, because he really wanted me to win. There was another councilperson running. But I thought it was good advice.

JOHNSON: How much of an issue was gender in that campaign though, because it was a crowded primary. There were 12 opponents, and you were the only woman.

OAKAR: I thought it was a great issue for me to be the only woman. {laughter} Yes, I think gender was a problem for some people. One of the fellas did an ad, in fact, saying that my polling was high. And it wasn't a poll I took; it was a poll he took, but it was leaked by one of his volunteers. I found out that I was

ahead of everybody, which was very interesting because I didn't think that was the case. But he did an ad saying, "You know, if you want a weakling," that sort of thing. "You want somebody soft on issues." I mean he didn't even have to say woman, but that's what he was talking about. It really backfired, I think, quite a bit. And he was the person that everybody thought would win because his father had been in a high position and had been former mayor of Cleveland, and so on, and worked for President [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy. I did think that some made an issue about the fact that I wouldn't be strong enough to have that office, and so on. But obviously, some people thought differently.

WASNIEWSKI: Can you describe a key moment in that first campaign? Was there any "aha" moment for you or point where you felt like you turned a corner?

OAKAR: Just a few things, I think. First of all, I was in public life. And as a councilperson, we were going after an arsonist in our most historic neighborhood, the neighborhood I represented in the city council where I lived—still live in Cleveland. Somebody was burning down the city, and so on. And I found out that a realtor was selling these homes, and then they would fix them a little bit, get great insurance, and torch them. We had a person tell my assistant, whom I had to pay for, that her sister was married to the guy torching. He wasn't the brains but he was the torcher.

So we were able to expose that. Honestly, I had threatening notes left under my car that I was going to be killed. It was a pretty wild moment, but we succeeded, and the FBI stepped in a little later on. My assistant had all the notes. She was in her 70s, and she had all the notes from what the sister-in-law had told her about who did it. And I knew who the realtor was and the people involved. They caught them, and that was a highlight.

I think the other thing, on a lighter note, was that my chief opponent had all the priests. Not that Cleveland is so Catholic. But he had the priests. And I remember I said, "Well, you know, I'm going to go to the nuns." And I knocked on the convent door. At that time, there were quite a few. I bumped into my second grade teacher, and I said, "Sister." "Oh, don't worry, Mary Rose, we're all for you; we got everybody registered." And so I kept on knocking on all the convent doors.

The last day, I knock on the door of this one convent about an hour before the closing of the polls. And this nun answers. She says, "Mary Rose, did you go to Saint Patrick's School?" And I said, "Yes, Sister, I did." She said, "So did I." She said, "You're going to win." She said, "Come here. I want to show you." So she had this garden devoted to one of the saints, Saint Therese. This sounds a little too Catholic perhaps. But anyway, she said, "Look at these roses, they never bloom this month, but they're blooming. You're going to win that election tonight. You wait and see." I said, "Oh, thanks, Sister, I really appreciate that."

So I had these rose pens, I would go and get in anywhere with them because people liked them. My friends who were running had literature or a bottle of wine to give to people at a card party or something, or at a Democratic event or a bowling alley, wherever we were I had these rose pens, and people would come up to me to get one.

And so this one day, I was at this huge parish card party, and the priest said, "We're not letting any politicians in." There were four of us that wanted to get into it. "We're not letting you guys in. And you," to me, "you stand aside." So I said, "Okay, Father." So there's two Saint Patrick's in Cleveland: West Park and Bridge Ave. So the other three guys left. He said, "I need to

talk to you. You need a lesson"—pretended that he needed to talk to me more. I said, "Father, don't hold it against me." Because he was pastor of Saint Patrick's West Park, the Saint Patrick's that was farther out—and he said, "Honey, I went to the Saint Patrick's-Bridge Ave. where you went, on the Near West Side. Come on in." So I'll tell you I won the whole crowd. He gave a speech for me. So I think those were lighter moments when I said, "Holy Toledo, how does this happen?"

Campaigning at 5:00 in the morning with the steelworkers or the UAW [United Auto Workers] workers—we had two huge auto plants, Chevy and Ford. They were so good to me. The rank and file of UAW overturned the endorsement that the leaders gave to one of my opponents. That was a turning point—huge. I found out later that my opponent got the state endorsement while I got the local endorsement, and he got four times more campaign contributions than I did. And here I had gotten the rank and file of where they really served. So it was kind of interesting. That was a big turning point, the UAW.

JOHNSON: Especially for people that are not from Cleveland, not from the area, can you describe your district and then also how it changed over time when you were in Congress?

OAKAR: Yes. I had about half of the city of Cleveland. Congressman [Louis] Stokes, my dear late friend, had the other half of Cleveland. And I had originally 12 suburbs. Then when we kept losing seats—not that we lost population as a state, but other states gained population—I had 16 suburbs of our county, and Congressman Stokes had the other suburbs. We worked together. We were two kids from Cleveland who wanted to help our city and our suburbs.

So what happened was it kept getting bigger and bigger. And I did see tremendous changes. For example, we got more UDAG [Urban Development Action Grant] grants, which are public-private grants, than any other city, working together with Congressman Stokes and others. And I saw the restoration of all of our theaters in downtown Cleveland. We saw neighborhoods perk up with restoration. And we both wanted to do something about public housing because he had much more public housing than I did. Congressman Stokes was on Appropriations, and I was on the authorizing committee. So we were able to do some things with that. Not everything I wanted to do, but I did feel that I saw some positive changes working together.

In those days, we worked in a bipartisan manner for our state. So we would have meetings together, and the oldest Republican with the most seniority would co-chair with the senior Member of the Democratic Party. So we had Congressman Chalmers [Pangburn] Wylie and Congressman Stokes as the two co-chairs. Congressman Wylie was from Columbus, and if he had something from Ohio State, we'd all work to help him. If I wanted to save NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] in my district, they'd help me. And that's the way it worked. Today, they don't even talk to each other practically, I'm told by my friends who are serving. And it's very sad to see that.

There are some states where they still meet. California they still meet. But Ohio is a big disappointment in terms of being estranged as I think people perceive the Congress to be the same. For example, Tip O'Neill's best friend was Bob [Robert Henry] Michel, the Minority Leader who just passed away.[3] Did they argue? Did they disagree? But did they know how to compromise? It wasn't a nasty word in those days. And I think that that kind—I'm not

saying it was easy because we had our disappointments. But I do think that there was much more cooperation when we could.

WASNIEWSKI: You alluded to campaign contributions in terms of the state versus the local unions. We're just wondering, was fundraising a barrier in your early campaigns? And did any women's groups support you in those early years?

OAKAR: Yes, I did have support from women's groups. The Women's Campaign Fund did help me. To get $500 in my day was a lot. Not that these guys that I ran against didn't have a lot more. But I had a hard time raising money. First of all, I don't like doing it, and I think we have too much of it in our country. I wish we were more like England or some of the European countries in that sense of elections and money.

So the barrier really was—I just gave an example of how it was overturned, the election—or the nomination—for the UAW. And I got $500. My opponent, who they said got it statewide—whatever that meant—got $2,000. So women were discriminated against.

On the other hand, women—I think Nancy Pelosi is good at raising money, don't misunderstand—but I do think that it's harder for women to raise funds. And it's harder for women sometimes, in my day, to get endorsements and things like that. However, that shouldn't be a barrier for anybody who wants to run. You just go to the people, if you can.

JOHNSON: Why do you think it was harder especially for your period? You said that you didn't particularly like doing it. Or was it something beyond that?

OAKAR: Well, first of all, I was a councilwoman. And some of the people that I ran against were state senators—larger group, had more political names. I just

think it's easier for guys to go play golf with somebody, go in the backrooms, and raise the funds. I don't think women are into making false promises. Not that you do that because it's perfectly legal to get a contribution. But I don't think that's in our nature as much to raise money for campaigns. I mean they used to force me to sit down and call people, when I needed to raise money. But I did not raise a lot of money for my first campaign. But we still won because we had volunteers.

We did something a little bit more unique. One of my friends had one of those old Fords. It was really not a 1932 Model T Ford, but it was one of those sets that they could put together to look like an antique car. It was red, white, and blue. And so, we'd just go. We didn't have money for television. And one of my opponents was on every day of the week. Fortunately, he didn't wear makeup, a la Richard [Milhous] Nixon, and he didn't look too good in the commercials, even though he wasn't a bad-looking guy.

So we would go in this Model T Ford all over the district, which was pretty large, and people would come out because they wanted to see the car, and then I'd get to meet them. So that was sort of a way for me to get to know a lot of the people and get around 12 suburbs and half the city of Cleveland, even though I had a base, which was nice—my own ward. But I didn't have the areas that some of my opponents had.

JOHNSON: Before we move on to your career, we had a couple questions about objects that are in the House Collection and some of the images are right there. The first is the campaign button that has your name and your district number. So we were wondering if you have a particular story or memory connected to this button, or if not for that, for any of the campaign materials that you used.

OAKAR: Well, we did for this button—and we decided on red and blue. When I ran for city council, sounds crazy, but I decided I'm just going to wear red, white, and blue, always—which was a big mistake because I ran out of clothes. But these are the colors we chose. And we were able to give these buttons with the rose pins, which is what we could afford, and people would wear that. And they were large. They weren't those tiny ones. I think that that was very, very helpful. And we had a printer who designed it. It was nice. And our signs—we had a few signs—and they were this color as well. So we always used blue and red in my signs and things. But it was a large button, it wasn't this big, but it was fairly large. And that was something that made them know me. But most of the people knew me by my first name. It's interesting.

JOHNSON: Then the other one that we had pulled up for you was the Supersisters card.

OAKAR: I remember these cards. There's my red, white, and blue outfit. I remember these cards. I have three brothers. And I remember taking a few home because they used to collect baseball cards. And I said, "Well, add this to your collection." And they said, "Oh." {groan} But no, they thought it was cute.

Supersisters. We were. When I came, there were only 16 women out of 535 people. They didn't even know where the women's lavatories were when I first got here. You needed a key.

WASNIEWSKI: That's a great segue into our next question about coming into the House. So you were sworn in at the start of the 95th Congress, 1977. There's not even a dozen and a half women in Congress at that point. Did you find that women Members gravitated toward one another because there were so few of you?

OAKAR: I think so. Barbara Mikulski and I came in together. And we had communicated before because she was a councilwoman too, from Baltimore.

So we had communicated as city councilwomen for some reason. I think it had to do with transportation, trucks or something. Anyway, so Barbara and I wondered why women never met. There were only 16 of us. And I said, "What's the problem?" "Well, we can't agree on the Equal Rights Amendment. They don't agree about abortion." And I said, and I think Barbara and I both did this, "What if we said we're only going to support things that all of us agree on?" We found later that that was 95 percent of the time.

So we went to the senior Members, Liz [Elizabeth] Holtzman and Peggy [Margaret M.] Heckler, and I got to know them before. They were very out there for the new Members. And we said, "Why don't we meet?" They said, "Well, let's form a bipartisan caucus." I told this story last night. We all had to go to different women to ask them if they'd join because we wanted everybody to join. So Liz Holtzman gives me Barbara [Charline] Jordan. Barbara Jordan was an icon. She was very famous. And she was not reaching out too much to us. I wanted her autograph, I remember thinking.

So I go to Barbara Jordan. I said, "Barbara Jordan, I'm Mary Rose Oakar; I was just elected to Congress for my first term." She said, "Of course you are." She's sitting there on the House Floor. She always got there early because she had a problem walking, and she wanted to get there early. And so nobody was in the chamber at the time but Barbara and I. I said, "Well, we're forming this Women's Caucus. It's bipartisan. We'd certainly love to have you join." "Caucus? Women's Caucus," she said. She said, "There's only one caucus I belong to." And I thought she was going to say the Black Caucus. I said, "What caucus is that?" She said, "The Texas caucus."

So I said, "Well, can we at least use your name even if you don't come to the meetings?" So that was the compromise. So we did get a few Members that never came to meetings. But just about everybody did sign on and come. And as a result, we passed wonderful legislation together. So much so that at one point Senator [Robert Joseph] Dole asked me if men could join because I had done some things on breast cancer. Connie [Constance A.] Morella did some things on women with AIDS; Olympia [Jean] Snowe did osteoporosis. Then we put it collectively into a health bill and individually introduced that legislation. He was interested. And I and my staff especially were successful with breast cancer, with mammography in Medicare and getting more research dollars—some interesting stories about that which *60 Minutes* and *20/20* put on when I got angry at my colleagues. [Dole] was interested in prostate cancer, because it was underfunded, and we were able to slowly but surely get some of the female-dominated disease grants and coverage. So that was our bonding, the women's bipartisan caucus. And meeting them and getting to know them very well was a great privilege.

Shirley [Anita] Chisholm. When I taught at one of our community colleges, Shirley Chisholm spoke there, and I remember getting her autograph. And here I was a colleague of hers. She was an educator as I had been. She was just a marvelous woman. She told me stories about her running for President and winning primaries, and then the men in her own caucus wouldn't support her, and how she was put on the Agricultural Committee, and she was from an urban area, like Brooklyn. She said, "I showed them." She did the food stamp legislation. Then they wanted to get rid of her. So I got to know Shirley as a colleague. It was a marvelous experience. She was only there a couple terms that I was there.

Peter [Wallace] Rodino [Jr.] told me how they changed the law concerning people—immigrants—and how they had quota systems for everybody unless you were English or German. If you were English or German, you just got in. If you were any other nationality, there was a quota. And so he was the one who did the legislation before I came in the early '70s.

But meeting people like that was a magnificent experience. And nobody's going to ever write a book, perhaps, about good guys like Bruce [Frank] Vento—and they should—or Marilyn [Laird] Lloyd of Tennessee, fabulous woman who was very knowledgeable about space issues and science issues. But they should write books about people like that. And I guess, maybe, you will do this with your history.

JOHNSON: Well, hopefully after people listen to these interviews and read the transcripts, they'll be more inspired to do that.

OAKAR: I hope so.

JOHNSON: You mentioned Peggy Heckler, Liz Holtzman, Shirley Chisholm. So when you were coming in as a freshman Representative, did any of these women who had been here longer than you offer you any helpful advice?

OAKAR: Just as colleagues. I think Shirley Chisholm offered me advice quite a bit. And she was on the Rules Committee. She said, "You know, Mary Rose, if you don't gain seniority quickly on the Banking and Urban Affairs Committee," which is what we called it then, she said, "you ought to try to get on Appropriations or Rules." And I said, "But Shirley, the issues that I came here for I still haven't finished, and they have jurisdiction." And she said, "Well, then finish that, and see where it goes."

Ultimately, I was able to climb up quickly and be a subcommittee chair of that in the Post Office and Civil Service Committee, to help federal employees and to do my pay equity bill, which I was very interested in, because they had a very outdated civil service. It was just terrible. I mean they had names like black boot for one of the categories—glass ceilings for female- and minority-dominated jobs—awful. And I wanted to change that and did a study.

So all we were going to do was do a study on it. I didn't want to change committees because I was a subcommittee chair at the time of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee. And so, I did a pay equity study, and finally it passed the House, actually two times. I found out that the Senate had a hold on the bill. I found out it was Jesse Helms, Senator Helms—of one of the Carolinas—and so I thought well, I'm going to march over there and ask him what his problem is. It's just a study.

So I go over there, and I ask Jesse, Senator Helms. He's in the cloakroom. And I say, "Senator, I'm Mary Rose Oakar from Congress." "I know who you are. I know you." "Yeah, okay." I said, "I have a pay equity bill. All it is is a study." It was a little more than that, but I told him that. And he said, "Yeah, I know that." I said, "Well, why do you have a hold on it?" He said, "You're not supposed to know that. Who told you?" Well, everybody knew he was the guy. So I said, "It's a rumor." And he said, "How'd you vote on my tobacco bill?" He wanted it regarded as a vegetable or something, and I thought it's not a vegetable. I said, "Well, if you call it something else, I could see that it's very important to your state and so forth, but it's not a vegetable." And he said, "Well, there you have it."

So I actually did a GAO [Government Accountability Office] report then, got them to do a study on it because I couldn't get it passed in the Senate. And it was the Senator from Washington [Daniel Jackson Evans] who had sponsored my bill. He was a Republican. He told me, "He's going to keep that hold on forever, Mary Rose. Let's just do our own study." So that's what we had to do. But we did change some of the names. We were able to change some of the things that were very, very horrible in terms of not changing that law for more than 30 years.

WASNIEWSKI: We have a lot of questions on your committee work and legislation. But we want to just walk you back a little bit to that first term and just get your impression about—how would you describe the general atmosphere of the House when you first arrived? Was it a welcoming place for women Members at that point?

OAKAR: Well, not so much in terms of resources like ladies' rooms. It was sort of a plantation kind of thing. On the other hand, what was welcoming was Speaker O'Neill because he was such an outgoing person. I remember Millicent [Hammond] Fenwick, who was a Congresswoman—she was there before I came even. And she said—and she was a Republican—"I love the Speaker. Whenever I need advice I go to Tip O'Neill." Now can you imagine that today?

And Tip and Bob Michel got along so well as friends, personal friends, that I think that attitude permeated the chamber. Now I won't say that they didn't have hard times later on in my career from Newt [Newton Leroy] Gingrich. But we took care of Newt a couple times. One time he—I don't know if people remember this, but at the end, when we're finished with our House business, with voting, you can ask for time to speak on the floor. And the

person who's chairing the floor as Speaker [pro tem] has to stay there until you're done talking. Well, he got some of his colleagues to speak all through the night. And finally, so much so that Tip O'Neill—Democrats were in charge—so he had the cameras rolling showing all the empty seats, so the taxpayers would know what was going on a little bit at 3:00 in the morning: nobody was there.

So one night he [Gingrich] said, "Now you take"—he was talking about the Contras—and he said, "You take that Mary Rose Oakar. She's as pink as can be." This was meaning I was communist. "And she said she wouldn't let her son serve in the service if he had to go to Central America and defend these freedom fighters." And, of course, I had been very active with the missionaries who were killed in El Salvador, two of whom were from Cleveland and did a lot of work with my staff on that and got some reconciliation about it, a trial for those soldiers. But going back to him, he probably thought that because of my work on Central America. So the next day, I'm thinking I don't have a son, and I never talked about not sending my son. He was talking about Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder, who is about a foot taller than I am. And so I said, "Pat, he's talking about you but mentioned me." And I said, "Let's get him."

So you probably won't play this one. But so we said, "Point of order, Mr. Speaker. Our names were used. My name was used last night at 3:00 in the morning as being pink, meaning that I was leaning toward communism. But will the gentleman from Georgia yield? I'd like to ask you a question." "Sure," he said. "Did you in fact use my name?" "Yes." "And did you say that I had a son who'd never serve in Central America in the military service?" "Yes," he said. "You didn't have the courage to say that to my face, but nonetheless, I don't have a son. Who were you talking about?" So he looks

around. And one of his staff comes running down the aisle and says, "Pat Schroeder." So Pat then gets up, and lets him have it. Well, he was really red-faced after that, and he stopped. After that, he never did it again, stayed all night long with that business. But he was a very creative person, and that's some of the things he would do to get attention. He was kind of a thorn in Tip's side, I think, once in a while. So Tip was very pleased with Pat and I that day.

JOHNSON: You had mentioned the access to bathroom facilities as being difficult, but one of the questions we had was about the gym—a couple stories that we came across with you and Barbara Boxer and Marcy [Marcia Carolyn] Kaptur coming up with a song to talk about equal access to gym facilities. Do you remember that?

OAKAR: Oh, how could I forget? Yes. Well, Barbara, she could have written the words to music. And I like to sing. I was a drama teacher and all that good stuff. And Marcy liked to sing, and Barbara liked to sing. So we would sit down and think of these things. And so there were times when we would have—the Democrats and Republicans did this. We would go away for three days to talk about a certain issue. I was in charge of that particular event. And I wanted us to also, besides dealing with issues, have a little fun. So we would invite people who wanted to entertain us in the evening. One of our fellas was a country singer, a guitar player, and he'd do that. And Tony Coelho liked to dance and do all his things.

So we would have an evening of entertainment. So that's when Barbara and I and Marcy had written a song "Can Anybody Use Our Gym?" to "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue," that melody. Cokie Roberts was there because Lindy [Corinne Claiborne] Boggs was her mother and Cokie was with public radio.

And so we sang this song that I can't remember all the words, but the essence of it was that we can't use the gym. We're not allowed to use the gym. And I played basketball when I was a kid. Our little team won the championship, girls' basketball. So I didn't use it very much even when we got to use it.

But so Cokie heard the song, and then she asked us to sing it again, and we did. And they giggled and laughed and all that. She played it the next day or a couple days later on public radio, and that embarrassed the heck out of everybody, and so the rules changed, and we got to use the gym. Included in that was the swimming pool they have. But I like to swim more than go in the gym with all the guys. But we were able to have access at least to that. So that's how that took place. But we were performers, pretend performers—a lot of fun.

WASNIEWSKI: What kind of media attention did you receive as a new Member of Congress, and what were some of the questions that you got? Was that an adjustment, coming from local city politics to national politics?

OAKAR: A little bit because certainly you weren't just asked questions by your local media. When I was a councilwoman, I was on television and radio quite a bit because of arson in my ward; it's colorful and visual. So they would always come out to my ward—I didn't do it because of that. But I would always have a press conference about getting these people who were burning down my city.

It wasn't the biggest adjustment for me, but when one was asked to be on Phil Donahue's show—who by the way was from Cleveland—or you were asked to be on some national show, that was a little different. And even C-SPAN, you knew you were going to be visualized and heard by millions of people really. And so that's a little different. You really have to prepare and to

know what you're doing because it's usually live and so forth, and that was different. For some reason, some of us were doing things that they were attracted to. So it was an adjustment, yes. And to know how to do it in such a way that your 10-second clip would get repeated on television.

JOHNSON: Did you feel that the women Members were treated any differently than the men, especially in the '70s and the '80s by the press?

OAKAR: Depends on the press. I do feel that sometimes women were not treated as fairly. I do. I think Pat Schroeder was one example. Pat Schroeder ran for President, and she worked her head off, didn't have a lot of resources, and she was a wonderful candidate for President. And at the end of it, when she finally had to leave and couldn't go on because she wasn't winning and she didn't have the money, she cried a little at the press conference.

Well, Ronald Reagan used to cry, but the media criticized her for that. Ronald Reagan, they'd sing "America, the Beautiful," and he had tears in his eyes. So that to me was despicable on the part of some media. Not everybody. I think public television and radio were very fair. I think that's why people who are thoughtful really like it, because they're objective.

But I did not think she was treated fairly. And I certainly feel that I had some problems too, later on in my career. I had to sue my own hometown paper, which I'd rather not go into, but I did win the case, for actual malice. That is not something that I cherish because I love the First Amendment, and I think we have to invite all the press to be in press conferences. And I don't like the fact that Helen Thomas was put in the eighth row and not in the front row because she asked serious questions about our involvement in war. So there are times when I think, but I don't think that's true all the time, it just depends on who's in the media.

WASNIEWSKI: You've mentioned a little bit already about the founding of the Congressional Women's Caucus. We just wanted to ask you a couple questions related to that. One is just general culture of the group. How often did you meet? Where did you meet? What were your meetings like?

OAKAR: We met in the women's lounge, which was the former Speaker's Office of John Quincy Adams, right off the Statuary Hall.[4] And there was a women's lounge with all the amenities. We met, I'd say once every couple weeks at least. It was very convenient because you weren't far from the House Floor if there was a vote. We would talk about various issues that we were concerned about, and we all would bring up things that were of concern.

We all talked also about the way we were perceived. And every single one of us had issues that were not true that we were perceived to be, in the sense of bad, those who were campaigning in a negative way. For example, Pat Schroeder was neglecting her children. Marilyn [Laird] Lloyd, her husband died in a plane crash, and she succeeded him, and she was called everything. And Barbara Mikulski was something else. And I had something else. We all had things that were used negatively when we campaigned. And we didn't see that as much for men.

I remember we would bring this up, some of us, at the Democratic Caucus, and the Republican women would bring it up at the Republican Caucus so that they would know that that was—in case somebody had a female opponent, that they wouldn't do that. Just talk about the issues that really mean something and not the personal lives, most of which was not true, of the women. So that was one of the things that I thought was very, very interesting, that all of us had this negative kind of thing whenever we campaigned. Or we had people targeting us with certain things.

But culturally, it was fabulous because we were from different areas of the country with different issues that were of concern. I learned a lot about rural problems. I was from the city. They learned about the city, a little more about my problems. We learned about the water for example. The Great Lakes people were very concerned about keeping our water pure because we use it so many ways. And California people were concerned about the dryness in California.

We really did work. And all of us worked on issues collectively as well. So we would bring in the head of the FBI and say, "How come you don't have any women who are out there?" And we'd bring in the head of the State Department and different agencies, along with doing legislation collectively. I think we made a big difference. I really do. And I don't take personal credit. I think collectively that's what we did.

JOHNSON: When we spoke to Liz Holtzman—we had the opportunity to interview her for this project—she mentioned how she was involved in the extension of the ERA, trying to get more time for states to ratify. So this would have been in the late '70s—joint resolution. She said that a lot of the women Members were involved in this, and it was an extensive whip organization basically, what you were doing. Do you have any memories of that?

OAKAR: I do. And I was very disappointed. As I recall, we lost by one vote or something. It was a very close vote. I was supportive of that amendment. Even though that was Liz Holtzman's personal—because all of the women didn't agree with it. And so we had that unanimous issue that you had to agree with something unanimously [in the Congresswomen's Caucus]. But it was extensive, and we almost did it so that states would have a chance to vote on it.

All of us networked to people we knew, particularly those we thought would be the hardest to please about that amendment. And we worked very, very hard, came very close to passing it. But it was not a caucus issue by the way, as I recall, because all of us didn't—I mean I was for it, but some people were not.

JOHNSON: Along with that connection of what you were just saying about having to be a unanimous issue, so of course women's reproductive rights were always a really big issue. Did you feel that that undermined the caucus in any way because that wasn't something that was unanimous, of course, but did it somehow cause friction among women Members?

OAKAR: I don't think it did because right away we said that was going to be off the charts. But one thing did come up that I felt maybe we could have agreed on. And that was family planning. But there were women that didn't agree with that. So we didn't use that.

But on other health issues . . . there's not just one issue that affects women. And you can be 9 for 10. And I think that's one of the mistakes that we sometimes make. Do you have to take the whole loaf or can you take nine-tenths of the loaf? And so on health issues, we had a health bill that every woman practically contributed to with her own legislation. We were very, very successful. I can tell you—and then we independently introduced our legislation as well as collectively, as a large piece of legislation.

But I know some of the problems I had. I had a mammography bill, and for six times, it was always in the budget for Medicare. And we had proven that it saves money and saves lives. If you catch breast cancer in stage I, it's cheaper, and you save the person's life. If you catch it in stage IV, it's more expensive, and somehow they don't have the same opportunity to live.

And for six times, when these fellas, all fellas, would go into a conference committee, at the very end, they would take it out and give somebody, because of the jurisdiction of Ways and Means, which was also for taxation, they would give somebody a tax break. Take my legislation out. When I say "my," I mean my staff too because there's nothing like a great staff.

So finally it was near Christmas, I believe, and everybody had their airplane ticket to go home, anxious to get out. We were on television making fools of ourselves because we hadn't passed the budget, and it was crunch time. And one of the guys in the conference committee, a friend of mine from Massachusetts, came over and said, "Mary Rose, they took your mammography legislation out again."

I just got enraged because it was the sixth time they did that. And so Leon [Edward] Panetta, my classmate, was the Budget chair. And he said something like on page 1012, line 10, take out "blah, blah, blah, and substitute blah, blah, blah." And I said, "Reserving the right to object, what is that?" And then Dick [Richard Andrew] Gephardt ran down the aisle and said, "Mary Rose, I know you probably found out, but we're going to do it, believe me, next year." I said, "What is it?" And then I went on and on about the lives that could be saved: 4,800 lives could be saved if that legislation passed, I was told. And still today that's a true statement. So I objected. And they went crazy. I had to be escorted by the Capitol Police home. They were so mad at me because they were all ready to leave. And I said, "Well, too bad, you know." And I said, "You fellas will have this on your conscience."

One of the guys came up to me from my own state and said, "Mary Rose, I'm one of the 2 percent of men who had breast cancer." And he said, "Good

for you." He said, "Let me walk you out with this police officer." And they drove me home. I had to leave my car there. Honestly, it's a true statement.

So anyway, the next day, because so many people were watching us, the phones had been ringing off the hook for these Congressmembers. Dan [Daniel David] Rostenkowski told me he had over 1,000 calls. Senators told me their lines were jammed because people were watching this and calling and saying, "How dare you take that out for giving somebody a tax break?"

So the next day Dan Rostenkowski came to me and said, "We're going to put it back in. I have a half hour to put it back in. And I'm going to let you control the time. Would you mind if I take five minutes, so I can win my next election?" I said, "Of course not, thank you, Mr. Chairman." So that's what happened. And *20/20* had it on and so on.

Then what happened was I got calls from all over the country. Scott Frey, one of the male members of my staff who was my legislative guy on this, was fabulous. He took the calls. And we encouraged women to have a petition. They came from all over the country sometime later with a million signatures on passing more research dollars as well for breast cancer, which is like a lot of diseases almost an epidemic. It never did get the funding in the past. It does have more funding now. And so they came.

I don't know if this is a story about Congress or not. But one of the women, who was very attractive and young and had a seven-year-old kid with her, beautiful little girl, and she was gorgeous. We had a press conference outside of the Capitol with their petition, and she said, "They told me I'd feel better after I had gotten the cancer out of me, and I don't. I feel sick every day. They told me that I'd look better." And she had a prosthesis she took out.

"She told me that I'd really be beautiful," and she pulled off her wig and she was bald.

That day I was supposed to testify before Appropriations to get more money for research dollars to find a cure. So I went to the meeting, all male, of Appropriations, and I said, "Mr. Chairman, instead of my talking do you mind if one of the constituents in this country who's had breast cancer speaks? She's the mother of a little girl with her." He said, "No." Anyway she gave the same speech. When she took that wig off, these guys were horrified. We were able to get more money for breast cancer.

And another time I got John [Patrick] Murtha [Jr.] to—I found out that we were spending $36 billion on research for weapons. Okay? And all of NIH, National Institutes of Health, I believe was $12 billion. And I thought isn't this ironic? All these diseases, and we were using 1970s weapons for Desert Storm. We don't even use these sophisticated things all the time. Anyway, so I went to John Murtha, who was chair of the Subcommittee on Defense—fabulous guy. And I said, "John, do you realize the $36 billion for research for weapons and $12 billion for all the diseases in this country in research?" I said, "I would like $500 million, $300 million for breast cancer research and the rest for other female-dominated diseases like osteoporosis, AIDS," whatever it happened to be. And he said, "You know what, I agree with you."

So he said, "I'll do the amendment. No, you do the amendment, and I'll agree to it because there's a firewall." You're not supposed to do that. But if the chairman gives you a waiver, you can do it. And so he said, "I agree with you." He said, "You can take $500 million out of the Defense Budget for Women's Health Research." And so he let me do it. The only thing was that it all had to be done by the Defense Department, not NIH. You couldn't

change that. And then I didn't come back the next year. He'd said, "When you come back, we'll fix that." And to this day the grants are given by the Defense Department. But they're given. And they're very good. I mean, they're very good about it. So John Murtha could have said, "No way," and went according to real strict rules, but he didn't; he was a fabulous man. Sorry he's passed on.

WASNIEWSKI: We're at a transition break. And we're about an hour and 15 minutes in. Do you need to take a break at all, or are you good to go?

OAKAR: No, I'll just take some more water if that's okay with you.

WASNIEWSKI: You've alluded to your committee assignments and committee work. And we're just curious to know when you first came to Congress, how was it that you chose the committees that you chose, and how did you obtain those seats?

OAKAR: You obtain a seat on the committee of your choice by—the major committees, not the select committees, that's the Speaker's job—but you say what you'd like to have. I think I mentioned that because of the public housing problem I had and the reason I really ran to make that an issue, one of the reasons anyway, a major reason, I wanted to be on Banking and Urban Affairs. And some of the S&Ls [savings and loans] and banks in Cleveland, which had some large independent banks and S&Ls, wanted me to be on it because they didn't have a Democrat from Ohio on it.

And so the jurisdiction attracted me. I didn't at the time know a lot about banking. But I knew something about community development and HUD [Housing and Urban Development]. So I learned a lot. And I asked for that committee. They divide you in states. So Ohio and Pennsylvania would give

the committees people wanted, and then you would vote as a group on it and then go to the floor with your caucus. And that's how I got on Banking.

But I wanted to be on the Select Committee on Aging, too, so I went to Claude [Denson] Pepper—Senator Pepper—who was the chair . . . he had a profound influence on me also. He was one of my mentors. And it's interesting because they were a different generation than I was. I was in my 30s then, and these guys were in their 70s. But they were my two heroes, Tip and Claude Pepper.

So I went to Senator Pepper, and I said, "I want to be on Aging." I told him about why. And he said, "Oh, I'd love to have you on Aging because you'd have to be active." I said, "I promise I'd go to every meeting." And he said, "Well, here's what you have to do. You have to go to Tip O'Neill and ask the Speaker if he would put you on the committee." He said, "Just meet him. Every morning he gets there at 7:00 in the morning. So you have to get up and be right there." So I did. And Tip would greet me and say, "Rosemary, how are you?" And I said, "Mr. Speaker, I'd like to be on the Select Committee on Aging." He said, "You don't have seniority, honey. I have five guys that have seniority, and I only have one seat. You have to wait a little while."

I went back and told Claude Pepper. He said, "Well, keep going back." And so I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes." So I go back next morning. I see the Speaker. He said, "Mary Rose, how are you?" And I said, "Great, yes, sure you don't think—here's why I want to be on [Aging]." He was so nice about it, but he said, "You don't have seniority, Mary Rose. I can't do it."

Next morning, so he went through this Rosemary/Mary Rose deal. So one day, I go again, and I said, "Mr. Speaker." "What can I do for you," he said,

"besides that?" I said, "Well." I was ready to give up. I said, "You know, I have constituents from greater Cleveland here. Can you take a picture with them on the Capitol steps?" He said, "Love to." He said, "What do you want me to say about you? Anything you want." I said, "Just remember my first name. It's Mary Rose, not Rosemary." He said, "Honey, I have a sister Mary Rose, and a daughter Rosemary, you're like one of my family." I said, "If I'm like one of your family, put me on the Aging Committee." And he did.

Rosemary, Tip's daughter, who worked for the State Department for many years, and I got to be real good friends. But what's in a name? Well, I'll tell you what. My mother forced me to go by Mary Rose, not just Mary. And I was glad I did. That got me on the Aging Committee, the coincidence of his having a sister Mary Rose and daughter Rosemary. So, I did get on the committees I wanted to be on.

And the extra committee, the minor committee, was the federal employee issue, Post Office and Civil Service. I had a very inspiring chairman, Bill [William David] Ford, who was very conscientious and very supportive of federal employees.

JOHNSON: When we were looking at committee rosters for the Banking Committee, we noticed that you and Gladys [Noon] Spellman were the only two Democratic women and that throughout most of your career it was predominantly men that were on the committee.

OAKAR: That's right.

JOHNSON: First, what were your memories of Gladys Spellman on the committee?

OAKAR: Oh, you're talking about Post Office and Civil Service Committee. Gladys Spellman—I was on her subcommittee that she chaired. And that's how I got to take her place, to be honest. I wasn't ranking in seniority. Gladys Spellman was a magnificently conscientious fine Member of Congress. And she taught me a lot because I didn't know those issues. A lot of issues you really learn once you're on a committee. She was a very fine chair.

We would have a briefing before we went into the subcommittee she chaired, and she would say, "Here's what we're going to talk about, and here's why. And we're not for privatization, for example. We really want our own employees to work. And you have NASA in your district, and you want them to be federal employees; you don't want to privatize contracts and all that."

So she'd explain everything. And that's how I learned. Then I was devastated when she died so suddenly.[5] I didn't realize that she would go so soon. Then that's how I became chair. Bill Ford wanted me to move up in her spot even though I didn't have the seniority of the full committee. It was a little battle, and I won. It didn't hurt that the chairman was for me. But Gladys Spellman taught me a lot. And because of that, she also mentioned that if she had something that in the future we would do, we would change the civil service laws and change the categories because she was very aware of how mislabeled they were and how old-fashioned they were. And my memories of Gladys are very keen. She was very, very kind to me and taught me a lot.

JOHNSON: Because there were so few women at the time when you came in in the late '70s and even into the 1980s, when you were on a committee that was mostly men, did you feel like you had to work a little bit harder to prove yourself and to prove that you belonged there because you were a woman?

OAKAR: I didn't think of it that way. But I do think the women are more workaholic. We didn't go to the gym, for example. No, I'm only teasing about that. Nothing's wrong with that if you do your job. But I was very fond of many of the men too who were very, very helpful. We had some very fine chairmen. And I sat next to my classmate Bruce Vento, who was a great friend of mine. I think he deserves a lot of credit for the homeless bill and other things that he did for the environment and the Interior Department.

But I do think that I tried to be conscientious, and I had a great staff. I didn't know who to hire. How do you know? I was a city councilwoman before. But we didn't have a staff at that time. I had people helping me, but I had to pay them out of my own pocket in those days. Now it's different. But I do think the women were industrious, and I do think that's a quality that they have. And I think their values are—we bring a different perspective. I hate to sound—I'm not anti-men at all because I already said my two mentors were Tip and Claude Pepper. But they take polls across the country and across the world, and they ask women. Barbara Mikulski and I went to the United Nations Decade for Women, and they take polls. What are the most important issues for women? And they're all a little bit different in their perspective of it. But the three issues that always came up, civil and human rights, economic security—now for an African woman, it might mean clean water; for us it might be equal pay for equal value, not just equal work, equal value of women's jobs and men who do those jobs like teaching, nursing, etc. Anyway, so economic security, civil rights, human rights, economic security.

Number one issue for women? Peace. And if you have peace, you don't have to spend all that dough that most countries spend on more weapons and all that. You can spend it on other things. I think there are values that you bring to the table. I remember when I was at one of the meetings at the White

House for leadership people. President Reagan was going to meet with [Mikhail] Gorbachev about treaties and so on. And I don't know why, but I had one of my rose pens in my purse. I didn't always carry it around, but it happened to be there. All these guys around the table said, "You go get them, go get those commies." I said, "Mr. President, I'm going to give you this rose pen. And rose is a symbol of peace. Try to make peace with them." The pen was an ink pen with a plastic rose on top.

Reagan was such a gentleman. Even if I didn't agree with him, he was so nice to me, to the point where Tip O'Neill used to get mad because he'd call on me first. I was the only woman in the room. But he was an absolute gentleman. So he said, "Oh, thanks, Mary Rose." So he put it in his lapel. Do you know when he signed a treaty with Gorbachev he had that rose pen in his lapel? I couldn't believe it. Probably just wore the same jacket.

But nonetheless there is a different perspective sometimes that women bring. And that's why I think we should have more women. I mean they brag about oh, we have 60 more or 70 more now. Well, whatever it is, it's certainly not as equitable as we would like it because of the population. And it's nothing against fabulous men with whom I served. Even though I talked about Leon Panetta, he's one of my dear friends, and Leon and I did the legislation as Members of the House Administration Committee collectively that put all of us under the civil rights law. Before that, we could pay somebody a penny an hour. We didn't have to adhere to the laws as Members. And Tip O'Neill was the one who said, "Don't talk about this to anybody. We're going to do this legislation on Monday as an emergency call when some Members are present just for emergency calls."

So we didn't and wrote the bill. And, of course, you always have those lawyers that write the legislation for us. And it passed. When some of the Members found out about that one, they were pretty mad because they couldn't get away with underpaying and undervaluing some of their staff, although Members don't have to adhere to the civil service.

WASNIEWSKI: You talk about Congresswomen having a lot of energy, too. You were on four committees because you were on House Administration, too.

OAKAR: Yes, he said that was the housekeeping, really easy committee; the Speaker said, "Why don't you be on that committee?" And it took a lot of my time. But I was very, very grateful to be on that committee. We did the Women's Memorial and the Korean [War] Memorial and later worked on the Indian Museum. And we were able with our committee because of the fabulous staff member who did research on the Smithsonian—they were building the underground African Museum. The Smithsonian was investing in South Africa when it was absolutely the most prejudiced place. And we exposed—the Smithsonian was making money and using some of it to build an African Museum in Washington, DC. It was a front-page story in the *Washington Post*; and it was my staff director: she saw this disparity, and Secretary [Robert McCormick] Adams, who was head of the Smithsonian, off the record said, "Do it." And I said, "It's going to be embarrassing to you." And he said, "Well, it's not embarrassing to me. We have to change." So that's what happened. But that took a lot of time. But I was thrilled that Tip asked me to be on this committee, to be honest, it was a wonderful experience.

WASNIEWSKI: You say it's a housekeeping committee. It's in charge of everything on the House side of the Capitol. And you told a great story off tape about finding the suffrage monument, the Adelaide Johnson. Can you tell us that story?

OAKAR: Yes. Well, the Architect of the Capitol was from Cleveland originally. So he would tell me all these haunts. So I said, "Why don't you take me on a tour of things?" And so one day, he took me upstairs. Did you know you can walk around the circle of the highest point of the Capitol inside? I didn't know you could do that. I'd go up there with him. He had a map room and gave me maps of my own neighborhood. And so one day, he took me in this basement, this lower level, that God knows where it was. And I look, and all these dusty monument figures are in there.

There is this chalky-looking monument devoted to women suffragettes. We were always talking at the Women's Caucus a little bit about why aren't there more women in Statuary Hall. States can choose the two they want and usually chose men, which may have been the right people to choose, but nonetheless they weren't [women]. So I told the women about that. And they went downstairs.

I think Jim [James Claude] Wright [Jr.] was the Speaker then. He was a very nice man, too. Anyway, so he brought it up, and we put it in there. They didn't even vote on it. They just said, "Put it in there." I think it's still there, isn't it?

WASNIEWSKI: In the Rotunda, of course, yes.

OAKAR: Yes, and that was the Congresswomen's Caucus who did that. But the Architect of the Capitol really told me all the haunts in this place. And there are a lot of them. A lot of the senior Members have these private little offices. I never knew they were there. But I learned a little bit by being on the committee, but it took a lot of time.

The other thing that I'm very proud of that one of the members of my staff suggested. I chaired, in the beginning, a subcommittee on personnel, which included the Capitol Police, the people who work in the cafeteria, everybody on the House side but the Members of Congress. And we found, including somebody on my own staff, that some people had addiction problems. They would just fire them. One of the members of my staff who was a counselor and a recovering alcoholic herself publicly spoke out about it and said, "We ought to have something for those people and not fire them, but help them get better."

So I said, "Well, help me with the legislation because you know more about this than I do." She did. She went to lawyers, and they said, "We ought to have somebody that they could go to for help and have a staff that will help people, and if they go through a program, then they don't get fired." So that's what we did; it passed. I hope they still have it. But one of the things that happened was some of the Members—particularly Republican Members—came to me—who were recovering themselves, recovering alcoholics and drug addicts—came to me and said, "We ought to have events where people with the AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] movement can come, and they can go to meetings here on the Hill." And so that, I think, was a wonderful contribution. I couldn't have had that passed if I hadn't been on the committee.

But I want to stress the work of my staff because I could not have done some of this legislation without their help. I mean Mary Darah: in this case, she knew all about what was needed, and she was on the interview committee for the Office of Addiction. I think we saved many people's jobs by getting them help for their addictions. So that was really special to me.

WASNIEWSKI: The Employee Assistance Office is still here.

OAKAR: Is it?

WASNIEWSKI: Yes.

OAKAR: Well, we found that we were the only parliamentarian group in the Western world that had one of those. And other countries were asking us. And Mary would give them all the material that they needed to start their own.

JOHNSON: One area that we wanted to ask you about today was your move to the Democratic Leadership. But we wanted to start with a few questions about your work in the whip organization. To start with, was this something that you wanted to do, or were you recruited to become a whip?

OAKAR: You're recruited by the Speaker usually, or one of his officers, to be a whip. And they always wanted me to be the whip for Jim [James A.] Traficant [Jr.]. {laughter} So he's from Youngstown; I'm from Cleveland. Jim always wanted to go off the beaten track sometimes. On the other hand, he was right a lot of times. He wanted steel to be made in America. He wanted auto plants in his district that had left years before. I think he did a lot for Youngstown. Nothing to say about his other problems, but as someone who was an advocate, he was great.

But anyway, I always had to go to Jim and other Members that they felt I could be helpful with. And you'd have to sit down and talk to them and convince them. The Democratic Caucus and the Speaker or the leadership would want the votes. We had a lot of Southern Members. Not a lot, but some, who did not vote with Democrats often. I'm trying to remember the name we had for them.

WASNIEWSKI: The Boll Weevils.

OAKAR: The Boll Weevils, I think that was the name, yes. Anyway, there were about 24 of them or so. I was really friendly with the Georgia delegation and so on. And a few of them were my classmates. There is something, like Al [Albert Arnold] Gore [Jr.] was my classmate and Panetta. But there's something about coming in the same time. And there were a number of us who came in that year. There is something about that because you go to orientation together, and you get to know each other more than some of the others.

I was very close to the Georgia delegation and some of the Southern ones because of a few people that I had come in with especially. And so I always had them. They were sometimes difficult to vote with us. But whenever we succeeded, it really helped me. The Speakers were always kind to me whenever I could get a vote for them and for us. I think probably the Speaker today with the Tea Party people have the same difficulty. It's parallel in a way, and I think Representative [John Andrew] Boehner had that problem.

JOHNSON: What are the qualities that you think you need to be an effective whip?

OAKAR: I think you have to be liked. Sala [Galante] Burton was my favorite, a darling fabulous woman. She was probably one of my best friends in Congress. I knew her before she came to Congress. Phil [Phillip] Burton was a great guy. And Sala had a way about her. I gave the eulogy when she passed on in San Francisco. She would go up to these fellas, and she'd say, "Oh, you have dandruff on your suit collar, you don't want that to show on camera." And she'd do something like that [brushing motion] first. Or she'd say, "Do you need some Kleenex" if somebody would cough or sneeze. And then she'd say, "You've got to be reasonable." "Sala, you know I think the world of you, but blah, blah, blah." Somehow she always succeeded. But she knew how. It

wasn't flirtation, it was more like I'm going to do something nice for you, and I think the world of you. And they liked her a lot. I think when people feel that you're not always mad at them and angry, it really helps.

When I wanted to get one of my Republican colleagues to vote with me on certain issues or someone else, I would go over and sit by them where the Republicans sat, and talk to them on their side of the aisle. I don't know if that was a gesture that was meaningful to them. But I didn't say, "Why don't you meet me in the Rayburn Room?" I'd go over and talk to them on their side of the aisle.

Dick [Richard Keith] Armey, who was very against my pay equity bill and fortunately revised and extended his remarks about it, became a great friend of mine and used to ask my advice about lots of personal things. So I could go to Dick and say, "Come on now, now you're a big deal in the leadership. Why do you want to do this?"

I have a story about Bernie [Bernard] Sanders, who was a Member. And because he was a Socialist and not a Democrat or Republican, they put him on the Democratic team. But Tom [Thomas Stephen] Foley told him, "You can never get anything passed unless you're a Democrat. So you can vote with us; you can come to our meetings; you can tell us what you like." So one night, it was like about 12:30 at night, and Bob [Robert Smith] Walker was always the guy on the Republican side that would stay, so we didn't do anything mischievous when nobody was around under unanimous consent.

But anyway, he was the Republican who always stayed on the House Floor when we were there late, and I was doing inconsequential resolutions for the committee I chaired. And so Bernie Sanders comes over to me and says, "Mary Rose, I have this terrific bill. It's to make hospitals tell the data on the

diseases they have so that National Institutes of Health can do research on it."

I said, "I thought of doing that. That's a great bill." And so I said, "But we have a problem because if I ask unanimous consent to bring your bill up, Bob is going to object. The Republican is going to object." I said, "But let's see what happens." So I went over. I said, "You take the floor now and take my place as chair and give a speech about one of the resolutions. And I'm going to go over and talk to him." So I went over to him, and he said, "No way. I'm here. You can't do any major bill. I'm going to object. And then that would be the end of it."

So I came back. I said, "It's not going to happen now." He said, "Well, I'm going to go home then." I said, "No, no, stay. I'm going to go ask him again. But we'll wait a little while." So we did another resolution. And then I went over, and I said, "Bob, do you know of anyone that has a rare disease of any kind?" And he said, "Yes." Unfortunately, not a lot of data exists for rare diseases. I said, "Well, what do you think this legislation will do? It's data on unique things as well as diseases that are more prevalent." And I said, "Nobody's going to know that you didn't object. You can say you went to the men's room or something." So Bob Walker said, "Okay, okay."

We got Bernie's bill passed. Bernie always tells me, "My first bill as a Congressmember passed because of you, Mary Rose." I thought that was so actually magnanimous of Bob to finally cave on that because he was under strict rules to stop us from any legislation. And Bernie couldn't get it passed because he was not a Democrat. So it worked.

WASNIEWSKI: You've mentioned a few times Speaker Wright, Speaker Foley. We're just wondering. You served under three Speakers. And you've told us about

Speaker O'Neill. What are your memories of the other two and how would you compare their leadership styles?

OAKAR: Let me do Tom Foley first. He was the best-groomed person ever. He was very bright. Very nice man. You want me to be honest about this?

WASNIEWSKI: Sure.

OAKAR: Tom Foley's wife volunteered for him and spent time on the House Floor. I didn't think that her role was to have so much power.

Jim Wright knew how to get things done. First of all, he was eloquent when he spoke. He was always a fabulous speaker. And Jim Wright would say, "We're going to pass this bill," when he became Speaker, "this bill, this bill, this bill, and this bill." And he knew how to do it.

But while he was acutely responsible for getting it done, he also had a little—he made people mad at him. And, of course, he didn't have that warm personality that Tip O'Neill had. But he was fantastic in getting bills passed. And I felt very badly when he left Congress. And I liked him very much. I thought he was very effective as a Speaker in that sense. Was he my mentor? No. But was he somebody that I respected? Absolutely. And that's how I feel about the Speakers that I served with.

JOHNSON: You became the secretary of the Democratic Caucus, and, I guess initially, what we were wondering is if you always had leadership aspirations—if this is something that you had wanted to do, or were you tapped and recruited for this sort of position?

OAKAR: Well, I wasn't tapped, but I got the feeling that they thought I should do it. Gerry [Geraldine Anne] Ferraro had been the secretary of the caucus before

me. So Dick Gephardt ran for caucus chair at the time and Jack [French] Kemp on the Republican side ran for his caucus chair. And Dick [Richard Bruce] Cheney was the vice chair. So Dick Cheney and I were vice chairs. Well, later on, I became vice chair.

I think it just sort of happened because, I think maybe, the Speaker did say something to me. I can't remember about running. So I won that seat. Gephardt and Kemp were running for President, so they were never there. And they wouldn't give up their caucus chairs. Cheney and I did all the work for our caucuses. He was called a vice chair, but I wasn't, and so the Democrats changed the name from secretary to vice chair. And that's how that happened. And you had to coordinate meetings, or the seminars we had for three days, and so forth. I had a great experience.

One time it was education. I was an educator. And we were going to spend three days at a West Virginia resort and talk only about education. I was reading magazines about it, kept reading about Hillary Rodham [Clinton]—at the time it was Hillary Clinton—and how she was appointed by her husband, the governor, to deal with the problems in education. And in that state, they went from 48th to 12th or something best educational system because of her efforts, her leadership. So I called her up, and I said, "Would you like to be—I know you're the first lady of Little Rock." I said, "Would you like to be on a panel, and chair the panel?" She said, "Oh, on education." I said, "I've been reading about your good work." She said, "Love to come." So she agreed.

Next day, she called me. She said, "Do you mind if I bring my husband, Governor Bill Clinton, to the seminar?" I said, "Not at all. That'd be wonderful if the governor comes." Next day, she called me again. She said,

"Do you mind if he's on the panel, too?" {laughter} He had aspirations. But she was fabulous, and so was he. I mean they were really excellent in terms of what they did for the people of their state in education, improved it. So I was delighted to know her. So I've known her for a long time, and President Clinton.

JOHNSON: You mentioned to Matt and I before the interview started that Geraldine Ferraro had offered you some helpful advice as the previous caucus secretary.

OAKAR: Yes, she did. Well, Gerry had run for Vice President and came around to the Hill to thank individual people. She came to my office to thank me. And there's nothing to thank. I was passionate about her running. And she said, "I want to tell you. You were elected secretary to the caucus." She said, "Don't do what I did. Because I thought I would get ahead more, I never ever told them that I should go to the meetings at the White House for leadership. And no woman has ever done that." She said, "It's wrong because you're elected." And some of the appointed people—at that time we had an appointed whip—and they would get to go, but the elected people, the secretary, would not get to go.

So she said, "Go to Tip O'Neill, and ask him." So I said, "That's great advice. I'd love to go to those meetings." And she said, "No, you have to go." So I went to Tip. And Tip said, "Eleanor," who was his secretary, "Get President Reagan on the phone." I heard him. He said, "If Mary Rose Oakar isn't invited"—because the White House invites you—"I'm not going. She's the Secretary of the caucus." So I got to go.

So I get this invitation. I didn't know what gate to go in at the White House, so I was real early. First time in my life I was early for something. I go in, and I see Sam Donaldson and Helen Thomas and other reporters on the White

House lawn, "Yay, the first woman ever to be at the leadership meeting." And I said, "Oh, thanks." And they said, "Are you nervous?" I said, "Sure."

And so I go in. And there's this oval table. And I look around the table. There are name cards. I look for my name card. It's not there. And the head of protocol for the President was standing in the corner. And I said, "Where's my name?" He said, "You're sitting over there in the corner somewhere. Not at the table." And I said, "Not at the table?" I said, "Well," I said, "I'm leaving. I'm going to have my first press conference outside about this that you're not allowing a woman at the table."

So he comes running after me. "No, no, no, I just changed it, I just changed it. Come on, come back, you're at the table." And here he had changed my name because there weren't enough seats, they were big seats, and they took up every inch of room, and he put Jack Kemp in the corner. I got to sit at the table. Jack never knew why he was in the corner, but he didn't care. He's a nice guy. So that is the story. Thanks to Gerry, I got to go to those leadership meetings. It was a great honor, great honor.

WASNIEWSKI: What went into your decision to run for the Democratic Caucus chair in 1988? And what are your salient memories of that campaign?

OAKAR: Well, I was vice chair, but I was really working as the caucus chair for all those years. And everybody said—in fact, my biggest supporters were from California, Barbara Boxer and Nancy Pelosi, who Sala Burton had asked me to help on her deathbed. She was interested in Nancy's running. So they said, "Well, you deserve it." And that was our thing. "You did all the work." And I said, "Well, I know what to do. But I don't have to run." But I ran. I had names of 48 people. I think [Nancy] Pelosi wrote about how I had all these names of people and had the majority. I haven't read the book, to be honest,

and somehow they changed. Well, Bill [William Herbert] Gray [III], a minister from Philadelphia, ran against me.

WASNIEWSKI: Bill Gray.

OAKAR: Bill Gray was on Appropriations with a lot of the guys that signed the appropriations bill. And for the first time, I was able to get Members of the Black Caucus to vote for me because they usually voted as a unit. Ron [Ronald V.] Dellums did. Certainly Congressman [Louis] Stokes, he nominated me. But Bill Gray was pretty good. He had a lot of people that supported him—a lot of people that wrote a letter, wrote their names down, changed their vote. It was a secret ballot. We didn't vote according to the way we vote where it's very public. And he won. I asked that he be given the chairmanship unanimously.

But it was a good lesson that people can change. You got to continue to sustain them. But it was a rough race. I really went to see all the Members and everything. And I suppose I thought that because I had done all the work before—I don't mean all the work, but a large part of it, because my chairman was off running for President—that people might believe that I deserved it.

I'll tell you. The delegations that really were mad were the Southern ones. They were mad at the caucus for not voting for me. And they signed a petition and all. I said, "Please don't do that. Let's be unified, it's over." I was glad that I had so many other things to do. You mentioned I had more committees than anybody else in Congress in the House, and it was just a lot of work—for my staff too, because they stayed long hours working on all these different issues with me.

JOHNSON: Do you know if gender ever became an issue in that race?

OAKAR: I think it did. Yes. Only by the whispering issue. They never had a female caucus chair. I remember Shirley Chisholm told me, she had a saying. "Give your chair to a lady." And she didn't win. Apparently she had run for it years before I got there. I would have voted for her. But no, I think it did. I think that it meant something to some of the men. Not everybody. But he won fair and square, and that's life.

Then the irony is that Bill left Congress then after a year or so. And then they said, "Why don't you run now?" Said, "No, that's okay. I have enough to do. I did that, it was a great experience, and it's enough." But it was a disappointment, you win some, you lose some. And I really was almost relieved—more responsibility—disappointed, but relieved.

WASNIEWSKI: One question we wanted to ask too was at the time you were one of a handful of Arab Americans serving in Congress.

OAKAR: That's right.

WASNIEWSKI: And we want to know what effect that had on your House career. And then also did you feel that you were a surrogate representative for Arab Americans who were beyond your district?

OAKAR: I think, as a woman, I felt that way about women. I think, to a large extent, if I agreed with all the things they did, I felt that way, yes. I think that other people, Ukrainian Members of Congress, felt that way about Ukraine. I did because I didn't think that the Congress was sensitive enough about the needs of some of the people. Steve [Steven Joshua] Solarz was one of my best friends. He was a real interesting guy. And he traveled. He would just go on

these missions and get into countries and meet all these people in the Arab countries, in Israel, everywhere.

He, one time, brought a group of people whose bus had been bombed in Israel, and their little kid was killed, and he brought them with pictures. He asked Members to come. I was the only one who showed up. I just did want to meet them. He was so struck by the fact that I came. I said, "Well, I think any disaster is tragic. I don't believe in violence, no matter who does it." I said, "I think the Palestinians, whom I feel have been violated against, removing their homes and all that—however, to retaliate with violence is the wrong approach. That's why Dr. [Martin Luther] King and Gandhi were so effective."

So Steve and I became very good friends. And we had a situation where Palestinian kids' schools were closed. One of the fellas from Salt Lake City, he was a Republican, introduced an amendment to open the schools for these kids. And they had thrown stones at Israeli soldiers, so they closed their schools.

So I went to Solarz, and I said, "You know, this is ridiculous to close the schools. They're only going to become more violent. If they're educated, they might get along better, and so on." And he agreed with me. So Solarz said, "I'll vote for it." He said, "Go talk to [Howard Lawrence] Berman." So I went to Representative Berman, who I liked very much—and he was on Foreign Relations as well as Steve—and I said, "You told me the other day about your kids." And he lived near Georgetown, the campus, and he was having a hard time finding the right school for them, and the adjustment of deciding whether he lives here or in California. I said, "How would you like your kids not to go to school, because they were locked out?"

He thought about it. And the next day he called me. He said, "I will be a cosponsor." It wasn't my legislation. It was this fella from Salt Lake City. And we got that passed. I just felt that when you just speak to people about human needs, no matter who they are, I think they could relate to that. Certainly Howard Berman did. And Steve, of course, always was helpful to me.

But I do feel that I'm not proud of the fact that I'm probably the only woman who's of Middle Eastern ancestry. I think one of the women was Assyrian. And somebody else was part Lebanese or something. But I do think—like I did some legislation when the American University of Beirut's hospital didn't have generators when there was bombing and war. I went to the chairman, Lee [Herbert] Hamilton, one of the real classic guys, fabulous guy. I said, "I want to introduce an amendment to get some generators over there. The cost is, I don't know, $30 million or something." And he said, "Introduce the amendment." It passed, so that they could have the care they needed until they fixed the electrical problems over in Lebanon. So I think my relationship with those people on Foreign Affairs was a positive one even though we didn't always agree on the subjects of the Middle East.

JOHNSON: For each of the women that we spoke to for this project, there are specific areas having to do with women that they focused on. And we saw one of your major issues was economic security for women. Why do you think that issue was so important for women's rights?

OAKAR: Well, talk about whatever needs women have. Let's say you're talking about the fact that some women have a hard time paying for abortion. If you have economic security, you don't have to worry about that, if that's what you want to do. But I do think the undervaluing . . . I was a teacher, and I didn't

feel I needed to make that much more money. But the truth of it is if you want to attract more men to the educational field and women who want to make that a career, you've got to pay them fairly. It's that simple.

One of the highest paid persons on my staff was my secretary. I don't know what I would have done without her. Honestly, she kept my life organized. And with all these committees, etc., it's really hard. And she was fabulous. The undervaluing of nurses and nurse anesthetists, for example, who did the same thing that a doctor did in anesthesiology. To be undervalued that way. And at NIH, you would have PhDs, who were women, who were the researchers along with the MD, who happened to be a guy, doing the same research making way less money.

It just didn't make sense to me. And all the menial jobs around this place, like the elevator operators and the people who clean the places. They were very, very underpaid. The people who worked at the Library of Congress were undervalued in my judgment. See, we passed a law in the '60s: equal pay for equal rights. So that law passed. I wanted a law that said equal pay for equal value. What is the value of a teacher or a nurse or a secretary or somebody doing research, finding a cure to a disease, who happens to be female?

When I was teaching, I taught at a community college. And I had fellas who wanted to go into nursing. I thought it was terrific. Or you go to the VA hospitals. Most of them are male nurses because they got their training in the military. And you talk to these guys, and they say, "If we weren't in a female-dominated profession, we would be paid much more." And we also saw that—I could be wrong about this, but I do think, in some cases, people who happened to be male and nurses made a little more than the nurses who were

female and so forth. I saw that when I was teaching, that professors who happened to be male were given a higher contract to start than some of the women. And that happens.

But I do think that around here, the Congresswomen's Caucus can do an awful lot for those issues. They have, they've done some really nice things that we didn't do. They were talking about them last night. So pay equity is very, very important. And I'm only saddened that I couldn't get the bill passed on the Senate side. But I could not vote for his tobacco bill. I'm sorry about that. Even though we did do the study and got positive changes to civil service.

WASNIEWSKI: One of the other things that occurred during your career was in 1991, a group of House women marched over to the Senate to implore the Senators to allow Anita Thomas to testify in the Supreme Court nomination hearings for Clarence Thomas. We're wondering what you remember about that event.

OAKAR: Oh, I remember it well.

WASNIEWSKI: And the impact it had on the House, on the elections as well, the next year.

OAKAR: I chaired a committee where Clarence Thomas used to testify for EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission]. He was head of EEOC. And somehow, I had some jurisdiction over that. Anita would come with him. So I saw them once in a while. I didn't agree with Clarence at all because there was a backlog of all those cases that were dramatic.

So what the Congresswomen decided to do—not all of us, but some of us—was that we would sit in, after we marched there—I couldn't go because I

was chairing a meeting at the time, but I did go, when we decided we would go to all the hearings, which was an all-male committee, as you recall. And some of our very liberal friends were not terrific at those hearings.

Then we would meet with Anita for breaks. She had a very difficult time. And we just sat there and listened, and then we would speak out and try our best to support her. I was abhorred by the way she was treated. I abhorred it, I should say. I tend to believe it was true. I don't have any proof of that except what she told us. She's a very bright person. She's a lawyer. She's been through the mill. And it's interesting. They made a movie, one of those documentaries, about Anita. And we have a film festival in Cleveland every year. And I didn't realize this because I didn't go to the film festival that year. But at the end of the film, somehow I said something. I'm in the film saying, "What a shame," or something. The Cleveland people recognized me and applauded. But the truth of it is I think it had a tremendous impact on sexual harassment, which really is a major issue.

I was on the state board of education in Ohio for the last eight years. I was term-limited. One of our responsibilities was to decertify anybody who shouldn't be in education, not just teachers, but bus drivers, whoever it was, janitors, whoever. And one of the things that was de facto, you would just eliminate these people, is if they sexually harassed a child or tried to make out with a kid. Or if somebody in leadership preyed on one of the teachers to get a better job. And, unfortunately, we found that. Not often, but we did have a number of those cases that we decertified these people.

I think Anita's courage by coming forward, even though it was very awkward for her, perhaps belated, was truly outstanding. She was pretty beaten up by doing that. But the Congresswomen, some of us, really supported her and

stayed at those hearings. They were always on a Friday. They thought nobody'd be around. But we had to stay. And all of us took turns staying with her. And we had lunch for her and respite for her.

JOHNSON: We're going to jump ahead because I know we're short on time. We've kept you here a long time. So thanks for being so patient.

OAKAR: Well, you're very kind to even be concerned.

JOHNSON: So after Congress, after you served here in the U.S. House, you served a term in the Ohio state house of representatives. How did that service compare, your state service versus your federal service here?

OAKAR: Well, usually, it's the other way around. One of my friends who was term-limited, a woman, said, "Mary Rose, it's a little partisan. The Republicans have all this money. And that was part of your district. And why don't you do this?" And I said, "I was in Congress, I was on city council. It's enough. I'm going to go back to education maybe." And she said, "No, no, I'm term-limited, and I want a woman with experience. Because of term limits there are a bunch of kids running the show, and they don't have experience." And she said, "You could win. But if we put up this one person that wants it, he won't win because he doesn't have the money or name recognition."

I said, "Well, I don't have that much money either." But she said, "Well, let me send you some issues." So she sends me education, something I felt I had neglected here because I wasn't on that committee. She sends me economic development, which was an interest of mine. And she sends me things on taxation and all kinds of stuff. And I said, "Okay, I'll do it." And I loved doing it.

One of the things that's very different—this may not seem like a big deal, but in Congress, we take down every word people say, whether it's in a committee or on the floor, and you can revise your remarks and a lot of times we do. But the fact is that *Congressional Record* is a matter of record at the Library of Congress. And I can find out what I said in 1985 if I want to or anybody else. Now that there in the state, they don't take down every word in committee, they just have an agenda. They'll say the people who appeared, and it's an outline. It doesn't mean anything to me. I tried to change that, unsuccessfully.

I also felt that—I hope this is not true anymore—but I saw lobbyists. Our lobbyists here are a little more subtle. They may be floating around. But in the state legislature, they go right up to the desk and give them the bill to put in. It's practically written for them. And I couldn't believe that. I'd sit there. One of the reporters from the *Akron Beacon Journal* who used to cover some of the things I did even though I was from Cleveland had changed, and he was working for the *Dayton Daily News*. And I said, "Bill." Bill Hershey. I said, "Bill, what is this? These lobbyists come right up." And I said, "You guys see this; don't you write about this?" And he said, "No, it's been written about; nothing happens."

It was very partisan. So, one day, I went to the speaker, and I said—actually Congresswoman [Joyce] Beatty was a state rep when I was. And she's a great person. Anyway, I went to the speaker, who was Republican, and I said, "I have this bill, and I want you to please hear it." It was a bill to restore money for libraries they had cut, slashed, and it's an amendment to the budget. And he said, "Terrific, we're going to do that." I said, "Thank you." "But your name is not going to be on the bill." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Well, Mary Rose, don't you know the rules around here? When we

like a bill, we'll put somebody else's name down and reintroduce it under their name." I said, "Well, I'm going to have a press conference right outside in two minutes if you do that. You shouldn't do that. Do you do that to other people?" And they had.

Then I recalled that that's what happened to a friend of mine who had done legislation. She had been in the armed services, and she wanted the young people who were going to Pakistan to be able to come back to their jobs. And they loved that bill, but guess what? They put somebody else's name on it.

Later I said, "Why did you let them do that?" And she said, "I wanted it passed." So anyway, I said, "Mr. Speaker, stop this. Because I'm not going to let you do that without a little battle." And he said, "Okay." So he let me keep my name on it. But can you imagine? I can't imagine that happening in Congress. And the lobbying was not subtle. Now that doesn't mean we don't have these high-priced lobbyists. We do, that you trip over. But nonetheless, I felt that it was so overt that I was amazed that they didn't say much about it—and very partisan in that sense.

But it was a great experience. Honestly, I learned a lot about state government. Then, when the governor asked me if I would be on the state board—11 are appointed and eight are elected—I said, "Well, I'd love to do something for education. Tell me the responsibilities." And he said, "It's only part-time and all that"—another part-time job, which I probably made it more of a full-time job than it should have been. But I said, "No, I'd like to run. I don't want anybody telling me what to do." I said, "I'll just run for it." And that's what I did: I ran and won. It was a great experience.

But I've served in all three legislative branches. And I think my city council training was very helpful when I came to Congress because I knew how to

read a budget. One of the guys that had been there a long time in the council taught me how to read our city budget. He'd say, "See that line item where it says it's for the police? It's really a slush fund for the mayor." So you have to question these things. He would explain the whole budget to me as a kid. I was pretty young then. And I thought this is really interesting. But when I came to Congress, we made it, our staff and I made it our business to know what that budget had in it. We would give a briefing to some of our reporters about what we thought the budget said. I thought it was very, very helpful.

WASNIEWSKI: We have time for just a couple wrap-up questions. And one which we certainly wanted to ask you, and you almost led right into it. You had this wonderful career where you served on city council; you were in the House for 16 years; you were at the state legislature level. What was your perspective on women's changing role in government during your career? How did that change from the early 1970s?

OAKAR: I thought in the very beginning, when I was a councilwoman, that at the time we had more council than they do today. But, of course, we don't have the population either. We had 36 seats; we had six women. Frankly it was a bigger percentage than when I came to Congress. And there were many more women in the legislature.

I saw a change, I think particularly in the state government, where more and more women were running for state offices—and legislators especially. And then went on to other things. Like Jane Campbell who was a state rep for many years and then a county commissioner, and then she became mayor of Cleveland. I saw that stepping stone for Jane, who was outstanding in many ways. I think the role has changed in the sense that more women are thinking that's a career for them than before.

But when you think of Jeannette Rankin being from the only state where women had the right to vote, and Susan B. Anthony was tossed in jail several times before she—she never got to vote but tried to vote.[6] It seems to me that the evolution of what's happened is very interesting. I think Senator Clinton, Secretary Clinton's role in this last election was really courageous.

I always tell people who lose an election—I just tried to help a woman win for an office, and she lost by a close vote. I said, "You really didn't lose. You got 2,563 people who agreed with you." And I said, "That's not a loss in a sense." What a privilege it is to get somebody to vote for you. In Senator Clinton, Secretary Clinton's case, she had millions more vote for her. And that's not to get partisan about it. But that's just a fact. The courage it took for her to do it again was—her health and everything else is affected by that strenuous campaign. And his too, the President's too. And he's not a kid.

So I think people who run for office should not be afraid. First of all, you shouldn't be afraid to do it no matter who you are. It wasn't easy as an Arab American to run for office, believe me, sometimes. I was targeted here and there. But nonetheless, we could come to an understanding. Anybody that I felt—and I think it's a good lesson today—if you felt that you didn't do as well with a certain group, you go out and reach out to them. You don't ignore them. You reach out to these people. And I think that that's one of the things I tried to do.

There were suburbs where I lost in the beginning election. And when I left Congress, they were the biggest voting population for me because you just reach out to people who didn't support you. And get to know them and know why they didn't support you. They probably had good reason not to support me. But nonetheless, I think it's a great honor.

When you think of the fact that you are celebrating the 100th anniversary of Representative Rankin, that is just unbelievable. The courage she must have had and to be the only person to vote against the wars. I think she was the only one in World War I and World War II. Whether she was right or wrong, that took courage to vote against war. But as I mentioned, I think peace is the number one issue for women.

JOHNSON: Do we have time for one more? This is a question that we've asked all of our interviewees. And it's one where we're asking you to predict the future a little bit, so different for us as historians. There are now 109 women in Congress, so 88 in the House and 21 in the Senate. How many women do you think will be in Congress on the 150th anniversary of Jeannette Rankin's election, so 50 years from now? And then also, how do you think we get to that point?

OAKAR: Well, I think there'll be more women than men. One of my brothers went to Georgetown Law School. And I was asked to speak there. And I said, "Jimmy, how many women were in your class when you went to Georgetown?" He said, "Two." He went in the '60s, during the Kennedy years, and he's older. When I went to speak to these women, it must have been in 1990 or something, they were in the majority in law school at Georgetown. You see this change. I told him that. And he said, "That is really amazing to me that there were more women in law school at Georgetown than men." In his case, it was very different some 30 years before.

So I think the same thing. I think we will have a female President. In the future, I think that you will have more women in public life. Certainly in other countries, women have been leaders of their countries and done a pretty good job. And so I predict there'll be more, way more than today. I

don't think 105 or whatever you just mentioned is terrific. I mean, it's better than 16 when I came in.

But that was, what, 40 years ago, I guess. That's really something when you think about it. And what if we had the same ratio in the future? That would be a good number. So I think there'll be a lot more because women will see it as a profession in a way they never did before. And that's what it is, just as men are in professions that used to be female-dominated. And that's good. That's very healthy.

JOHNSON: Thank you.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you so much for your time, this has been great. We kept you going.

OAKAR: Well, it's my pleasure. Thank you very much.

NOTES

[1] Mary McCarthy, *The Group* (New York: Signet, 1964).
[2] The Congresswomen's Caucus was established in 1977. Congresswomen Liz Holtzman and Margaret Heckler served as the core founders and first co-chairs.
[3] Republican Leader Bob Michel passed away on February 17, 2017.
[4] After suffering a stroke on February 21, 1848, in the House Chamber (of the Old Hall of the House), former President John Quincy Adams was brought to the Speaker's Room, the present day Lindy Claiborne Boggs Congressional Women's Reading Room, where he passed away two days later on February 23, 1848.
[5] Gladys Noon Spellman suffered a heart attack on October 31, 1980. She survived but lapsed into a coma and died on June 19, 1988.
[6] In 1914, Montana became the 10th state to legalize voting for women. Six years later the 19th Amendment to the Constitution granted all American women the right to vote.