

Maureen and Mike

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Interviewee: Peggy DiMichele
Interviewer: Jim Caron
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Jim Caron: How did you first begin to work for Mike [Mansfield]?

Peggy DiMichele: Well, actually, it was a luck of the Irish to start with it. I came to this area because my mother died, and I only had an aunt back here [Maryland] who—I had an aunt here and one in Montana. The one here agreed to take me and my brother, and then my aunt in Montana had three. She couldn't, they couldn't afford to all five of us, so then I took a—I was taking a course for card punching and census and I had to put down residence, you know legal residence, and I went up to [Congressman James F.] O'Connor, he was from Livingston, and asked him about whether I could claim Montana because I was under a guardianship of another state from Montana, but my aunt and uncle I had lived with, I wanted to keep that as my residence.

So, they made an appointment with Harry Mitchell, who was chairman of the Civil Service Commission, and I went down got it straightened out. So when I came back I stopped and told him. And O'Connor then, after hearing me, says, "I hear you type and take shorthand?" Yes, so he has a secretary dictate a couple letters and then he said, "If she can type them, see if she can get him done this afternoon," and he said, "We'll hire you for a few days." Well then, it turned out I was with him for five years. If he died in January of '45, which was the beginning of Mike's first term, and Marge Mum [Nicholson] of Missoula—I don't know whether you would, you're too young to remember her, she was at the University, was Mike's first secretary. She came with Jimmy Sullivan of Butte, and Montana never had a congressman die, so they had to go through the legislature and they couldn't agree because they were afraid anything they passed would be partial to one party or the other. So the Supreme Court ruled finally after, I guess 90 days, that they'd form a—each party nominate, you know go into caucus and nominate a candidate who would run. In 30 days they'd have a special election; so that took almost six months.

So, we were into June and I was out in Montana helping the Democrat [Leo Graybill] to win, and he didn't win. So Mike had come out to campaign for the Leo Graybill. Then he calls me up in Great Falls one morning and he said, "What are you going to do?" and I said, "Well, as of today I'm off the payroll. I have to look for a job." [Laughter] So he said, "Well, Marge is getting married in a couple of weeks and can you come in and help us while she is off?" And I said sure. He said then you have a chance to look around and I said that would be great. He said, "Do you think Mr. [Wesley] D'Ewart would hire you?" And I said, "I don't think so after me campaigning out here."

So two days before, I guess it's two or three days before she [Mum] got married he [Mansfield] told me that she wasn't coming back. She was going to live out west, and then he gave me the job and that was in '45. So I stayed with him until he retired in '77. And when we went to the Senate, Jimmy Sullivan, he got ill, had an eye operation and got ill and then died in the early '50s, and when he died I was then promoted to the top job. I was top secretary when we went to the Senate, but there was only three of us in the House on the staff in those days and we went over to the Senate.

JC: What a career.

PD: Yes and I always tell everybody I got two jobs I never applied for. Never got what I applied for. [Laughter]

JC: One quick story that we've heard about: there's the Mike Mansfield Room in the Senate building?

PD: Right.

JC: We heard a little story about how he was, Mike was, the dissenting vote when they went to vote that to name it the Mike Mansfield Room. Do you remember that story?

PD: I don't remember whether there was a vote on it or not. I thought that was after he went out.

JC: Could be. We're trying to get some information on how that room was named and no one seems to know.

PD: I tell you, call the historical man in the Senate. They should have a record of that. There's a, and I can't think of his name—Max's [Baucus] office can help you on that—and ask them to check back because I'm if I remember rightly, that extension wasn't finished, I don't think, when our—had just been finished by the time we retired and—

JC: It's a pretty room. We went in and took a couple pictures.

PD: How do you like that painting?

JC: It's spectacular.

PD: Doesn't that look natural?

JC: Yes, it's just a wonderful portrait.

PD: I think that was one of the best things that I have ever seen of Mike. But they, see they named the majority leader suite, after Kennedy was assassinated, that was named Kennedy. Then there was a another room named for Johnson and they started giving names to all those rooms. But the historical man could give you the history of that. I don't have a book on the Capitol or I would look it up.

JC: I have a bunch of subjects I could ask you about, but I'm wondering if you just have any favorite stories you think might be interesting?

PD: Well, I was jotting down some things that I thought if you wanted the humorous.

JC: That would be exactly what we are looking for.

PD: One time, I don't remember the date, Mrs. Mansfield was sick and he went home from work and he was frying himself some, I don't know whether it was hamburgers or eggs and bacon or what, and the pan slipped and burnt his right hand. So they called the doctor and the doctor said take him out to the Naval Hospital. Well, I'm at the office and I get this call from a news person and [he] says, "Can you tell me what has happened at the Mansfield house? Is the senator or Mrs. Mansfield ill?" And I said, "Well I'm at the office. I don't know what—wait what are you referring to?" "Well, we understand an ambulance just pulled away from their home." And I said, "Well, I don't know a thing about it." I said, "Give me your number and I'll see what I can find out." So, I thought, well now if somebody's sick they both may be gone, but I'll take a chance, I'll call the house, and Maureen answered the phone. I said, "Maureen what happened to you or Mike?" She said, "He burned his hand." And I said—well she said, "How'd you know about it?" I said, "The news media called me." They had gotten a call from a neighbor who saw the ambulance, and they didn't want to call the Mansfield house so they called the news media to find out what had happened. So she told me he burned the hand. Well they bring in this stretcher, and of course he takes a look at it and he says, "Put that thing back." And he sat up in the ambulance while they took him out to the hospital. Well they fixed his hand in a great big bandage and the next morning he comes to work and every news photographer I think in the world must have taken a picture because he got more publicity out of that burnt hand than anything he'd ever done in the senate. [laughter]

We laughed about it. We said, "Go burn the other one, get your name (unintelligible)." [laughter] It was really funny how much publicity we got on that just because he burned his hand. And see, she was in bed and that's why he was doing the cooking. Of course he's a pretty good cook I think too.

JC: How did he feel about publicity and did he shy away from that? You know we have heard all these stories about how he's so modest and—

PD: Well, I think he gets embarrassed when people start flattering him, you know, but I think when he reads about it he appreciates the nice things that are said. He's only human, you

know. But in interviews he was always noted for being a very quick and short on answers. If you—have you been up to the library and looked at the scrapbooks or anything like that?

JC: In Missoula?

PD: Yes.

JC: Yes.

PD: In there, in—I think Face the Nation, I can't remember—one of those programs he had the record of answering the most questions on the program. In fact, the reporters afterwards said they were running out of questions he went so fast with them. But we have all those tapes out there at the University on those programs.

JC: We picked up some of those. Do you know much about his boyhood? That seems to be hard to find out, and there's the thesis that [UM School of Journalism dean] Charlie Hood wrote that's pretty good about that.

PD: Yes.

JC: Any stories that he ever revealed you with about his boyhood?

PD: Well, see, he was born in New York and his mother died. Now they've reported—I'd have to go back, I don't remember, I think he was about 5 or 6 because he had two younger sisters when she died. And they had an aunt and uncle, an uncle and aunt, in Great Falls, who had that grocery store on 6th Avenue. And the father, being a widow—and he was a hotel porter or something I think. He couldn't take care of the three small kids, so he sent them to Montana to this uncle Dick and aunt Margret. And of course she was a very strict disciplinarian from what I gather. And when he got to the 8th grade he ran away because he went back to New York to get his father to sign the paper for him to join the service because he wasn't old enough. But the only thing I can remember about that is, we had a letter one time from a priest who was answering his letter on something, and put in there, "Do you remember" —his name was Regan and he was up at Fort Benton then, and said, "remember the days that, when we used to play baseball down in the South Side, and you would walk across the lot with your violin in the pillowcase?" So I said to Mike, I said, "You know everybody's claimed to be your student or went to school with you or Maureen taught him." I said, "It's the first time I've ever heard of a priest accusing you of carrying a violin in a pillowcase. Very dry, he said "I didn't have a case. I had to carry it in the pillowcase." And I guess he had to take violin lessons [laughter] but I'm just trying to think who's left in that bunch from Great Falls.

JC: He has a stepbrother doesn't he? John.

PD: Yes, but I'm thinking about the old-timers down there. John might be able to help you on there. Well Father Regan is dead, and the Hodges, I think they're both dead. I can't remember some of the others that were down there all in the same, you know they all grew up together, more or less.

JC: What kind of boss was he? Did he, I mean was he distant for his employees or was he warm?

PD: Well, he wasn't, I guess in a way you might say he was he wasn't one to chitchat around like so. You know what I mean? A lot of them would sit around and just talk by hours. He was never quite [like that] because every moment meant something to him. He was very organized in that he'd come to work very early, and he'd get the early morning mail and read the papers and then go down to breakfast at 8 o'clock, and he started that eight o'clock breakfast over in the Senate, and then he'd come back and dictate. By that time it was time to go to committee meetings or go over to the majority leader office, whichever you know was the case. And then when he'd come back we'd have the mail back there for him, and he'd go through that. He used to sign all the mail before he'd go home. Well then after he became leader, and he was so darn busy and we were getting a great (unintelligible) and it was putting a lot of pressure on me to get it all in there in time. I started on my own just not having it all ready so he'd go home. It wasn't exactly—not that I'd—but you know, he was tired. And then we got where that was on his desk early in the morning and he'd sign the mail early in the morning. I thought that worked out much better because then he was rested. And he signed all his own mail whenever he was in town. If he wasn't in town we signed. If we used his name we put our initials under it or we wrote it under our name. We never sent out a letter that was—tried to say it was Mansfield and it wasn't. And we tried to keep the important things, copies of those for him to see when he returned.

JC: There's a lot written about his relationship with John Kennedy. Do you have any particular remembrances of that?

PD: Well, see, he was in the house with Kennedy, and Kennedy, [Henry "Scoop" Jackson, [Stuart] Symington and Mike were the four Democrats who survived the Republican landslide of '52, and came to the Senate. I think those four, because they had had close races, and they were hard races that year, that was when Eisenhower ran, that they did have a closeness much more so. And then of course when he was elected president, Mike was then made majority leader while he worked, you know, very closely with him. But he always tried to explain to everybody that there was a difference between the executive and the legislative and the like when he may have had a different view and they say something. After all, he was the Congress and the president was downtown and that they had to carry out their own respective jobs, and he was very firm on that, to make a distinction between.

JC: Any recollections of the awful assassination term?

PD: Yeah, I know I was supposed to come over for—I'd been on the Capitol and I had to come back to meet some Navy guys. There was a program we were going to try to get for Bozeman, and when I got on the elevator all the bells start ringing. And I asked the operator, I said (unintelligible). He said, "I don't know." Well then I got a call from the capitol office telling me to put on the radio, that the president had been shot, so we broke up our meeting, and Mike then was busy from that time on. He ended up finally going down meeting Johnson when he got in, and of course he was very, very upset about Kennedy. And because he'd been in Montana, what, just the week before? And Mike called from Billings and I said, "How did everything go?" And the first thing he said was, "Thank God, he got out of the state without being harmed," was the thing he had said. I mean there were all kinds of rumors at that time and nobody wanted President Kennedy to go [to Texas] but I guess that was his fate.

JC: Off course, the eulogy was very famous. There's also quite a bit written about the Vietnam era and how Mike himself considered that as something that he hadn't been as successful in as in other areas of his...

PD: No, and of course if you were to go back to his reports in '53, '54, and '55—I think were the years—those were the trips he made in which he came back and recommended that we stay out of Vietnam. And he was talking about, you know, that it was a thing for governments over there, and he was always opposed to our being there, and that started way back long before, you know, we even had any military men there. And his reports will bear that out. Of course he was very concerned about the mail. We used to get volumes, a lot out of state, and there for a while he kept a sheet in his pocket every day of the [number of] casualties. He kept—every day he checked out how many casualties we had.

JC: Did he have a sense of regret, do you think, that he hadn't—

PD: Well, I think if you're realistic, these things aren't the responsibility of one person. They're a combination of a lot of things, you know. I don't know what more he could have done because he certainly gave his reports, but like everything else, those things don't get read by everybody, and he wrote them in a scholarly way in that they weren't sensational like some people, you know. But he made a lot of speeches on it and he was interviewed a great deal about it, and of course he was very sad about the whole thing.

JC: How about the vice presidency? They say he was offered it two or three times, or at least they toyed with the idea, and even some talked about the presidential nomination. Did he—was he averse to that as everything I read?

PD: Oh, yes. Whether or not it was an actual offer at any time—I think maybe it was when Johnson—no, I don't know whether it was Johnson or not. That would have been something I wouldn't have been involved with. But I know he was never interested in it anything like that.

JC: Was it because he felt that the Senate job was so important that—

PD: Yes, and he enjoyed, you know, representing Montana. I think that was the bright spots when he could go back out there and go around the state, you know. He used to come back looking rejuvenated, you know. It was just like a vacation in a lot of ways. Just to get out there and go to all those little town and see the people and everything.

JC: Did Montana remain a priority through all this national level stuff that he was involved with?

PD: That was the one thing when he became leader, he was very emphatic that Montana came ahead of everything else because one, we had seen from past experience leaders like, I can't think of his name, he is from Arizona.

JC: (Unintelligible)?

PD: No, was it McFarland? He was before our time. He had been leader and kind of neglected his state and he went down in defeat, and so did one from Kentucky that was assistant to Johnson. And Johnson at that time was busy running, so Clements, you know, really had the burden because he had forgotten [his constituents, so] he was defeated. Oh, Lucas is the one from Illinois who was leader and he got defeated. So we had seen what had happened to all these others because, you know, I think a lot of that too can be put on staff. Staffs, a lot of times up there, used to get, oh, impressed with the leadership, so to speak, and they'd kind of forgotten [who they served]. And that was the one thing that in our office, I didn't care what happened over in the Capitol. I was—Montana was my main duties and concern, and I think because we worked that way, that's one reason why I think Mike survived the elections because we didn't neglect Montana. Even though he was busy he didn't, and he was kept informed of everything we did, you know, on his behalf.

JC: I guess the only thing I also would like ask is if there's any words that come to mind—when we think of him we always hear about integrity and we hear about as bipartisan as a party member can be, and all that stuff. What—

PD: Well I think that his understanding, his compassion of people with things that—and his memory were the things that impressed me most. I couldn't get over anybody who could remember so many things and so many people. He didn't have to—we didn't have to make up a list for him when he went into a town. He knew the people and when anything occurred that affected their personal lives he was very saddened, you know, on things that would happen to... We'd get a call of some tragedy or something, and that used to be a high priority on his list to try to help, you know. Like we worked on an immigration case for a man that came from Poland. His wife and daughter couldn't come. This was after World War II, and I forget how many years we had to introduce legislation on that, but we worked years for that. And because he had gotten interested in fact that this man's family wasn't able to come. In fact, the daughter was a teenager by the time she came to the states. And, of course, when we had the fire in Helena he found out that the government didn't have hazard insurance.

[Background noise from a pet]

Okay, Joe, we know you're there. For the single boys, if they were married and had a dependent, they could get something, but if they were single, there was nothing, so he introduced the legislation that then provided some hazard for families even though they weren't dependent.

JC: What a career. Any other quick little anecdotes you might add before we wrap it up?

PD: Well let's see. You've seen the picture of him in the football [uniform] at the School of Mines and one time I said something about how I didn't think he'd be interested [in playing football]. Well, he said "I was 11th man on an 11-man team." [Laughter] Meaning that there wasn't anybody else. Of course, he used to like his hamburgers all the time. I have a picture of one upside down. They took it, I mean the hamburger was upside down when they took the picture. We didn't know it until they [the photos] came out. They had put it on the plate wrong when we got it, you know, and all he wanted was a sliced onion, and a hamburger and that was his sole lunch. Black coffee.

JC: Black coffee.

PD: And he used to like it strong too. I was just trying to think. Well like the old oh—you know, they always rented an apartment when he was in the House because he said he didn't have a permanent job, so therefore he.... So when he got into the Senate he finally conceded to Maureen that maybe they would buy a house. So he told her to go select something and one day she said the real estate person and her would like for him to see the house. He said ok. So they set up a time, 9 o'clock, so Maureen said, we'll meet you at the house at 9 o'clock. Well, he was so wrapped up in the House of Representatives [that] he was sitting on the steps of the House office was while she was at the house. And she calls and wants to know where he is, and she had forgotten, you know, House meant the House of Representatives to him.

JC: Are we about out of tape there?

PD: Oh my.

JC: [laughter] You did well. Half an hour.

PD: Half hour.

JC: Well, this has been great.

PD: Well let's see who all—you are going to get to see [William] Roth?

JC: We hope so. They are trying to line that up. We have [Joe] Biden at 11:15 today.

[End of Interview]