

May 11, 1994 Maya Miller on the Women's Lobby, in Washington, DC, 1976-78

Kit: I guess the obvious question is, why the Women's Lobby? When was that?

Maya: It seems to me it must have been early '76, because I was divorced in '75. And then I remember Carol Burris coming out here and visiting and she was the woman who had started the Women's Lobby, and she and Ann Zill both urged me to come back and lobby with them.

Had they just gotten that started?

Well, Ann Zill was not part of it. Ann was part of the Women's Campaign Fund, that we also had started with Sandra Kramer and others. It was purred by the understanding of how hard it was for a woman to get early money and be taken seriously by the money people like unions and individuals who raise money. Ann ran Stewart Mott's office, and Stewart was a friend of Ken Bode's and so Ken got Stewart to ask me to go on his board, which was a little organization called something about Constitution. So that brought me into that circle, an Stewart had also given money to my campaign, and had given a party in New York that had raised some money. And then he had also come out here for the last two days of the campaign, that's what people who gave money did. They came and got a taste of it, and helped for a couple of days in an effort to get out the vote. Willie Campbell from the League of Women Voters also came with her husband from Los Angeles to do some of that last phoning and all.

And so I was really ready to get out of here. You were in college and so was Eric. And I really hated the idea of just being a martyr to the place, where it was a shared responsibility before. What we had was Marla, who kept on running the programs (at Washoe Pines) for several years, and Jim Conkey, who was the Foresta chair of the board. But here in this house there was nothing except this terrible basement that I remember as a total nightmare of junk, a lot of which was GSA (Government Surplus Admin).

And when Carol came to visit you, was she proposing that you come?

I don't remember whether she was proposing that or not, I remember most of all our finding Cloud. Cloud ultimately became Marla's dog. Cloud was left behind after a group of Girl Scouts had been bicycling by. And we went up and down the road— Carol was an animal freak – trying to find the owners of Cloud.

There must have been some ideas planted at that time about coming East. It seemed like a good idea to me, and I was interested to translate some of that energy that I felt in the campaign, into lobbying for women and organizationally. The National Women's Political Caucus really was dedicated to getting women into office. Lobbying was not its primary concern. Carter was elected after – he was elected in 1976. We had been to the mini-convention in Kansas City, we were trying to make a firm place for women in the Democratic machinery through the mini-convention. And in the process I think that must

have been a big piece about why I got to thinking about Washington. Because in that process we set up an office, actually in the Women's Caucus, and Nanette Falkenburg and you personed the office and connected with people who were going to be delegates to the mini-convention all over the country so that we could formulate a wording that we could all agree on, and that we could come into the convention prepared to really fight for that wording, so that we wouldn't be torn over one or another words. That must have been late '74.

So that sort of stirred us to go to Washington. And then Ann and Carol focused on getting me back there. And I got a little efficiency apartment that had just one room, half a block from Dupont Circle. And Carol Randalls, for part of the time I was there, came and share the other bed. At that point, Carol Burriss' operation was a matter of meeting with the 4 or 5 women that she had convinced to be part of lobbying in the Congressional cafeteria, and they were just deciding what they were going to do. She didn't have an office, it was just meeting there and it was very fly-by-night.

Tell us about Carol Burriss? What was her background?

Well, she had come from Montana, immediately before I came she had tried to get the National Women's Political Caucus to hire her to lobby, because she really wanted to lobby. She had this whole fantasy about her family that was about her mother being a doctor, and Ann Zill told me that someone had gone back and looked into her past and realized that this grand family picture was a true figment of her imagination. Her mother was a nurse, and had never been this advanced doctor. I don't know quite how she'd known these people that in the beginning had given quite a bit of money to the Women's Lobby, like Claire and Francis Lear. Ann was saying this morning that Carol had this flaw in her character that was a real compulsion to lie. And then Pat Rus, who had known her until almost the very end of her life, said that she had recognized in Carol, who had been very kind to her and encouraged her to come, Carol was very perceptive about people who could do the job, recognize talent, and she recognized it in Pat. She helped Pat raise money back home to bring Pat to Washington, DC, and then Pat worked variously for these different outfits and now is the head women's lobbyist for NOW's Legal Defense Fund. Pat Rus said that she had early recognized in Carol this incredible capacity to be raconteur, to tell stories, and that they necessarily engaged a good amount of exaggeration, and so she discounted her stories by about half, and learned to lie with that. But they were good stories, and story-telling was clearly a big part of her stock and trade. And then when Kristina Kiehl came along, and there were other interns coming, I figured out that I would invest a year's rent, and so did that. I figured that was a good gamble. So we had the office for a year, and that did attract just a batch of really talented young women, Alexis Jetter, Pam MacEwan and you...

To get back to Carol's experience before this, she had been lobbying Congress on the Equal Rights Amendment. What happened with that?

Well, you know, it didn't go. That was the issue that everyone had been lobbying on in that period of time, in the '60s, and it lost as it did here in Nevada, and in many ways it

was an influential fight. The loss of that – I'm sure a lot of people tuned out after that. But people like Sue Wagner here and Harriet Trudell, and a lot of women who were deeply activated by that loss. Because so much of it seemed like betrayal on the part of people who had promised a vote and then backed out of it. But I think what that did was to sharpen the capacities of a number of women, the whole effort to get the ERA through, just as it had in the earlier days with Ann Martin (Nevada Senate campaign of the 1800s), and all the effort to get the vote.

I think as far as Carol was concerned, it really connected her with a lot of people in Congress that she seemed to have a real familiarity with.

That was the incredible part of her, she was, as all of these people say, a genius. I don't know what made her feel that she had the right to do that, but she did, and she had the technique of that you needed to do, down to a really fine point. One of the things that would go with this is some of those papers on welfare reform that we did. She did them up, there was a whole Women's Lobby issue on Welfare Reform. And then there would be background information that are relevant, like 2-3 sheets of that. But very cogent, and she make it so that you realized that you had to get these facts and figures in hand and not just dream away as you went lobbying. It was a very hard, self-disciplined effort, and made you realize that it was a serious affair. And then she laid out the sequence of people you ought to see. She taught me a lot about what committees are the important ones, and who on the committee is, not just any legislative assistant, but the one that was going to be dealing with your subject. And then laid out the numbers of offices that you ought to be covering.

That was another neat thing about Carol, that if you worked on it, you got the glory. She really elevate the college interns to the level of full-fledged lobbyist.

We got really incredible appointments. We got appointments with Jim Wright, when he was the Speaker, with Russel Long, Daniel Moynihan. I think it couldn't have been too much of a laughing stock, I think it must have been seen as a resource of information, because its information was really solid. She may have embellished her stories, but I think the facts and figures that we were pedaling were really sound. And then she had those two women who were displaced homemakers, she really helped to elevate that subject to a reality. The thing also that she was such a genius at was in perceiving the women's inequity in systems which everyone took for granted, like the Social Security System and unemployment. She saw the inequities for women, and then devised ways of trying to level that out. I remember one woman was working almost full-time, on part-time work, part-time and flex-time, which at that time were real women's issues. Now that the contingency worked force, as they call it, is mainly made up of part-time workers, part-time has become a negative, because now it is understood that it doesn't carry benefits with it and has not security. But they were also fighting for having pro-rated benefits and health care. But also health care was a big issue Carol. I was there for three years, and then when I realized that the Women's Lobby was coming apart. Also, I had realized even before you left, the fight for welfare reform was done, that it was not going to happen, that nothing good was going to come of it.

One of the things that we did during those years was to work with confreres, the people that represented the elderly and represented the disabled, that had an interest in welfare reform, and what happened during the course of those discussions, was that it was clear that, increasingly clear, that the people that were advocating for the elderly were willing to take money from the general pot away from the welfare. For AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), for women. They would never really acknowledge that, but then it became clear that, when it came down to hard bargaining, they were in there bargaining for their constituency, and yours was out there in the cold. Since old people vote, theirs was a clearly more active and ominous constituency than ours. But in the process, they brought in a lot of welfare women to lobby – some of them good and some weren't But Ruby came for a period of time, and I don't know how long it was, a couple of months. She always said it allowed her to go snoop in all those offices like the labor department, places that welfare wasn't expected to be.

People who were interested in welfare weren't supposed to think about work. And one of the really interesting things about the whole affair was the advocates for AFDC were really downplaying work, they were saying we shouldn't have to work. And in the beginning, welfare had started on the theory that it would enable women to stay at home with their children, and not go to work. As Russell Long in one of his hearing said, we realized that there were more and more two-worker families and wondered why, until we realized that in order to be middle class, you have to have two workers in the family. At that hearing I can remember, when I saw Russell Long leaving, I said, "Come on, let's go and meet him in the hall."

And so the two of us left, and I went up to him and introduced him to Ruby, and she had a big Afro wig, and he said, "I thought I must be saying something right, when I saw your head bobbing in the audience." And I just remembered three years ago when all those welfare rights mothers shook their fists at us and said, "We aren't going to be working for you any longer, Senator Long. We're not going to iron your shirts!" and Ruby said, "Of course we want to work. We've worked all our lives. We just need jobs that will pay." And that still remains a kind of a difference.

There was also this southern California young white woman that had been brought back by the welfare advocates, and she said at one point, because there was such a model from upper-middle class America of women staying at home taking care of their kids after a certain point in their husbands' career. Galbraith said, when a lawyer began to make over \$15,000 a year, then his wife could quit working and just spend her time figuring out how to buy, to consume. But this young woman said, "I feel I have the right to walk on the beach with my kid any time I want and to take my Italian lessons." I thought you really don't have the right to tell that to the man who goes down in the mines every day.

And there is still that sort of anomaly about the whole question of welfare, of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and Pat Russ, who now is working actively on welfare reform, and it's just really ominous, because it's so much worse than it was 20 years ago. They are actively promoting cutting cash benefits first of all for all women under 21 who have children, and when they ask what you are going to do with the

children, the New York Times just reported that the answer from one of the Congressmen without even blanching about it is: orphanages. And they're talking about shifting the money from cash grants to orphanages. Pat Russ was saying I remember a number of years ago there was this move to get all old women into nursing homes, and then there's this big nursing home industry that makes money hand over fist, and Pat said, "I think those same people now are waiting to run those orphanages, run by government money."

But the rhetoric, it bothers me that the rhetoric is so much worse than it was 20 years ago. Part of it is this awareness that there is this significant body of out-of-wedlock children, like 30% born are to single mothers. And Charles Murray was the intellect who advanced this whole theory of just cutting it off cold-turkey, claims that half of those would not have their children if they were not assured that they would get the cash. It seems to me that the mores of the country have changed so radically in relation to marriage and sex, that it would be hard to imagine people getting married for that. Or whether he thinks they would not have sex. One of the things that Pat Russ says now is so troubling is that her own people, the middle class women that are out there demonstrating for the pro-choice, won't be there on the subject of welfare, nor will they be there to overthrow the Hyde Amendment, to ensure that poor women can have abortions.

So in retrospect, the years at Women's Lobby seem very orderly in the issue, because I think then that so few people realized it was a women's issue, that when you talk about welfare, you're not talking about what Harry Reid, when we were discussing welfare with him, he then got this sort of glazed-over expression and said, "Well, let me tell you a story." And then he goes on to this long-winded story about his brother who had decided just to kick back for a few months and go on unemployment. Well unemployment is not welfare, and has nothing to do with...

I wonder if you're right that they do understand maybe better that it's women, but they don't understand that it's mainly children. Do you think that there was more activism around poverty issues?

Yes, I do. I think that it was that activism around poverty that came out of the Civil Rights Movement, and the Great Society, that made it possible to have some sense of "up" about lobbying on welfare reform for them. I can't think what it would be like right now. But then there was this real assumption that we couldn't put up with poverty, that poverty in a rich country like this was an anathema. I don't think we have that sense now. We're perfectly willing to let people get richer and richer, and it doesn't seem weird to us. I think also with women who have children and are poor that they really haven't been schooled to think that they have a future. Pat said this morning that her partner, who is the lawyer for NOW, was on a debate the other day with a middle-class black who ultimately looked at her and said, "What these women need is shame." And she said to him, "No what these women need is goals."

And the sense that there are goals, that it's that it's possible to move out, seems so way down the line that we don't realize that it's the economy itself that's in this lousy state. The economy does not really allow for jobs for women. And they tried to reverse that as

soon as the war was over. So that really thinking through the economy, can be thought of in relation to the thing that Ann Zill was saying this morning, that when you consider the incredibly desperate amount that we spend on armaments to kill, as compared to support for taking care of children. Congress is so used to spending that money, that they don't even look at it as a value. If you try to figure out what the value of a gun was that you sell to somebody in Rwanda.

One or the things I was thinking about is what you did aside from lobbying in Washington, what it was like to live there.

It was really very exhilarating and fun. People like Ann and Carol would have these wonderful dinner parties and great stories about one or another Congressman. And there were also all the things to do like waling in the mall and going to the museums. And Marty was there then, and we saw something of her, when she wasn't studying. There was a lot of women's music. That was part of the exhilaration. One of the things I'm reminded of with Carol is what interesting people she brought into our camp. Jane O'Riley, who was a really entertaining writer, and Francis Lear, and these women who were thinking ahead and very tuned into what the women's movement was all about. They were fascinated by her, and her insight into the laws and how they reflected the bias of institutionalized sexism.

How did you get connected with the Tabard Inn?

When we first were there, Fritzie (Cohen), Tom and Ed (Cohen) were friends of Ann Zill, and I had known them someplace. Fritzie was on the same Steward Mott board I was, he took us all to Bermuda for a weekend, and we had our board meetings there. Fritzie was doing a lot of the same things that Ernie Fitzgerald was, whistle-blowing on the military. She said once that, as shy as she was in other places, when she got on the phone to the Pentagon, she just went for the jugular, and it was really easy for her to do that. (*Kit's note: she started the Military Audit Project*).

Ed and Fritzie were busy putting together this buy-in in this hotel unit, so I invested. And after the first year of living in this little apartment, Ed gave me the opportunity of refurbishing the attic that they had, in exchange for 2 years rent. It was really a wonderful apartment, fun to live there because all kinds of interesting people came and went, and they lounged and they had a fire and you could meet people downstairs. We would go to a movie once a week, and go to some interesting restaurant and taste the food and the ambience and the cutlery and the chairs and tables as they looked for a place to have their restaurant. Also, the location near Dupont Circle was a wonderful location because you felt you could walk at night and there was music sometimes and movies. It was a great location for somebody who lived in the country like this and had to drive a car to go anywhere. Just to be able to walk out, also to take public transportation. I used to love to take the bus to the Hill, because our office was on the Hill. You could take the Metro, but it was more fun to take the bus cause you saw more people. I really loved that concentrated, being in the middle of town.

And during that time I would come back every few months, and pay bill and see that the place wasn't burnt down. I just remember its being really forlorn. Ann was asking thi morning about how I had decided to leave. And it was a confluence of having decided that welfare reform was not going anyplace and I remember being in the ways and Means Committee and watching a vote on something that was just sort of a test, and seeing how it went and realizing that it was not going to fly. They had done 3 years of reporting and studying and really high-level analysis, and they weren't going to be able to do it. And then, a little bit after this that Carol was drinking herself into a paranoid state, and not being on top of the finances of her organization, and I decided that I need to bail out and come home. And I went down one morning at 6 o'clock and cleared my desk out, got my files, dropped them home.

And that was the summer of '78. When you came back did you still keep some commitments back in Washington, or did you kind of come back to Nevada cold-turkey?

I think it was more of the latter. I went down there from time to time, visiting Nora, and at one point, Fritzie had a big party for me that Par Russ was remembering. So I must have left just before you got back from Guatemala.

Was that a rough adjustment, coming back to Nevada?

I don't remember that at all.