Ileana Ros-Lehtinen

U.S. Representative of Florida (1989-2019)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

April 16, 2018

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

"Katie Couric was interviewing me and she said, 'How does it feel to be the first Latina elected to Congress?' And I thought, 'Gee, I don't want to correct you, Katie, I mean it's wonderful to be elected as a Member of Congress. I'm going to take my job seriously, but I don't think I'm the first Hispanic woman elected to Congress.' And she goes, 'Oh, trust me, we've done our research, you are.' That's how I found out I was the first Hispanic woman elected to Congress. How did it take that long to elect a Latina to Congress? Wow! And now, I'm so proud to see so many other Latinas elected to Congress. So, the world has shifted a lot, but I always felt a sense of obligation that I was representing not just the Cuban-American community, but women as well, and Latina women especially."

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Abstract

In 1960, at the age of eight, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and her family fled their native land of Cuba and made a new home in Miami, Florida. The future Representative established strong community ties as an educator before transitioning to a career in politics. In her interview she explains why she sought elective office and touches upon her time in the Florida state house and senate, including how this service prepared her for Congress.

In 1989, Ros-Lehtinen entered the special election for a Miami-based seat left vacant by the death of longtime Representative Claude Pepper. The 15-term Congresswoman describes her first campaign as a "bitter" race where her opponent denigrated her Cuban heritage—a tactic she believed backfired by galvanizing the support of the Hispanic community in her district and helping her become the first Latina elected to Congress. During her time in the House Ros-Lehtinen concentrated much of her energy on international relations. She discusses her service on the Foreign Affairs Committee and explains how she made history as the first woman to chair the House panel. Ros-Lehtinen also describes how she balanced a busy congressional schedule with raising young children when she first arrived in the U.S. House. From child care to campaigning, family played a prominent role in her career. During her 30 years in the House, Ros-Lehtinen served with six Speakers, saw a spike in the number of women serving in Congress, and was part of a Republican majority that took control of the House for the first time in 40 years. Her oral history includes recollections of the evolving institution and her milestones as the first Latina and first Cuban-American elected to Congress.

Biography

ROS-LEHTINEN, Ileana, a Representative from Florida; born Ileana Ros in Havana, Cuba, July 15, 1952; A.A., Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, Fla., 1972; B.A., Florida International University, Miami, Fla., 1975; M.S., Florida International University, Miami, Fla., 1987; Ed.D., University of Miami, Coral Gables, Fla., 2004; founder, Eastern Academy; member of the Florida state house of representatives, 1982–1986; member of the Florida state senate, 1986–1989; elected as a Republican to the One Hundred First Congress, by special election, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of United States Representative Claude D. Pepper, and reelected to the fourteen succeeding Congresses (August 29, 1989–January 3, 2019); chair, Committee on Foreign Affairs (One Hundred Twelfth Congress).

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 ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN OF FLORIDA —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm here with the House Historian, Matt Wasniewski. Today's date is April 16, 2018, and we are very excited to be here with Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen. Thank you so much for coming today.

ROS-LEHTINEN: Thank you very much. I'm excited to be part of this project, so thanks.

JOHNSON: This project is in recognition of the 100th anniversary of the election of Jeannette Rankin to Congress—the first woman elected to Congress. So to start off with today, what we would like to know about is your memories of your childhood in Cuba.

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, I was born in Cuba and came to the United States when I was eight years old. [Fidel] Castro had been in power for a little bit of time, and my parents thought maybe this is going to blow over, maybe it won't, but let's get to safety while we continue our fight against Castro. We came to the United States on one of the last commercial flights leaving Cuba, to the United States, a Pan-Am flight, and we were so optimistic that this revolution would blow over that we bought a round trip ticket. I still have my return ticket to Cuba. It was $20 and then taxes, so a total of about $24. It was an open date for a return to Cuba, but nobody thought that the Castro communist dictatorship would remain in power for so long.

My early memories of Cuba were really as a child: my school, my neighborhood. I remember being in the car when my parents were driving around Havana, and shots would be ringing out—they would say to lie down in the car. So we thought that was kind of crazy and strange. But as a child, I

had no recollection of this being a political revolution or democracy versus communism. I was only a kid. I think eight-year-olds now are more aware than we were back in the day.

But I thought it was an interesting adventure, when we got to leave Havana to go to Miami because my mom had bought some special clothes for us—for my brother and for me—and it was our first airplane ride. So my brother and I, we were giddy with excitement, and my mother was just crying throughout the probably 35-minute plane ride, but it was a heartbreak for her. But it was a real joy for my brother and for me because we were kids. New clothes, airplane, wow, this is great, and little did we know that the days would turn into weeks and months and years and decades. And here it is, to me, I mean the United States is obviously my home.

We'd like to see Cuba be free, but my parents were great role models because they kept the fight for a free Cuba right up until the last day of their lives. They were optimistic and fighters for a free Cuba, yet they said this is our home now, the United States. And my father, even though he had difficulty in speaking English, he could read and write it very well. Even though he was working full-time, he went back to school, graduated from Miami Dade Community College, got his bachelor's [degree] at the University of Miami, while working full-time. So my parents were great role models for my brother and for me. We couldn't slough off and say we're too tired to do homework because here we saw my parents working really hard.

When we first came over from Cuba, my mom worked in a hotel in Miami Beach. Everybody worked in a hotel in Miami Beach. She worked in the dessert line, and her job was putting pudding and Jell-O and all kinds of fancy cakes and desserts for the snowbirds to come by and get it. They would put those in the front of the line, so you wouldn't get too full by the end. It

was a great job because whatever they didn't sell that day—whatever they didn't consume—she got to take it home, along with other food. So we were never hungry, even though we were very poor. My father worked in a laundry shop, and his work was he drove to people's houses, picked up their dirty laundry, and then returned them with the clean laundry. We were very happy. I didn't know that that was a tough job. I thought that was how everybody was growing up.

So my early memories of Cuba were just memories of wondering what the heck is going on? Things are happening; people were wearing army clothes in the middle of downtown. So things had changed, but not that I thought that that was bad, it was just different because I was just a kid. And then my school and my neighborhood, and then not being allowed outside to play like we used to do, so that was different. We knew something—my brother and I knew something was happening and it wasn't good, but we really didn't understand what it was until much later.

JOHNSON: As a young girl in the United States, what were the expectations for you, as to what you would be when you grew up?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, because my parents were such terrific role models, the expectations that I had as a girl growing up were probably the same as my brother: that we would go to school because my parents believed strongly in an education, and that we would work, and that we could do whatever we wanted to do. My parents did not set any lower standards for me because I was female, than they did for my brother, who is just one year older than I am. We were both expected to study, to work hard, and to succeed at something that we loved to do. I wanted to always be, always, I wanted to be a teacher; a veterinarian in the early years, but then I switched to be a teacher. And that was my dream job, and I became a teacher, became a Florida certified teacher.

So my parents were wonderful role models, expected us to succeed and to get educated and to keep fighting for the principles that have built this county, and that is freedom, democracy, the rule of law, human rights. They were dinner table topics every day. I didn't think of them as exotic topics, but that's how we grew up, and our house in Little Havana [Miami] was the house where people came to when they first came over from Cuba. We didn't own the house, we rented it with some other families, but it was sort of a halfway house for folks who could come to the United States. They didn't know where to stay, and they would stay at our house.

So I grew up in kind of an atmosphere where people go in and out, and you see them for a week or two days or a month. But it was fine. It was a big enough house that there was room for everybody. My brother and I shared a room, and that was never disturbed. I saw that my parents were very welcoming to other people, and that was a good way to grow up, I think. Those are my memories of being in the Cuban exile community in Miami.

We came in late August of 1960, and then just a little bit later, it was October 31, and my brother and I thought is this a great country or what? We're going around with paper sacks and all you have to do is wear this funny mask, and people give you candy. This was back in the day where there were good people, and nobody was scared of going out, and you could trick-or-treat, and there were no worries. And we thought, wow, this is the greatest country ever. We didn't have Halloween in Cuba, so once we had Halloween, October 31, we said, "We're staying; this is the greatest country on earth."

WASNIEWSKI: How was it that you became interested in politics? Was that growing up as a child too?

ROS-LEHTINEN: I often ask myself how is it that I am here as a Member of Congress? How is it that I became an elected official because there's no one political in my family, on my mother's side or my father's side? I wasn't involved in politics in middle school or didn't run for student government in high school or in college, but because in our dinner table conversations we talked about freedom, democracy, and human rights, I didn't think of those terms as political terms, but I guess now, looking back, they were. So I could see that there was something about me that would turn political, but I didn't see it at the time.

What happened is, I realized my dream of becoming a teacher, and with my parents, we founded a little elementary school in Hialeah, a working-class area of Miami-Dade County, where everyone there was an immigrant child, a refugee child, where the parents spoke very little English. And so they would come with papers that they got from government agencies and ask me to translate, which I did gladly, and I would navigate them through the bureaucracy of our government. Finally, somebody one day said, "Rather than just helping Maria and José and Pedro, you could actually run for office, set the policies that are frustrating these parents, and you could have a greater impact." And I said, "How do you do that?" And they said, "You run for office." That was the first inclination that I could do something to help a lot of people, and that was my motivation. I would run for office, and I'm able to help a whole lot of people.

I hope that in my almost 40 years of elective office—29 here in the House—that I've been able to help a whole lot of people because that's been my motivation—that and continuing the fight for freedom and human rights, not just in my native homeland of Cuba, but throughout the world. I fight for autonomy for Tibet, and I fight for the rights of the Venezuelan people,

and wherever there's an injustice, I hope to have a hand in righting that wrong.

WASNIEWSKI: Was there anyone in particular who served as a mentor when you were first transitioning to politics?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, my father and mother really were my mentors. We signed up for a campaign school, and we were the—I was the best candidate ever because since I didn't know anything about how to be a candidate, they gave you this "10 steps of how to be a good candidate." And I thought okay, then that's what you're supposed to do. So we knocked on doors, and we had my mom as volunteer coordinator and my dad was the campaign manager. I've become a lazier campaigner now, but I was as best as anybody could be in 1981 and '82, when I first ran for office because we didn't know what else to do. We figured this is how you get elected, and we followed it to the letter—signed up for a campaign school run by the GOP and have been a successful campaigner ever since.

JOHNSON: Well you had experience, just what you were talking about, in the state legislature in Florida. What lessons did you learn there that helped you when you came to Congress?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, I was in the state legislature from '82 to '86, and the great thing about it—no, I guess '82 to '89, right, when I first got here to Congress. That's where I met my husband, so that's the best thing that happened to me, being in the state legislature. I got elected and got to know him right away. I loved serving in the Florida legislature, as did my husband. In the Florida house, there were 120 members, and that was a lot of fun, and we got to do a lot of great things.

But the Florida senate was an even more magical place because we were only 40 members. And here, my husband was a senator too, and I was a senator. So we were two out of 40 senators—it was amazing. You could pass great legislation, and we worked on victims' rights legislation, and we worked on a lot of good bills. I was able to help a lot of people with their issues.

But what really drove me to Congress—even though I loved the Florida house and I loved the Florida senate even more—was I missed that international aspect of what I wanted to do, to help people who are oppressed and repressed and who have no human rights, and shine a little bit of democracy on them, and hope and pray and work toward a better day for all of the people who are living under authoritarian regimes. So you could do that a little bit in the Florida legislature, but really, it's Congress where you come to get international work done. That's what motivated me to come to Congress. I love the state legislature, but I missed that international dimension.

So as soon as I got to Congress, Dante [Bruno] Fascell was the chairman of the—I think we were having relations then, International Relations—now we're having affairs, Foreign Affairs. Dante Fascell was a Democrat Member from my area, from Miami, but a very bipartisan Member, and he said, "Ileana, we don't have a spot here for you yet, but I'm going to talk to the leadership and see if we'll change the ratio, and we'll get you into the Republican side." So I didn't even have much of a desk. There was no room at the dais, and I had just a little flipflop kind of desk, you could play—a card desk, you could call it. And he said, "You stay there, and we'll make sure that you get a spot." I've been in the Foreign Affairs Committee now 29 years, and I love it. It's a great committee.

WASNIEWSKI: So in 1989, Claude [Denson] Pepper died, and the [congressional] seat comes open, and there's going to be a special election. Were you recruited to run for that seat, and can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved?

ROS-LEHTINEN: In 1989, Claude Pepper passes away, and he was an elderly gentleman, an icon, a living legend. He was there when all these wonderful programs, like Social Security, were created—an incredible man. He was very good to the Cuban-American community, so we loved him very much as well. Now he had been in office so long, that many generations of political leaders came and went, and Claude Pepper was still there, and there was another generation, and Claude Pepper was still there.

So when he passed away, there were just hundreds of people who were interested in that seat. I'm envious, whenever I read that somebody was actually recruited to run because I think, "Wow!" I mean here we had to get rid of a lot of people. You can't have a hundred people—that would make a very interesting ballot for the race. But finally, they winnowed it down, and it was a pretty hard-fought race. I had many opponents in the primary, and the Democrats had many opponents as well. I think that there were maybe 14 of us running for the Claude Pepper seat—Republicans and Democrats. I just worked very hard, again, went to my roots of "campaigning 101" and was just the better candidate because I knew how to campaign, and I knew the issues.

It was a bitter campaign. I would not want to relive a moment of that one, as exhilarating as it was to finally win. It turned into a very divisive, ethnically-oriented campaign. My opponent used the logo, the theme was, "This is an American seat." So he didn't say what he meant by that, but I guess I wasn't as American as he was. I don't know what he meant like that, but it seemed

pretty insulting, "This is an American seat." What am I, chopped liver? I'm a naturalized American and happily so, but I'm as American as anybody else.

So because he had such a racist sounding campaign slogan, it actually ended up helping me because it galvanized the Hispanic community. Sometimes we're divided—Puerto Ricans, Cubans—it's ridiculous, but we are. But everyone came together, and they stayed together with me throughout all these years. So it was a terrible tactic for my opponent to take because it brought our community together. And, of course, I didn't just get Hispanic votes. I got a lot of everyone else's votes as well. It was just a shame. It was my only racially-tinged election, and I think our community was so turned off by it. We haven't had one like that since; it was terrible.

WASNIEWSKI: Did gender play any role at all?

ROS-LEHTINEN: You know, I always wonder, in my elections, whether gender plays a role, and I believe that if it does, it would be positive only because when you talk about generalities—and, of course, there are 500,000 exceptions to generalities, but people tend to think of women as honest, dedicated to their job, hardworking. I don't see a sexist element in gender playing a negative role. If anything, and I don't know that there are gender roles to play in campaigns, but if anything, I think that it's positive because women tend to be viewed as more honest, no offense, than male counterparts. But it's because of the traditional makeup of our society.

That is slowly evolving, but women still tend to shy away from running for office because they're the ones who are taking care of the kids. And it's a single-family home, and it's the mom with three kids, and she's barely getting by: paycheck-to-paycheck. She doesn't have the luxury of being able to think, "Oh yes, let me run for office, that's an interesting lark. What a great

adventure." People really have it tough, and I think that that's why we're [the House of Representatives] not really a good cross-section of what our country is because most folks are really having a tough time getting by and running for office. They think we're crooks. Anyway, it would be the last thing that they would think about. We have to do better at getting Congress to be more representative of what our great country is. We need more women, we need more minorities, and we need more folks from all of the socioeconomic categories.

JOHNSON: What role did your family play in that first campaign?

ROS-LEHTINEN: My family was everything in my first campaign. There's no way that I could have made it without my family. My dad was my campaign manager; my mom was the volunteer coordinator. We would map out every day, my parents, and I don't mean just them. My brother and my aunt and uncle, it was a family affair, and my friends. It was friends and family, and slowly, the circle became bigger. But at the beginning, and right up until my last election, my parents were very, very important figures. We would map out what neighborhoods we would walk every day, and we knocked on so many doors. We really did a door-to-door, grassroots campaign, and I think that I didn't look the way I look now. I was way younger, way thinner, and I think people thought, "This poor little thing, she's not going to win, but I'll give her my vote."

I don't know why. We always try to figure out, how do you capture a vote? What makes somebody vote for you or not vote for you? Do they think of you as their granddaughter or their grandmother, or do they remind you of somebody you went to school with? Do they vote for you because of your position on a certain issue? That's that magic that nobody's ever figured out what drives a voter to vote. It's not like selling laundry detergent, but in a

way it is, where advertisers try to think what would make that consumer pick up this bottle of detergent, and politicians are always thinking how can I, without changing my principles and my views and my policy, how do I engage that voter enough that that voter is motivated to come and vote for me even though that voter has got kids or has got cats at home and has got so many things on his or her mind? How can I presume to get an hour of that voter's time to come vote? It's a difficult science, and I don't know the answer even though I've been around almost 40 years in this business—if politics is a business—I have yet to figure it out.

But I know that what turns them off is when they smell insincerity, when they think that you're out for a buck, you're doing it for ego boosting. If they sense some kind of insincerity in you, I think you'll turn them off. And, for sure, I know you're not going to get that person's vote. Sometimes there's just that spark, where you feel with a voter, and I could feel it in my early days, when I would knock on the doors, when you made that connection with the voters. It doesn't work all the time, but you try to get that spark.

WASNIEWSKI: And we ask everyone to describe the district during their first campaign, the geography, the demographics, and maybe how that's changed during the past 30 years.

ROS-LEHTINEN: In my very first congressional campaign, that was the toughest district that I ever had. Not even my district now is as tough for a Republican as that one was. Just think, Claude Pepper was the Member of Congress. He was a Democratic legend. And at that time, you could more or less draw your own districts. We didn't have courts overseeing district lines unless there was some racial barrier. I'm sure that Claude Pepper went to Tallahassee and said, "I'll take this part and this part and this part." So my district was way more diverse than my present district is now. I had a lot of black voters, Hispanic

voters, I don't know what term to use, someone who is not black and not Hispanic, but white voters, white, not Hispanic voters, and it was a great cross-section of Miami-Dade County. Now, you move 29 years later and really, when you look at Dade County, it is far more Hispanic now than it was 30 years ago.

So my district is way more Hispanic, but a little more representative of the county as a whole. But back then it was really tough because I would have way more Democrats in the district than Republicans—a higher number of black voters. If you used generalities—and like I say, there are 500,000 exceptions to generalities—you would say black voters tend to be voting more Democratic than they would Republican and so it was a tough district for a Hispanic Republican. And believe me, my opponents made it clear to the voters that I was a Hispanic Republican, even though I just consider myself an everyday American, but they made sure everybody knew I was Hispanic and I was Republican, and those were bad things to them. They were saying, "Boy, remember, it's an American seat," meaning no Hispanics, and it's not a Republican seat. So I had to overcome that prejudice, but that's all right, I never took it personally. It was just nasty, and I don't like to be in nasty, ethnicity-driven debates, but I know that they were just doing it for politics. My first election and my first congressional district, it's not mine—it's the people I represented, far tougher then than it is now.

JOHNSON: Was fundraising an obstacle for you in those early years?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Early years, fundraising was an obstacle. I had not had any experience in fundraising. My parents did not know how to fundraise, so thank goodness for that campaign school. We had a whole day that was just dedicated to fundraising, and you asked your friends, and you asked your family, and you build on that. You're very frugal with your expenses. Because our campaign

was really run in our kitchen, at our dining room table. We didn't have many expenses. We didn't have a campaign office, and we didn't have paid people. Everyone was a volunteer, so expenses were low.

And then, in those old days—I mean we're talking 40 years ago—mailing, we had to be very specific. I wanted to make sure that I could reach the voters that I thought were going to be voting for me. We did not have the kinds of sophistication that we have now. Now, I could target just about—I'm exaggerating, but give me the voters who are blonde hair and blue eyed, not really but you could, who voted in the last 10 elections, in the last 10 presidential elections. You could get a list of voters that are so specific. We didn't have that kind of computer programming then, so we did fundraisers that are just friends and family, and we kept our costs way low.

We had nobody paid, except for an accountant, who we want to make sure that we did all the FEC [Federal Elections Commission] filings correctly. So he was a friend, but we paid him a little bit of money, and we just worked harder than anybody else in the race. I was never supposed to win my very first race for state house because I was going against a county commissioner. He was elected through the county, and he let go of his position to run for the state house. He thought for sure he would beat me, and we just outworked him. He was going to be sitting on his great name and great reputation. It was amazing.

I've enjoyed politics, even though I was never a politician, because you go to different events, you meet different people, and I'm a people person, or at least I think I am. I enjoy getting to know people. Here, you're interviewing me, but normally, I would be interviewing you, finding out what makes you tick. I enjoy it, and now, almost 40 years later, I still enjoy it. So I'm not leaving because I'm bitter or I'm angry with the administration, no. I love my

job. I love what I'm doing. I don't mind hanging out at airports; I don't care if the flight is late. Every part of the job, I love. I even love fundraising. You get to have a piña colada, people give you checks, and you get to know different people, and you get to go to fine homes and nice hotels because I represent a district that's heaven. I've got Key Biscayne, I've got Coral Gables, Miami Beach, Little Havana—what's not to love? It's an incredible district. Any time I have a fundraiser in my district, you're just going to a fun place. Oh, I have to go to the Delano again, in Miami Beach, oh what a shame, for a fundraiser. It's great, every part of it. Every part of this job is good.

JOHNSON: Did you have any women's groups that backed you in the early years, and then maybe as time progressed?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, in the early years, I would say that the women's groups that were more evolved, more organized, and more active were more liberal, and unfortunately, that was very much tied to whether you were pro-life or pro-choice, which is a shame, but that's how they were viewed. We had some GOP women's groups, but they were not as well endowed. They were not formulated to help elected officials. So I didn't have many women's groups help me, except the few GOP women's groups that existed. Now that's changed a lot. We have both conservative and liberal women's groups and they—I would say the liberal groups are more well endowed, they're able to give bigger checks, but we have many GOP women's groups who are very helpful as well. They were not around when I ran…no, not at all.

WASNIEWSKI: We wanted to move on to questions about your House career, but we wanted to ask you quickly, before we did that, we have a picture of your portrait from the Foreign Affairs Committee—International Affairs—Foreign Affairs. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about having that painted. Are there any

memories that stick out, and can you talk a little bit about the symbols that you chose for the portrait?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, I hope that people are able to see the map that's behind me—behind my left shoulder—and I wanted to have a little bit of Cuba in the painting because to me, where I was born is not just a stamp on my passport. It really has helped to define who I am as a person. Cuba for me, the fight for a free Cuba, the fight for freedom, for human rights, for democracy, they're just so important to me. It's got a little bit of South Florida in there as well. So I wanted a little bit of Cuba and a little bit of Florida thrown in there.

I was not sure what the artist would do. What's interesting for people to know is you think that I know everything that's going to look like in this painting, but you have no idea. The way that it works is that this is run by a department of the U.S. House of Representatives, and they're the ones that give you a list of vendors, of painters that they know are legitimate folks, and you pick which one you would like based on some works that they've done before. I wanted it to be more of a photograph and an oil painting rather than kind of a stuffy, just an oil painting. I wanted it to look more like me, for better or worse. And I wanted to have something of the United States there because I am a proud American and not ashamed of it. But I didn't know how this would come out. I had no idea what the artist would have in mind, and I just love it because it's got Cuba, it's got Florida, and it's got my country's flag.

The only part that I would have changed, and I had nothing to do with how it would come out, is I would have given me more of a smile because I'm a smiler, and I look kind of a little bit serious in this. But he did not think that that would be professional looking, so he's got me with kind of a dour expression and a little bit of a smile. Now I can't wear that green jacket very

often because it's so green people remember it, and they remember it from the portrait. So I whip it out on every St. Paddy's Day. I enjoyed wearing it every year on St. Paddy's Day, and maybe I'll wear it one other time, but it's just that people remember it. When you have these kinds of boring suits, like the one that I have on today, you can get away with wearing this, you know, once a week, nobody will remember it, just use a different blouse and it's just your regular congressional outfit. But with a green jacket like that, I've got to be careful; I can't wear it too long.

[A 47-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]

JOHNSON: When you first came to the House, there were 27 women that year, so, that's not very many, out of the total number of Representatives. Did you find that women Members tended to gravitate towards each other because there were so few of you?

ROS-LEHTINEN: When I got to Congress, I had actually not been here very much. I came here a few times, to make sure that we would raise some money, the few PACs [political action committees] that would help me, because a Republican, who's going to—Claude Pepper was such a Democratic icon, surely the Democrat is going to win. So I came to Congress a few times, to see it, but I really wasn't as familiar with this very institution where I ended up spending 30 years of my life as I should have, as a candidate.

I was busy in Tallahassee and with my family. When I got to Congress, I was just stunned that there were less than 30 women in the U.S. House of Representatives—absolutely stunned. Just think, out of 435, even though we're more than half of the population, there were less than 30 women. And yes, women, we gravitated toward one another. I don't know how many women there were on the International Relations Committee, but

Republican women, I would say there weren't many then and even now, it is just another woman Member and I, we're the only two Republicans on that committee. We need more women to get on these kinds of committees, but we did gravitate toward one another, whether we were Democrats or Republicans.

I served with Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder and just incredible women like that. Connie [Constance A.] Morella, just great, great, great women who were really setting the stage for what now has become a real explosion of women in Congress—a record number of women in the U.S. Senate. I would have never foreseen this great growth so rapidly, in the past years, but for a long time there was no growth. We were really stuck in those low numbers for a long time and women tended to support one another. Yes, we knew that one was Democrat, one was a Republican, but there was a real camaraderie there, because I think that for women who were Democrats, they had a hard time going up the ladder of leadership as well.

So there was a great deal of being in touch with one another, and I feel that now as well. For example, I play on the congressional softball team, Debbie Wasserman Schultz is the captain. She was the one who formed it and she's a very good friend.[1] Shelley Moore Capito, Martha Roby, Senator [Kirsten] Gillibrand, all of us are captains. It's Democrats and Republicans, playing against members of the press. We do it to raise money for breast cancer awareness and treatment, for young women who have breast cancer. It came about because Debbie Wasserman Schultz was young but was diagnosed with breast cancer. When she went to her doctor he said, "You can't have breast cancer, you're too young." And so she had to insist. She says, "I've got a lump. I insist that you do all of the tests." Sure enough, she did have breast cancer.

So this bipartisan, bicameral softball game really brings the best in us. We've got great folks, like Cheri Bustos and Joni Ernst, and whether you're a Senator or a House Member, Republicans or Democrats, we really bond together as women. And just think, I'm 65 years old and the Members we play against, members of the press, their median age is probably about 25, so we're really—nobody is as old as I am on the team, but nobody is a spring chicken either. So it's just a great time to bond with other women.

And we still have all those traditional challenges that all the women in our congressional districts have. Whether you're a bank teller, you work in a factory, or you're a stay-at-home mom, you're trying to balance it all. There's so many single moms who are really in tough shape and in jobs where they don't see advancements, and they don't see any future for themselves. We talk about those issues. What can we do to fight sexual harassment? What can we do to help women get better pay and get better jobs? And I think whether you're Republican or Democrat, if you represent your district, half of them are women, you're going to have to really pay attention to those bread and butter issues because that's what drives households every day. You're wondering how can I balance my checkbook, and how can I make ends meet? People have it tough out there.

I'm blessed to not have it tough, but I know that I'm part of the privileged few. Why? Because I've got a great family, and I've got a good support system, and I'm not alone. I don't think that many people viewing this would say that they're in that category. That's why I call myself privileged. It's not because of the money I make—although that's a lot of money—but it's because I have people who help me, and so many women are just by themselves, and it's really rough out there for a lot of women.

WASNIEWSKI: That actually leads in to the next question, and it's because there were so few women in Congress for much of your career, did you feel like you represented women beyond the confines even of your district, women across the country?

ROS-LEHTINEN: I really did feel that because there were such few women that I—we did each have a larger voice, that we were speaking on behalf of all women. And that's presumptuous, and that's a little pretentious, but I felt like, gosh, I met so many great people while I was going door to door and while I was campaigning, I felt like I wanted to be their voice. You take away the divisive issue of abortion, and you talk about bread and butter issues. You know we have a lot of common interests and a lot of commonalities, and I like to always talk about the things that bring us together rather than what sets us apart. So if you talk about women's issues and abortion, oh gosh, we're never going to be able to solve that problem, but how you can get better healthcare, how you can get a better job, how you can get promotion, how you can make sure that you're not harassed at work and you're treated with respect? I think all women feel an obligation to speak on behalf of those who feel like they have no voice. I don't pretend that every woman in my district feels like I represent them. I know that a whole bunch of them would say, "You don't represent me." But I think that for bread and butter issues, I try to represent that woman who is struggling to get by.

JOHNSON: Earlier you mentioned Pat Schroeder and Connie Morella, and some of the people that served in the '80s and into the '90s. Were there any women that you worked closely with, that you can recall, on some legislation?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Yes. You know, we had a lot of women who were working, like Judy [Borg] Biggert, on flexibility issues. She was very much attuned to banking and the economy, and she wanted to have a lot of bills that would give women more

flexible working hours. She was a great Member. We worked with a lot of women governors. Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey, she was often here, and she would be—we would have a lot of women's roundtables, and it was just a great time in the early years because there were so few of us, and we thought that was just pathetic. We were happy we were here, but we wanted to make life better for others. There were just some great women leaders. Gosh, my memory fails me, but every one of them, whether we agreed on a lot of issues or not, maybe they weren't too helpful on the Cuba issue, maybe they weren't so helpful on human rights, but there were a lot of domestic issues in which we worked together, and they don't have any party labels. When you try to lift all boats, that's always a good thing.

JOHNSON: As a young woman coming to Congress—because you were elected in your 30s, and we've talked about how there weren't many women—did you find that the institution was a welcoming place for you?

ROS-LEHTINEN: I found, when I got to Congress, that this was not a welcoming institution for young women. Whether it was something silly like there are no bathrooms nearby, or something important like, "Guys, where are the women leaders in committees," and everything in between. This was not an institution that cared very much about equality for women. They cared about equality in the larger sense, but when it came to you, they didn't think that that was so important. They didn't strive to make women feel important or feel empowered or give you the opportunity. Maybe if your leadership had an important bill, they would give it to you, and you'd say, "We're going to pass this, you might as well be the shepherd for it." No, not really. They would look at their endangered Members and give them the bills.

Now it's changed a lot. I think both parties are so aware of having women and minorities have a bigger say, be more involved. They make it a point of

making sure that women are in the front: let's. Let's make sure that women are in leadership. Our Republican Party isn't as great on that yet, but we're getting better, and so I think that there's a recognition at least, when we are doing a bad job, at least they're aware that we're doing a bad job.

Before, they were doing a lousy job, didn't know and didn't care. Now, they're more cognizant of it. How could you not be? Everything you see on television and movies and advertisements is telling you that female empowerment is very important. You'd have to be a fool to not pay attention to that. So women and minorities are getting a fairer shake. This institution is far more welcoming of women and minorities than they ever were. In the beginning, I would say that they didn't care; they didn't know. The worst sin is that they didn't know, and they didn't care, that they did not see sexism—that's sad. If you pointed it out to them, they didn't care; that's pathetic. But now, it's not like that at all, at all now.

JOHNSON: When situations like that arose for you personally, or some of your colleagues, did you speak up?

ROS-LEHTINEN: I think all the women would speak up, but we didn't do it in an in your face kind of way. I'm sorry I never served with Bella [Savitzky] Abzug because she would have done it—Shirley [Anita] Chisholm. They would have done it in an at your face kind of way. And Pat Schroeder, she was a pretty good, right at your face woman as well, but most of us did it in a softer way and maybe in the background, but we would make sure that our displeasure was noted. Whether that changed or not, I'm not sure, but I always believed in doing things in a more positive way, rather than negative. How do you say her name right, Bella Abzug?

WASNIEWSKI: Yes, you got it, Bella Abzug, yes.

ROS-LEHTINEN: But boy, when you talk about the olden days, there were some incredible women leaders here. And, of course, now we have Nancy Pelosi, who is a great leader, and we have Cathy McMorris Rodgers on our side, who is a dynamo. So we've got great leaders in both parties, women leaders, who don't take any of this for granted and really make it their business to highlight female Members. Both of them take this very seriously.

WASNIEWSKI: You mentioned Dante Fascell earlier. Were there any other women or men who were mentors earlier in your career, and what kind of advice did they offer you?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Dante Fascell was a great mentor to me, and [William] Bill Lehman was also a great mentor. These are two giant legislators. Bill Lehman was maybe not as well known, but he was the head of transportation funding. And were it not for the help of Bill Lehman, many of our roads and metro rail systems, and all of the transportation of an urban area like Miami, would not have been as successful without Bill Lehman's help. Dante Fascell, a great bipartisan Member of Congress who shepherded through the House, the first Gulf War Resolution under George Herbert Walker Bush, so that help for that war was not a partisan issue. So he was a bipartisan Member of Congress.

Bill Lehman, such a gentle soul. You know his middle name was Marx. He came from the line of super liberal Jews from the old days, Jewish Americans, to think that his middle name could be Marx. And he said—he was proud—he said, "You're not Marxist. My middle name is Marx, but you're going to love me." And sure enough, this man was a gentle giant, so powerful yet so humble. I remember I went to his services when he passed away, and I was just so moved with so many testimonials of people who, from all walks of life, who thought, my gosh, this gentleman who probably, maybe should have

been elected, from the Bronx in New York, but he was really a southern soul and just a great man.

So those were my two best mentors and by coincidence, they both happened to be Democrats because there weren't too many Republicans elected throughout the country, and certainly not from South Florida. They were just great friends; they were great mentors. And I hope that I've helped some of the newer Members as well, but I don't think I would ever come to the par of the great giants of Dante Fascell and Bill Lehman.

JOHNSON: You've made history throughout your political career. You're the first Cuban American elected to Congress and also the first Hispanic woman elected to Congress. What do those milestones mean to you personally, and then what do you also think it means to those groups that you represent?

ROS-LEHTINEN: You know, when I first got elected, in September '89, I did not even know that I would be the first Hispanic woman elected to Congress. Because we were Dade County, because we were Florida, of course our elections were all messed up. The computers weren't working. The head of the elections department actually passed out at 3:00 in the morning, finally got the computers rolling again. So I think I was declared the winner at, I don't know, like 4:00 in the morning. The *Today Show* called and said, "Do you want to be on our show?" And I said, "Well, I'm up anyway, and your show starts pretty soon, why not?" Katie Couric was interviewing me, and she said, "How does it feel to be the first Latina elected to Congress?" And I thought, "Gee, I don't want to correct you, Katie, I mean it's wonderful to be elected as a Member of Congress. I'm going to take my job seriously, but I don't think I'm the first Hispanic woman elected to Congress." And she goes, "Oh, trust me, we've done our research, you are." That's how I found out I was the first Hispanic woman elected to Congress.

How did it take that long to elect a Latina to Congress? Wow! And now I'm so proud to see so many other Latinas elected to Congress. So the world has shifted a lot, but I always felt a great sense of obligation that I was representing not just the Cuban-American community, but women as well, and Latina women especially. I've always felt that burden, that responsibility, and that privilege, to be a voice greater than myself. And that does not mean that all Latinas agree with me or that all women agree with me or that all Cuban Americans agree with me, I don't mean that at all.

But, by and large, I try to speak on behalf of a greater number of people, so that folks feel like they're represented here in the United States Congress. At least that's what I try to do, but mostly what I try to do is vote my conscience and tell my constituents why I voted a certain way. And you're not going to make everybody happy. I don't even make my own family happy on any given day. We don't agree on a lot, but I think you owe them an explanation for your votes or why you feel a certain way about an issue. You owe them that.

WASNIEWSKI: We're about the midway point time-wise.

ROS-LEHTINEN: Okay.

JOHNSON: One question we've been asking the women Members is how difficult it was for them to balance having such a demanding political career with also having a family. What was that like for you?

ROS-LEHTINEN: I think that the most difficult part of being a Member of Congress if you're female, because of the traditional makeup of our society, is balancing home and work: balancing your family with your responsibilities and your job. I could not have done it without a supportive spouse and a supportive family structure.

I got elected to Congress when my kids were only two and three years old. That is really difficult. So what we did is they would fly up with me every week, but so would my mother. My mom was such an important part of my political career. We would come up for the week, and then we would fly down. We would come up, but they weren't in school then. So by then, then for a few years of doing that, they got used to, mom is leaving, but we'll be here, and it got to work—it functioned for us. But I always said that I have never been a typical working mom because typical working moms don't have that kind of affluence, to be able to do it, nor do they have a supportive mother who would come, and in this case, my kids' grandmother, who would come up every week to help me. So I'm not a typical working mom. I've always had it easy, and I don't know how moms do it every day.

My daughter-in-law—they've given us four beautiful grandchildren—and she's a lawyer, and I'm wondering how does she do it? And yet she does, so she's working as a lawyer, her husband is a lawyer, they've got four kids. It's the dilemma, and what every working mom thinks about all the time is am I spending enough time with my children? Am I spending enough time with my spouse? Am I doing my job in a responsible way? Who's getting the short shrift here? Who am I not pleasing? Women, in generalities—like I say it's never going to be correct—but we like to please people. We like to have everybody happy, and with a lot of balls in the air, the balls are going to come crashing down.

I sometimes think back upon those years, when my kids were so young, and think how did they make it through? And they still like me, and they still love me. So I'm very happy that everything has worked out, but it so easily could have gone the other way. We have a loving, wonderful, supportive, warm family, and so that makes me the richest person in the world. But every

mom who is listening to this, you don't have to be a Member of Congress to know how difficult it is to balance it all and to think, "Oh gosh, who am I disappointing today? What did I not remember to do?" Whether it's your job or your family, something is going to be in there that it just didn't work out today. You've got to have the attitude that, "Okay, I can do better tomorrow. I'll pay attention to this tomorrow," or rectify it that very moment if you can. You always get another chance. You're never going to get another chance with your family, so try not to miss that school play and try not to miss that outing with your kid's class. I always tried to not do that. So family, we'll say family first, but your job is important, too. But you're never going to get another chance with your family. You might get another chance with your job.

WASNIEWSKI: We're going to move into a section on your work with various caucuses and then also on committees. To start off, can you tell us a little bit about your impression of the role of the Women's Caucus in the institution. Is it a major role, is it a small role, has it changed over time?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, it's very interesting, the way that the Women's Caucus has evolved. Now we try to have it so that there's parity between the parties, so that it's not a Republican head or a Democrat head: one is a Republican and one is a Democrat. Then we have these subcommittees that you can be involved with, whether it's human trafficking or something that whatever is your passion. I have gotten so busy with my committee work—both in the Foreign Affairs Committee and on the Intelligence Committee—that I have not had enough time to deal, in these past years, with the Women's Caucus as much as I would like to. But in the events that I go to, that they've put on, I'm very happy to see the bipartisan nature of it.

There were some difficult moments back in the day. None of the women here would remember, but there were some difficult moments where Republicans felt like, okay, abortion has taken over the Women's Caucus, so we're not going to be a part of that. That was a shame. Now, that doesn't happen. We agree to focus on the issues of gender equality and pay equality, things that we can all agree on that are important and that are difficult subjects, just as difficult as abortion but not as divisive, and so it's worked a lot better. I like the structure that we have now, but I haven't been as involved with it as I used to be. My committee work has taken over.

WASNIEWSKI: We read also, that you were, at one point, a lead sponsor for the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. Can you explain to us why, for you, this was such an important piece of legislation?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, the Violence Against Women Act, the reauthorization, became a flashpoint and a terrible, divisive topic, and it should never have been, but for some reason, it got off the track and it became—I was the only Republican that was supporting it, and we were wondering, how did this happen? We had to work a long time, to get us as a party, to be in agreement with this. Somehow, some think tank had sold our party this idea, which was incorrect, that we were micromanaging the world and that we were telling that it was a pro-abortion bill, or that we were telling businesses how to run their businesses, and they had to have a certain number of women employees and there were quotas; all of these crazy conspiracy theories. I don't know how they evolved, but it moved so far from Violence Against Women Act, and so people were thinking, "Oh my gosh, Ileana is a real trailblazer because she's the only Republican woman who is for this."

My goodness, this is motherhood and apple pie, and now it's coming up for reauthorization again. I'm already talking to a lot of Members in our party

and saying we cannot have this like we did last time, where we looked like Neanderthals, cavewomen and cavemen, being against this bill. Let's take out anything that you think is going to be controversial, but we need to be in favor of this bill. Let's work on this bill; let's pay attention before it gets to the [House] Floor and becomes this terrible bill that people feel like they can't support. Sometimes bills in Congress take a life of their own and when you read it later, you think, "How could this have possibly been controversial?" But it's a creature of the times and the debate—some errant word that somebody said, that's defined the bill, so we're going to be careful this time around, we're not going to get to that. We're not going to go down that rabbit hole.

JOHNSON: Matt asked you, just a few minutes ago, about the Women's Caucus, and we also wanted to ask about the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and then also the Congressional Hispanic Conference, that you got to serve on both of those groups—if you could just talk a little bit about that experience.

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well we, Lincoln Diaz-Balart and I—both Republicans, both Hispanics—we were part of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, but then, the head of it, another Member of Congress, went to Cuba, said some things that were not very positive about the Cuban-American community and talking about the embargo and really politicized the issue of freedom for Cuba. And we thought, "Well, this is certainly a slap in our face. We belong to this caucus, we give money to this caucus, and yet the head of this caucus is dissing us." One of the primary reasons we got to Congress was to be the voice for Cubans who are not free, and so we quit in protest, and that was a shame.

So we started our own group, and it's called the Congressional Hispanic Leadership Institute [CHLI], but it's bipartisan. We have Democrat Members on ours, whereas the Hispanic Caucus recently had another

controversy when Carlos Curbelo, a Republican, wanted to join it, and the Hispanic Caucus voted him off the island. They said, "You don't share our values." And I don't know what they could have meant by that. I think that they lost credibility. It doesn't make any sense to not be a bipartisan caucus. If Carlos had gone back, I would have gone, but now, if they don't accept Carlos Curbelo, I'm certainly not going to be a part of that either. To think that a caucus would want to be one party is a real shame.

So our CHLI, our Congressional Hispanic Leadership Institute, we have Democratic Members. I think the Hispanic Caucus, they should have allowed Carlos Curbelo to be in as a member because he does share their values. We're all for all the things that the Hispanic Caucus is for, and immigration reform is one of the key topics that we're involved with in these years in Congress, and Carlos has been a leader. So how unfortunate that something that should bring people together has brought people apart.

Now hats off to the Congressional Black Caucus; they don't have that attitude. Mia [Ludmya Bourdeau] Love wanted to join, and they said come on aboard, and she's a member of the Congressional Black Caucus. Any Republican—Bill [William Ballard] Hurd, if he wants to join or maybe he is part of it—I know because Mia is on our softball team, and so she talks about those issues and never a controversy, never a problem. I think they're a better caucus for it. So I say, "Shame on the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, for not allowing Carlos Curbelo in." He's a fine person, and he would be a great addition, and then all of us would want to join.

Anyway, people make decisions based on party, and that's a shame. Any time you make a decision based on party affiliation, it's never going to be the right decision. I have found that to be true. I've been involved with, I was involved very much, with the caucus. Now I'm involved with CHLI, the leadership

institute, and I hope and I know that in the years to come, the Congressional [Hispanic] Caucus will see the error of its ways, and it will be bipartisan again. I have no doubt about it.

WASNIEWSKI: You spoke to us already about how you got your committee assignment on Foreign Affairs: the chairman created a seat for you. Can you tell us a little bit about how you got the seat on Government Operations, and was that another committee that you really wanted to have a seat on?

ROS-LEHTINEN: You know, I liked being in Government Operations, Government Reform, until I saw how partisan it was, and then I did not like it as much. I decided I really, I'm not a partisan person. At first, in my congressional career, you get all revved up with being a Republican, and now, after so many years, I'd rather work on bipartisan issues and nonpartisan issues. I did not enjoy my time in the Government Reform Committee because the votes that we took were partisan. Whether we were beating up on [President] Bill Clinton, and then if a Republican became President, we weren't willing to investigate. It just seemed foolish to me, and it's not in my nature. Many Members are, they are [partisan], and good for them. I mean they are real partisans, and they fight for what they believe. I just don't think that those issues that divide us are really positive for our country. So I was put on there; I don't know why. I'm not sure. I don't remember lobbying for it. I wasn't quite sure what the committee did. I wanted Foreign Affairs, I wanted International Relations, and the other committee, as important as it is, was secondary to me. We did a lot of investigations, but they were just too partisan for me, and finally I said, "Please, please get me out of this. I just want to concentrate on my committee."

JOHNSON: You mentioned earlier, how there weren't many women on Foreign Affairs, which has been true from when you started to now, that the numbers have

been low. Did you ever feel like you had to work harder to prove yourself, or were there any other obstacles because you were one of the few women on the committee?

ROS-LEHTINEN: I have never felt that in terms of Foreign Affairs that I had to prove myself because I was a woman or I had to pull the wagon because I was a woman. Remember, that was during a time where Margaret Thatcher was the leader of the UK, where we had had Jeane Kirkpatrick being our Ambassador at the UN and many other roles. There were great women leaders who were leading the field in foreign affairs, so I didn't feel like the responsibility was on me. There were many women out there who were doing that. So it was good to see women leaders around the world doing what they needed to do.

I never felt, on Foreign Affairs, that I needed to be—other than amplify my voice, except for this. When I chaired the Africa Subcommittee, it was a wonderful opportunity for me to get to know that women around the world really are in difficult situation. Boy, we think that we have it tough here in the U.S. Look around the world. And now, as chair of the Middle East and North Africa Subcommittee, I mean women are in dire straits. We have come so far in the United States that we complain about things that would be considered luxuries in most countries. They have child brides; they are child soldiers, indentured servants, just terrible situations for young women and girls. I mean, to be married off at the age of 11 to a 65-year-old man. Genital mutilation, it's just horrific. Being on the committee, finding out and experiencing and seeing what happens to women as second-grade citizens, my God, citizens at all. They're not second-class citizens, they're not even—they're back in the slavery times. They're considered property that you barter for. So it's a great committee to understand how wonderful we have it in this country, the great benefits that we take for granted: freedom, democracy,

human rights, the rule of law. Oh my gosh, what blessings from God, it's amazing.

WASNIEWSKI: How important was it for you to chair those subcommittees, as you've kind of worked your way up? Can you describe that experience a little bit?

ROS-LEHTINEN: I was so thrilled that I got to chair so many different subcommittees. Now they've been rearranged, and now some of those subcommittees don't exist, but what a wonderful opportunity. I got to, at one time, I was chairing every one of them, at one time or another, and it was just the thrill of my life, to be able to set the agenda. I liked being a ranking member also, whether I was the chairman or the ranking member, it was great to be on those committees and to think that we could advance the cause of a free society.

For me, Israel is an important part of what I do. What can I do to make our strong relations even stronger with the democratic Jewish State of Israel? How can we focus attention on justice for Holocaust survivors? And how can we improve the plight of women in impoverished situations? So, in every one of my subcommittees, I have found just a great opportunity to shine the light on a plight of people, who maybe other people don't know that they have it so rough. We want to say, "Look, this is a great country, and we can help other people become great, too."

JOHNSON: You eventually were able to chair the Foreign Affairs Committee, and one thing a lot of people don't know about is the behind-the-scenes process and how you become a chair. Can you explain how that came about for you?

ROS-LEHTINEN: I still can't believe that I was chair of that wonderful committee: the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. And to think that just a few years before, I had come, sitting in a little intern desk, not even part of the dais. I was an

afterthought, and I got to be the Dante Fascell. I still couldn't believe it. I had to pinch myself to think is this a great country or what?

And what a weird, arcane process it is, to become chair, for the Republicans. We have a steering committee, and it's the committee of committees, and they are certain people that are picked by geography—where they're from, or key committees, like somebody from Appropriations and someone from Ways and Means, someone from leadership. And anyway, these 20-some people, they're the ones who decide who will be the chair of the committee, and so you make a presentation to them.

But what's interesting is that when I got to be, when I was chosen to be chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I actually jumped over a few people. So it's not by seniority necessarily—although that's a big part of it—but I jumped over people to become chair. I'm really grateful to the Republican Leadership for seeing something in me, and I hope that I did a good job, both as ranking member, under Tom [Thomas Peter] Lantos, an incredible man who was also a mentor to me and who helped me. We worked on so many bipartisan pieces of legislation. He was, you would call him a liberal Democrat from San Francisco, and I was more or less a conservative Cuban American from South Florida. But he was a Holocaust survivor, so he understood what it's like to lose your homeland, what it's like to flee from your homeland, to start up in this great country. For those years, we had two naturalized Americans leading the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Tom Lantos was born in Hungary, naturalized American. I was born in Cuba, naturalized American. And to think that two naturalized Americans were writing the laws and the policies of our government, in relation to how we deal with other countries—this is a great country. I mean in what other country in the world would a Tom Lantos be able to head a committee,

would an Ileana Ros-Lehtinen be able to head a committee, and then do it at the same time? We're not even what some people would—like my first opponent for Congress said, "This is an American seat." He would say I'm not an American, but here we are, naturalized Americans, writing the policy of the United States. That's why I'm just so thrilled to be in this job, and I can't believe that I get the opportunity to do this each and every day.

WASNIEWSKI: When you look back on it now, when you think, "Gee, I'm the only woman still, to ever have chaired the Foreign Affairs Committee," and what do you think your biggest accomplishment was, legislatively, as chairman of the committee?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, I think my biggest accomplishment as chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee had been to bring a lot of voices to the table. Before, I think that we had some great leaders [like] Henry [John] Hyde. We had great chairmen, not to diss them at all, but I wanted to have everyone, even the one who just got there two weeks ago, feel like they had a real say. So we would get together, and we would say, "Okay, what are the bills that we want to propose, and how can I help you pass your bill?" So we worked in tandem, we worked together, and I wanted to give a voice to everyone there, and I think that I did that.

Yes, we passed a lot of great bills. You know one of the bills that I'm very proud of is PEPFAR [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief]; this is an international bill, a program. It's a Foreign Affairs program to battle HIV/AIDS, and I think it's the best accomplishment that George W. Bush ever had. I think it's the best plan since the Marshall Plan after World War II. It's really changed a lot of people's lives and given people a life, and to think that I had a role in that, that's pretty good.

JOHNSON: You've touched upon this a little bit, but we wanted to ask more directly about how important you think it is to have women in leadership positions, like committee chairs, and in the House Leadership.

ROS-LEHTINEN: It is so important to have women in leadership positions, whether it's in your own party's leadership or whether it's committee chairs and subcommittee chairs. Why? Because I think everyone is a role model to somebody else, and our hearings are televised, and people watch it. You think that C-SPAN is not watched by people, but it is. You think that committees aren't covered on TV, but they are. And when you see a bunch of folks that are just not of your gender and not of your race and not of your age, you think, "Well gosh, that's not representative of my country and my neighborhood and—of what I am."

So it's important to have women in leadership; it's important to have minorities in leadership. It's important because we want Congress to be representative of the United States of America. And if you just have one particular group chairing committees, a lot of little girls out there, looking at the TV, even if they're not thinking about running for office, but they say, "Gosh, that's just so homogeneous, we need a little more variety." I think it's important to get variety. With variety, you get different points of views and different ways of tackling a subject.

WASNIEWSKI: When you first came to Congress, the Republicans were in the minority, but in 1995, Republicans go into the majority. Can you tell us a little bit about that time period and that change, and what it was like for you as a Member?

ROS-LEHTINEN: What an amazing time. Little did we think, honestly, that the Republicans would take over. I guess people will want to revisit history and say, "Oh yeah, we knew we were going to take over." No, not really. And I think no one was

more surprised than Newt [Newton Leroy] Gingrich. He just, "Wow, we're really in charge!" He credits the "Contract with America," which he was very proud of. By the way, I was one of the, I think one of only three Republicans who did not sign the "Contract with America" because I thought it was unfriendly to immigrants and to poor folks. But whatever, that's for another day.

The "Contract with America" and Newt Gingrich took over. Newt was a very interesting Speaker to work with. Why? Because he had a different idea every day, every minute. We would have GOP caucuses in the morning, and he would say, "Okay, these are the five goals for the day, and these are the five words that I'm going to make sure that you use in your speeches on the floor"—maybe it was empowerment, maybe it was diversity, whatever they were. And then we would have an afternoon caucus meeting, which was unheard of, and he would say, "No, these are the three ideas, and these are the two words," and they were different ideas and different words. But you know, he had so many good ideas, not everything was stellar, but he had so many ideas that a few of them were bound to be great. He was just an interesting character, to work with him, because he was a deep thinker; he was interested in everything.

I enjoyed working with Newt Gingrich. He was a very interesting Speaker who tried to help women get a bigger role. I think it's often overlooked that Newt was really trying. He was the first to say, "When we do this press conference, and we take this photograph, how about having the women, who are usually shorter, get up in the front so that we can see them?" He didn't take it for granted. He was a visionary. Newt was a deep thinker, and I enjoyed working with him.

We couldn't believe it; I could not believe it. We were in our campaign office, watching the returns, and we're saying, "Oh my goodness, this district flipped, and this one flipped, and this one flipped." Now everyone is very conscious of it. Now there's 35 seats in play, or whatever the number is. It could switch at any time. So if it switches, it won't be a surprise, and if it stays GOP controlled, that won't be a surprise. People are more attuned to it. But then, nobody thought we would really win. That's like saying, "Oh, I knew all the time that Donald Trump was going to win the presidency." Please, no one really thought, including Donald Trump, that he would win, and it was just as—it was a wow moment when we took over. But Newt was always good at trying to get women out there.

JOHNSON: You've had the opportunity to work with six Speakers during your career. Is there one in particular that stands out to you as the most effective, and why would that be?

ROS-LEHTINEN: I think that Paul Ryan is doing as good a job as anybody could do with a very difficult caucus. We have caucus members who are anti-government, you could almost say. They're anti-everything, and he's got to work with those folks. In his heart of hearts, I think that he wants to be in the John [Andrew] Boehner style of making arrangements with the Democrats and passing a bipartisan bill, but he can't. We're now in the groove of the majority of the majority, and that's a commitment that he made to the caucus. He won't bring anything to the floor unless there's a majority of the majority. I don't know that that's so helpful because there are some folks in our caucus that just won't vote for anything. They're just part of the "no caucus." And it makes it difficult. So I respect Paul Ryan. Out of all the Speakers, I respect Paul Ryan the most because I think it's been the most difficult for him than for any Speaker.

Now, Bob [Robert Henry] Michel, he was our Minority Leader, and he was just perfect for the times because he was a get along and go along gentleman, old school. He would work with [Thomas Stephen] Foley and Jim [James Claude] Wright [Jr.], and it was a different time, it was more like *Leave it to Beaver*, kind of *Mayberry R.F.D.* Bob Michel was perfect for that time. And then you get a firebrand like Newt Gingrich, where he wanted to set the world on fire. It's been great to see—I think Speaker Foley was not as dramatic, was not as earthshaking a Speaker. Speaker [John Dennis] Hastert—the less said about him the better—went down in disgrace now, and oh my goodness, I have no words to describe that. But I think the person I respect the most as Speaker is Speaker Ryan. The one I enjoyed working with the most was Newt Gingrich because it was just like an idea explosion. He's a big thinker.

But I've enjoyed Democrat and Republican Speakers. Everyone has brought something to the table. Nancy Pelosi, I thought she was a great Speaker, and maybe a lot of things that I didn't agree with, but there were many things with which I did agree with. So everyone brings something new. I know she's eager to take that gavel away from Ryan. He's retiring, but I don't know if she'll be able to. Maybe she will, but I think she won't.

WASNIEWSKI: In addition to promoting women's rights, you also have been a big supporter, in Congress, of LGBTQ rights. Can you talk a little bit about how you've used your position to draw attention to this cause?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Well, I think it's important for our party, to wake up and realize how much our country has changed. If I look back upon my career, 40 years in public service, 40 years ago, where folks who were gay were marginalized, discriminated against—maybe they still are—there's discrimination, of course there is, but it's not the social stigma that it once was. People can live with,

let me see, HIV/AIDS. People have a greater understanding of that. So much has changed from the dark ages of 40 years ago.

But still, for that family, when you have a child that comes out as lesbian or gay, you'd think it was 40 years ago because for that family, that is devastating news, for most families, for a lot of families, maybe not all. So as far as we've come as a society, in the family unit, it's still earthshaking, and kids are afraid to come out to their parents. Kids get kicked out, the suicide rate is higher, substance abuse; they drop out of high school.

It's a terrible situation for families, and our Republican Party has to get with it. We have to see how society has changed, and we have to learn how to be more inclusive. We are back in *Leave it to Beaver* and *The Donna Reed Show* when it comes to gay rights. We think of it as anti-family.

Well, I've had the joy of representing Key West for 10 years. I've represented the Keys, and it's a very inclusive community with a vibrant gay community. I now have the pleasure of representing Miami Beach, which is also very gay friendly. In fact, all of South Florida is very gay friendly—Hispanic parts, I mean Little Havana, gay friendly. We have changed so much, but it's because people are out. People are very free about saying their sexual orientation or their gender identity, and that has helped move the needle. People now say I don't care if somebody is gay or not gay, it's whether they're doing the work or not doing the work. That is not to say that there's no discrimination, of course there is, and you know shame on all of us for discriminating, but it's a reality of life. But have we come a long way, baby? Absolutely.

Now in my family, I have a transgender son who was born Amanda. He's now Rigo, Rodrigo, and it was hard for us as a family. It wasn't easy. It wasn't just like, "Oh, okay, yes that's fine." It's jarring, but now we see Rigo

for what he always has been. He's caring, he's thoughtful, he's a great family member. The whole family supports him—my father, before he passed away, Rigo explained his transition to my father. My father was 83 years old, and my father was cool with it. So now, Rigo is just Rigo. But I understand when someone first sees my son, they've always wondered, what's going on there, this is very weird. And that's how it used to be back in the old days, when somebody said, "I'm gay or I'm lesbian." They think, "What's going on? What's happening? I don't even understand this, what is going on?"

As a party, when they talk about politics and new Americans, we have to learn to be more inclusive, and we are not gay friendly as a party at all. We have the Log Cabin Republicans, thank goodness for them, but we're still in the dark ages. We're trying to pass a lot of good bills, and people are very worried. Now there are transgenders in the military. "Oh my gosh, we're going to destroy our military," you know all these kinds of prejudicial statements that you could make about any changes in our society. We just have to cool it. We have to be a little more mellow, and everything is going to work out.

JOHNSON: You served in the House for nearly three decades. What do you think is the most significant change that you've witnessed during that time period?

ROS-LEHTINEN: Now that's a heavy question, come on, wait a minute.

JOHNSON: I know, one or two things.

ROS-LEHTINEN: Wow, that has—tell me that again.

JOHNSON: That have evolved over time, that have changed in your three decades within the institution.

ROS-LEHTINEN: I have seen dramatic changes in the composition of the House, especially in the past 10 years. When I look—if you were to take a classroom photo of Congress when I first got here, and compare the faces, the colors, it's unbelievable. We are more representative of the United States of America now than we ever have been, and I think that's a fabulous change. I'm very happy to see it. That's the most transformational change that I've seen. We're more inclusive, and we represent the United States of America more and more.

WASNIEWSKI: One aspect of that in the House is that there's now 89 women, which is a record number.

ROS-LEHTINEN: And how many were there, did you say, 27?

JOHNSON: Twenty-seven, when you came in.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes.

ROS-LEHTINEN: So 27, and there are now?

WASNIEWSKI: Eighty-nine. So one question we've asked everybody is when we get to the 150th anniversary of Jeannette Rankin, in 2067, how many women will there be in Congress, and how will we get there?

ROS-LEHTINEN: We are going to get there because we're making progress in just superman leaps and bounds. It's just incredible: changes happening so fast. For a while there [was] hardly any change. Now, phenomenal changes and even greater strides. So in 20 years, in 50 years, you won't even recognize this place. We will look like Fred Flinstone and Barney and whatever, Pebbles, compared to what Congress will look like. We will be representative of the United States. We will have parity. We will have 50 percent; I just believe it to be true.

JOHNSON: Based on your long and very successful political career, if a woman was to come to you and ask for your advice, someone that wanted to run for Congress, what would you say to her?

ROS-LEHTINEN: If someone were to come and ask me for advice, and they do, I would say run. You're never going to find the perfect time. It's like getting married, you know you wait until you have enough money. When is that going to be? Until you have the best job. When is that going to be? Until you find the right apartment. When is that happening? If you love each other, you're going to get married. It's going to work out. You want to run; you should run. Don't wait for that perfect opportunity; it's never going to come. If I had waited, I mean my kids were two and three years old. Talk about an inopportune time to run for Congress, but I'm glad I did. And if you ask my kids, if they were here, I think they would tell you the same. I wouldn't have to force them to tell you that. I think they think that they've had a pretty good time of their mom being a Member of Congress. And I've paid attention to them, and they haven't felt slighted. There's never going to be a perfect time for anything, so just do it.

JOHNSON: I have to ask just one more question.

ROS-LEHTINEN: Go ahead.

JOHNSON: With your children being so young, and this was in the late '80s, when you ran, was that an issue, was that a negative at all, that people thought you should be staying at home?

ROS-LEHTINEN: When I ran, first for Congress in 1989, I was fairly young, I guess by my standards I was young, and I had two young children, two and three years old. It was not positive. Nobody was saying, "Oh how great, you're going to DC, when you have a two-year-old and a three-year old, good for you." No,

it was not that. And we debated, do we put the kids in the—and I said, "They're our kids, we're going to put the family photo—but ."there was a lot of discussion that this was not going to go over well, that people still believed that a woman's place was in the home. And the home was not the House of Representatives. The home was *tu casa*, where you were living.

So it was an issue. I think it's still an issue. People are still thinking, "Gosh, stay home and take care of your kids. And."And I think I did take care of my kids, and they came up with me, and we did the best we could. Every working mom goes through all of this. I was blessed to have wonderful parents and a supportive spouse, so I'm not a typical working mom. It's so hard for women everywhere, no matter what you do. It's a wonder to me that we survive because the odds are stacked against us, but we will survive.

JOHNSON: That's a good way to end.

WASNIEWSKI: Thank you so much.

JOHNSON: Yes, thank you.

ROS-LEHTINEN: Thank you. You guys asked great questions. I had to ponder them.

WASNIEWSKI: We really appreciate it.

NOTES

[1] Representatives Debbie Wasserman Schultz and Jo Ann Emerson organized the first Congressional Softball Game in 2009. The annual softball game, which features a bipartisan group of women Members against the female press corps, raises money for breast cancer research.