

**Rochelle Dornatt**

Chief of Staff, Representative Sam Farr of California

**Oral History Interview  
Final Edited Transcript**

January 18, 2017

Office of the Historian  
U.S. House of Representatives  
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“ . . . [I]n 1988, leadership was putting together the staff to go to the [Democratic National] Convention in Atlanta that year. All the guys were getting their travel arrangements made, and getting ready to go, and they were doing pre-convention meetings, and I’m like, ‘Well, what am I, chopped liver?’ I went to Tony [Coelho] and I said, ‘I think I ought to go to the convention.’ And he just—same thing—looks at me and goes, ‘Well, yes, of course.’ But somebody had to tell them. The guys didn’t think about it. I was the afterthought, and I think it’s because I was the girl. But they were all friendly. We were all friends. It was an attitude that needed to be changed. I was constantly poking them to change it.”

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## **Abstract**

For more than 35 years, Rochelle Dornatt was enmeshed in nearly every aspect of lawmaking as a legislative assistant, researcher, floor assistant, and chief of staff on Capitol Hill. Dornatt's vast experience on the Hill provides a unique vantage point to explore the inner workings of Congress. In this oral history, she reflects on her long career in the U.S. House of Representatives and the changing role of women in American politics during her time in Washington, DC.

Dornatt spent most of her career working in Member offices, including 24 years as chief of staff for California Congressman Sam Farr from 1993 to 2017. In this interview, she describes her diverse responsibilities as a congressional staff member, including constituent service, legislative work, campaign organizing, and office management. As research director for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) during the 1986 midterm elections, Dornatt provides a first-hand account of the rise of opposition research in congressional politics. She also discusses her experiences corralling votes as floor assistant to House Majority Whip Tony Coelho of California in the late 1980s. Throughout, Dornatt emphasizes the ways women on Capitol Hill faced formidable obstacles in their pursuit of new opportunities and equal treatment in the workplace.

## Biography

In 1979, Rochelle Dornatt left Detroit, Michigan, for Washington, DC. For more than 35 years, she worked as a legislative assistant, researcher, floor assistant, and chief of staff for Member offices and party leadership, primarily in the U.S. House of Representatives. Throughout her career, she used her impressive skills to traverse organizational and institutional boundaries, forging a record of leadership, innovation, and legislative achievement.

Born in 1955, Rochelle S. Dornatt was the daughter of Dolores Dornatt, a homemaker, and Zenon Dornatt, an autoworker. In the 1970s, she was inspired by the possibility of affecting change through legislative work while studying political science at Marygrove College in Detroit. After her first government job as a legislative liaison for the Department of Commerce in the [President James Earl “Jimmy”] Carter [Jr.] administration, Dornatt moved across town to Capitol Hill to work as a legislative assistant for Representative Jim Santini of Nevada in 1981. Two years later, Representative Kent Hance of Texas hired her as legislative director.

During the 1984 election, she spearheaded the opposition research efforts of the Hance campaign. She was then hired as research director for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), where she worked closely with the organization’s chairman, Congressman Tony Coelho of California and contributed to the Democratic gains in the 1986 midterm elections. When Coelho became House Majority Whip in 1987, Dornatt joined his leadership office. As an assistant in the Whip’s Office, she worked on the vote-counting operation on the House Floor.

After a brief interlude as legislative director for Senator Timothy Wirth of Colorado, Dornatt returned to the House as chief of staff for Representative Tom Sawyer of Ohio in 1991. After two years, California Representative Sam Farr hired her as chief of staff. For the next 24 years, Dornatt orchestrated reelection campaigns, managed staff operations, and played an integral role in enacting the Congressman’s legislative agenda. She maintained a legislative portfolio in addition to her management responsibilities, working on issues such as trade agreements, BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) policy, and Congressman Farr’s successful campaign to establish Pinnacles National Park in his district.

Throughout her career, Dornatt prioritized expanding the boundaries of acceptance for women staff members on the Hill. She pushed for equal treatment on the job, and created an informal support network for women chiefs of staff in the House Democratic Caucus called the “Sister Chiefs.” Reflecting on the resistance she encountered in her struggle for gender equity in the workplace, she concluded that it “was an attitude that needed to be changed. I was constantly poking them to change it.”

## 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](mailto:history@mail.house.gov).

## Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

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## **Interviewer Biography**

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— ROCHELLE DORNATT —  
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

**MURPHY:** Hi, this is Mike Murphy in the House Recording Studio on January 18th, 2017. Today we are happy to have Rochelle Dornatt join us for an interview that will be part of the Office of the Historian’s women in Congress oral history project, titled *A Century of Women in Congress*. Thank you for joining us.

**DORNATT:** I’m happy to be here, Mike.

**MURPHY:** Okay, great. So, I wanted to start with your story before you arrived in Washington. Where did you grow up?

**DORNATT:** I grew up in Detroit, and I mean right in the city. A lot of people say, “Oh, you know, Grosse Pointe or Birmingham?” I’m like, “No, I grew up in the city.” My dad was an autoworker, and I am a product of that urban environment.

**MURPHY:** And how do you think that shaped you, growing up?

**DORNATT:** Well, Detroit was a big city when I was growing up, but it ran into big problems, and all of that gave me a perspective on social ills in an urban environment, and encouraged me to get involved, and try to help solve some of those problems. Part of that has to do with my Catholic upbringing. I went to Catholic schools all my life, including a Catholic college [Marygrove College in Detroit, Michigan], so a lot of that all got wrapped together. How do you help people who are the, you know, the “don’t haves”? Detroit had a lot of that. When I finally came to Washington after college that was built into me as “How do I help people?” And to me, government was the answer.

**MURPHY:** As a student growing up, as a young person in Detroit, and as the daughter of an autoworker, did you feel that you were part of the middle class that could afford to help others?

**DORNATT:** We were sort of lower middle class, and we had a big family. Autoworkers did not make a lot of money, but they had good benefits, so I would say, yes, we were comfortable, I guess, but I never felt like I had extra means—like, I couldn't make big contributions, donations anywhere. What I would have to do is go out and volunteer. I volunteered on campaigns, and I did other things that I thought would change the way things were.

**MURPHY:** Did you have an early interest in politics, or was it more of a volunteering on a social basis?

**DORNATT:** I think the two morphed. My initial exposure to politics, believe it or not, was at age five, when [President] John [Fitzgerald] Kennedy was elected. And I remember just drying the dishes after dinner one night, and my dad coming home late from just having voted, and I asked him, "Did you vote for the right man?" He said, "Yes, I did, and I hope he wins." And he did. That stuck in my head as John Kennedy was a good man.

Then later, in 10th grade I was at a Catholic school. Michigan at that time had a program called Parochiaid, where the state would reimburse private schools for part of the cost of education, because kids who were in parochial schools didn't then crowd the public schools. The government gave the private schools a little bit of a stipend to help because tuition costs didn't cover everything. Somebody objected to that, and in 1970 there was a referendum on the ballot that put that question to the public. It was oddly worded, so that if you wanted to keep the stipend for those private schools you had to vote no. I got involved in that campaign, because I loved the

school I was in. I wanted to stay there, and I wanted to fight for that. I got involved in that campaign, but ultimately that referendum lost, and my school closed down. So, the whole John Kennedy conversation when I was really young, and then this exposure to literally losing my high school because of politics—those two things were sort of my early introduction to politics.

**MURPHY:** And even though you weren't on the winning side of that campaign, you felt like you had tried to make a difference.

**DORNATT:** Yes, I did. I felt empowered. Even though we lost, I felt like I was doing something. I think from that day I really wanted to be involved. Later, at my new public school, I got involved in student government. When I got to college, I knew I wanted to study political science. I got involved in the student government there, and the college council. I wanted to be where the decision making was going on, and so it meant being involved.

**MURPHY:** And were there any women or others—role models that you looked to as someone that would be guiding you into that path?

**DORNATT:** Yes, well, not necessarily along the political path, but there were some women who I did look up to, especially in college. Now, again, I said I went to a Catholic college, but we were taught—a lot of the faculty were nuns, but this was in the '70s, and nuns were becoming liberated. Even the nuns were liberated. They had shed their habits, for the most part. One nun, Pat Cooney, was my religious studies teacher and she was phenomenal. She was just so smart. She taught philosophy and religion, things like that. She didn't really have a political message, but there was a message of empowerment, and a message of helping, that we are here to use our talents, and the best way to do that is to help other people with those talents. She was a big factor in sort of developing that principle for me of going out there and giving.

The other person—I don't know if she was a role model, but she certainly scared me into action—was a nun—a traditional nun, so she wore the habit—Sister Amata Miller, who taught economics. She was old school. Oh my gosh. She scared everybody. I went in one day for an oral exam, and I had studied my butt off, and I was ready—supply-side economics and Adam Smith. I was ready. She was a tough teacher. When I got in there, she asked me about the announcement that President Gerald Ford had made the night before on some new economic policy. I was floored. I hadn't studied that! It wasn't in my notes! I sort of struggled through an answer. In the end she said, "You know, if you can't put the economic realities together with the political realities, you will never make this work." I was blown away. I went back to my dorm room and had a good cry, but she was right. And so I just doubled down to make sure I understood what was going on in all these different paradigms, because she was right. Economics goes hand-in-hand with politics, which goes hand-in-hand with social studies and history. So it was all there, and you had to make it all fit to make it work.

**MURPHY:** So those were two strong women, right?

**DORNATT:** Very strong women. Very strong women.

**MURPHY:** But when you were growing up, was there a sense that the social expectations of women might influence your career aspirations at the time?

**DORNATT:** Yes. It was still expected—even my dad wanted me just to learn shorthand, and become a secretary, because everybody always needs a secretary. So you can always make a good living if you can take shorthand and type. I did not want to do that. I did not. I tried to learn shorthand at one point, and I thought, "This is crazy." I didn't want to be pigeonholed like that. When I finally got to college, and it was a liberal arts college, and I was studying

political science—“Oh my gosh, what do you do with that, Rochelle?” My dad was like, “You’re out of your mind.” I didn’t care what he said. I wanted to break out. So, yes, there were expectations, especially coming from a poor or middle class family where you needed a job to survive. One of my older sisters was a secretary, and a very good one, and actually high-paid for the role that she played, but I just did not want to do that. I just didn’t see it as being very fulfilling, at least not for me. I’m not trying to criticize people who fill those roles, but it just wasn’t for me.

**MURPHY:** Right. And did you have the sense that other career paths were a possibility, or did you not care what other people thought?

**DORNATT:** A little bit of both. I thought other career paths were possibilities. You know, when I was in college you had people like Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder starting to get into office, and she was a very strong role model for women in politics. So I thought it could be done. And not to sound conceited, but I knew I was smart, and I was young. I could do anything, right? I didn’t have any holds on me. So, yes, I felt like I could do anything, notwithstanding whatever my dad was telling me. So, I wanted to break out.

**MURPHY:** So, like you said, it’s sometimes difficult to know what to do with a degree like political science, but what did you foresee for your future—the possibilities beyond college?

**DORNATT:** Well, I had thought—like a lot of poly sci majors—I would go into law, because political science was about making laws, right? So you might as well be a lawyer. I applied to law school, but I was afraid that if I went to law school in Detroit I’d get sort of channeled into business law or commercial law, and I didn’t want to do that. I realized that what I was interested in was how law creates a civil society. I was interested in government. And I thought

the only way to do that was to get out of Detroit and go to where government was, and that was Washington. I literally picked up one weekend, and a friend of mine helped me move. We stuffed everything into my car, and I moved here. She helped me move to Washington. By the time I found an apartment, and settled in, I had exactly \$50 left to my name, and I put \$40 in the bank—I opened a bank account—and kept \$10. I spent the other 10 on groceries. And then I started looking for a job. {laughter} So yes, it was kind of scary, but it was also an adventure. I really relished the idea of establishing myself, and doing it without any helping hands. It was going to be all on me.

**MURPHY:** And where did you start looking for a job?

**DORNATT:** I started looking—well, this is where my dad’s advice came in handy, because I couldn’t take shorthand, but I certainly could type, and I could organize. And so, I needed money, so the first thing you do is you go out and find a job. And I found a job—it wasn’t quite a secretarial job, but it was an administrative job with a lobbying firm. They made me a junior lobbyist, and I worked on solar energy, and came up to the Hill on occasion to help with briefings, and we did conferences and things like that.

**MURPHY:** How successful was that lobbying effort at the time?

**DORNATT:** I didn’t like it. I didn’t like being a lobbyist. In the end I thought we were pushing a product, as opposed to pushing a lifestyle. I think the solar energy industry has come a long way since then. Now they really are pushing a lifestyle, and an environmental lifestyle, but at the time that was so new. You’re talking 1977, so, you know, 40 years ago. It was pie-in-the-sky kind of stuff. I didn’t really like that.

I went on to do work with the Federal Bar Association, where I was their legislative director, and that's really where I started to get into the nexus between government and politics and law, and how that all meshes into what we work with on a daily basis. That was a very interesting job, and was my launching-off point, because I met a lot of lawyers who were in the federal government, very highly-placed federal lawyers. I networked with them, and eventually got a job as a legislative liaison in the [President James Earl "Jimmy"] Carter [Jr.] administration, at the Department of Commerce, in the Secretary's Office. So now I was into government, and I loved it. I loved it.

**MURPHY:** So you wanted to get a job with the government at some point, but this legislative liaison position, was it something along the lines of what you envisioned in terms of influencing legislation? Was that the goal?

**DORNATT:** That was the goal, though we didn't call it lobbying. We didn't call it influencing. When you're in government, you just educate Members of Congress and their staff as to the policy realities. And so that's what we did. We provided a lot of facts and figures and research on whatever issue it was that we were working on at the time. I did go up to the Hill to meet with people. I got that job, though, late in the Carter administration, so it was sort of a hectic time, because that was the campaign going on when Ronald Reagan came to office, and so things changed.

**MURPHY:** After that experience, did you think, "I'd like to work on the Hill at some point"?

**DORNATT:** Yes, and I'll tell you why: because being this junior lobbyist, and then being this legislative liaison, you were always going up to the Hill and asking Congress for something. I always felt like the kid looking through the

window at the candy shop, or at the toys, or the puppies. You're always on the outside, looking in, asking for something. And I thought, "I want to be the one that people come to. I want them to ask me." I finally left the Commerce Department—because I had a political appointment. When a new President is elected you have to submit a letter of resignation. They finally accepted it, I think, in March of '81, and so I left and started looking for a job on the Hill.

**MURPHY:** And did you think that legislative work in a Member office was the next logical progression? Is that what you were searching out?

**DORNATT:** It was. At that point I had sort of enough experience under my belt, and enough education. In the meantime, I had gotten a master's in political science at George Washington University. So I had enough "oomph" to make the pitch to a Member's office that even though I didn't have any prior experience, I had what it takes. I did get hired in Mr. [James David] Santini's office, and I was hired by a woman. She later told me that she did pull my résumé out of a big stack because she liked the way I presented myself, and she wanted to give somebody their first chance. That is one of the first things about women, I think, is that they will take that risk on the unknown and try to help somebody else, especially if it's another woman who's trying to break out. And to this day, she and I—her name is Mary Lou Cooper—she and I are still good friends, and we communicate a couple times a year. I have never forgotten that lesson. And I have, in turn, helped others the same way that she helped me.

**MURPHY:** When you joined the staff, was it easy to adjust to working in that office, and did you feel like you had a support network there with your friend and your other colleagues in the office?

**DORNATT:**

The office was very warm, and very inviting. The staff was easy to get along with. But along the way, there are subtle signs that come out. Our chief of staff was a really nice guy. He was very political. But the one thing that I questioned—and I never said anything, because it really—at that point it was, this is the way politics work. There's "big-P" politics out there, in terms of presidential campaigns, and then there's office politics, "little-P" politics. So you always have to be aware of what's going on wherever. But it plays into some of today's issues, and that is I learned that the men on staff were making more than the women. At some point I must have said something like that to him, but not in an accusatory manner, but his reply was, "Well, men are the breadwinners." And I'm like, "Well, not in my house. It's just me. I'm the breadwinner." But that was the attitude. You saw that back then in the private sector, where women, at that time, were making 56 cents on the dollar than men were making, so to him it made sense, but to me it didn't. I was doing as much as the guy who sat next to me, but, okay, I needed the job, and I liked the job. I wasn't complaining so much as I was like, "Wow." Reality hits you upside the head, and it makes you think. Is this the way it's supposed to be?

Mr. Santini ran for Senate in '82. He challenged a sitting incumbent of his own party, and he lost, so I had to leave. {laughter} My early career on the Hill, it was a series of ups and downs, but it was exciting the whole time.

I went to work for a Member from Texas by the name of Kent [Ronald] Hance. Mr. Hance was very conservative—way more conservative than I am—but he was an interesting guy. He was very Texan, is the only way I could put it, and I think I was one of the few non-Texans in the office, and I was the only female in the office who did legislative work. When he hired me, in the interview he asked me, "Well, you may be the expert on an issue,

and you may know more than anybody on that issue.” He said, “But what if you get some good old boy from Lubbock who calls in and asks a question about that issue, and you take the call and give him an answer that you know is right. And he says to you, ‘Well, honey, that’s all fine and good, but let me talk to somebody who really knows. Let me talk to a man.’” So the Congressman asks, “What do you do?” I just looked at him and I thought, “Oh my God, is that what this office is like?” But I looked at him and I said, “Well, if he’s got to hear it from somebody with a deep voice, I’ll either talk low or put a guy on the phone and feed him what he needs to tell the guy, because the important issue is making the constituent happy, right?” That’s what got me the job. I had to suppress that being female thing for the good old boys of West Texas. And that was a good job. I enjoyed it, but the guys in that office had a certain attitude toward women—especially non-Texas women. So there were times where we bumped heads. But all in all, it was a good experience, again, because it forced me to learn how to adjust and adapt and handle these kinds of situations.

I’ll tell you another funny thing that came out of that office. Mr. Hance was one of those Congressmen who never, ever would ride in a car with a woman sitting next to him. So when we drove to places, whether it was off-Hill meetings or receptions or whatever, I had to sit in the backseat, and the guys got the front seat. {laughter} I didn’t know the rule, so the first time we went down to the garage to get in the car I opened up the front door on the passenger side to get in, and Mr. Hance gets in, and he looks at me, and he doesn’t say anything. And I’m like, “What? What? Do I have, you know—is my makeup smeared or what?” Finally, the chief of staff who was with us says, “Oh, Rochelle, you need to get in the back.” Then they explained this rule, and I’m like, “Are you out of your mind? Are you kidding me?” The Congressman didn’t want anything to suggest that he was with a woman.

And I was like, “This is bizarre, but okay.” It was just another one of those things that women have to put up with, and it’s stupid, but okay.

Mr. Hance, in 1984, decided to run for Senate, and I think he would have won, but he didn’t make it through the primary. He had a three-way primary, and he lost it by 300-and-some votes, out of like 1.3 million cast. He was just devastated. We all were. We went through, like, two recounts. He was sure he could find the votes someplace. Lyndon Johnson might have been able to find them, but not Kent Hance.

But I had done some work on that campaign for him. Mostly research on his own record, so we could highlight it, and then the records of his opponents, so we could highlight them and take them down. That got me the attention of Tony Coelho. Tony at that point was a Member who was rising in the ranks. He wanted to take on the DCCC [Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee]—which is the political arm of the Democratic Party for the House—and he really wanted to turn the DCCC into a first-class, A1 political machine. One of the things that that involved was creating a new research division at the DCCC, one that would do opposition research, basically, and he tapped me to do that. So I came to work for him, basically, finding the dirt on our Republican opponents, which should not be a surprise to anybody, because Republicans have the same kind of operation. And, in fact, I became close friends with the guy at the NRCC [National Republican Congressional Committee] who did my job against us. His name was Brian Tringali, and we actually, after the elections, would go out and do lectures on how to do campaign research. He and I became good friends. That put me into the middle of sort of “big-P” politics, and I got to learn a lot of how campaigns work, and how campaign politics are different than legislative politics, and yet there is a link between the two. Again, it sort of

goes back to being able to connect all the dots because no one part stands on its own.

At the DCCC, Tony was okay about putting women in positions of responsibility, so I was there running the research division. He put a woman, Jeri Thomson, in charge of finances. We had another woman, who she wasn't head of the fundraising department but she was the second in command—Terry McAuliffe was our guy back then who did most of the big fundraising. But Mary Jane Volk was the one who did a lot of the grassroots, pound the pavement, get the money out of people out there. So, Tony wasn't bad about putting women in high positions, and I learned a lot from that, because all those women became my friends. Watching them do their job told me that there are no limits to what women can do. And I was, again, educated to all the possibilities out there. All those women have remained my friends, and I see them every once in a while, and we're still in communication, so that sort of networking has been a very valuable part of those jobs.

**MURPHY:**

How do you think you were able to transition seamlessly in that way? Because it seems like you had the research experience on the Hance campaign, and what connected you to Congressman Coelho through that? Why did he single you out for this position with the DCCC?

**DORNATT:**

The Hance campaign was in 1984, and it was one of those that had decided to use opposition research, which was still a relatively new field. It sort of got created in the—1980 cycle might be a little bit early, but '82 for real, where you had NCPAC (National Conservative PAC) really come into its own. And the Democrats had never experienced that kind of an attack machine. In '84, Hance was the conservative running for a Democratic Senate seat, so he was going to have to defend himself on some more conservative votes than maybe the electorate would have liked. In primaries you're always going to

your base, and the base tends to be way more liberal, at least among the Democrats, than the general electorate.

**[A 25-second segment of this interview has been redacted.]**

Hance's campaign was one of those that put that opposition research into play on a big scale. And since Mr. Coelho wanted to build an opposition research division at the DCCC, that campaign got his attention, and that's how I came to light, and that's how I got to know him.

**MURPHY:** Researchers today have an array of online databases that they can work with from their desk. How did you conduct this opposition research in the '80s? What were you focused on? Did you have to go to a district? Did you have to physically travel to do this research? What was that like?

**DORNATT:** Yes, I did. When I was with Mr. Hance, working on the research against Mr. Lloyd [Alton] Doggett [II] and the other candidate—his name was Bob Krueger—I actually did go to Texas, and spent my time in Austin, looking up their records, and going to the libraries, and doing clip files, and microfiche and all that. You literally had to do it from scratch. So the same was true at the DCCC. We did not have—computers had not been invented yet, really. There was no email. There was no internet. You had to plow through—if we were running against an incumbent Republican, you had to plow through vote histories. You literally would go through vote after vote after vote and see what you could pull out. Or you would go to the home newspapers and pull out clip files and sometimes you would go to their districts and talk to people on the ground, political operatives, to see what you could find out. And then you'd put it all together. It was a very intense job.

You also have to be clever, because you have to learn how to spin this stuff, and “spin” is not a new word in politics. You had to learn how to spin something that might seem very innocuous into something that was dangerous. I don’t know, maybe I should be a little bit sorry that that is how politics is today. It’s nothing but spin. But at the time, it was very interesting, and it was exciting to see what you could do with what you found. So yes, that was my DCCC experience. And I was very proud of it, because we—I was there for the ’86 cycle, and we took back a lot of seats that cycle. I was very proud of my contribution to that.

**MURPHY:** It seems like the organization itself was very influential in that process, in the victories in 1986, but there was also what you started with when you were discussing this organization, you talked about Coelho’s focus on fundraising, and building up these resources. And he also forged these ties with the business community that had not been traditional allies to the Democratic Party at that point.

**DORNATT:** Right, right.

**MURPHY:** How did the staff at the DCCC react to this? How did you view this shift in emphasis?

**DORNATT:** There was a lot of criticism of Democrats for doing exactly that: that we were tying ourselves in with business now, and we were talking about big money. But, in the end, I think the staff felt that we had professionalized the DCCC, and we had taken it to a whole new level. It wasn’t some sleepy just, “press release”-kind-of-operation. It now really got involved in campaigns, and was able to help marginal Members, and able to recruit good, competitive candidates. And I think that’s all good. I think that’s all good.

**MURPHY:** During your campaign cycle, did you focus on one race, or did you hire staff and allocate resources to many different races? What was your particular role? You were heading the department of research?

**DORNATT:** Our list of Members that we worked on came from Tony and a different division at the DCCC, the political division, and they were the ones who decided who were the Members that we were going to help, or the Republicans that we were going to go after. It wasn't always a very big list because we only had so many resources. So, whatever we could do—there were three of us on staff, myself and two others, who did the research. We did whatever we could, with whatever we could find. But it wasn't our decision to pick the Members that we investigated.

**MURPHY:** And after those victories in '86, did you see a kind of change in the discussion about the focus of the organization, as if many in the party accepted these means to justify this goal of victory?

**DORNATT:** I think so. I think certainly the other side was advancing the same way, and I hate to call it an arms race, but that's sort of what it was. If you didn't respond, or if you didn't have a good offense, then you were always playing defense, and you would lose. The whole thing about Congress is you can do as much as you can to make change, but if you're not in charge, it's harder. It's a lot harder. So you have to win, and that's why even today the struggle over controlling the House or the Senate is always such a knockdown, drag-out fight, because whoever has the majority gets to set the agenda.

**MURPHY:** While you were conducting this research, was there a concern about maybe a distancing from traditional allies, like organized labor? What was the relationship between the DCCC and those older allies of the Democratic Party?

**DORNATT:** I don't think there was any distancing at all. I think, actually, the relationship grew stronger because the party was able to front more candidates who supported the labor agenda. Labor finally had a really strong ally who was going to put their money where their mouth was. So it wasn't up to just labor to figure out what races to get involved in. At that time you could do coordinated campaigns, and you could literally ally yourself with those forces. So I think labor was glad to see this evolution in the party.

**MURPHY:** Right after that race in '86, Congressman Coelho focused on the upcoming election for the Majority Whip position. Were you, at that time, employed by his office, or by the DCCC? Were you connected to Coelho in that sense—as if you understood that you were going to go with him if he went to the Whip Office?

**DORNATT:** There was no understanding that I would go with him. I was employed by the DCCC. But when he started the race for Whip, some of his DCCC people engaged in that. I was not engaged in that race, per se. Whenever he asked me for information on any particular Member, I would give it to him because he was going around talking to every single Member of the Democratic Caucus. Sometimes he wanted to know background on them, and what floats their boat, so he could connect with them. I wasn't involved in his race so much, and there was no understanding, but the more I talked to him, and the more he asked for information that he could use in that race, I think the more valuable he saw my contribution. When he became Whip, he asked me to go along.

**MURPHY:** What position were you taking on in his leadership office?

**DORNATT:** I was one of the assistant floor staff people. It was an interesting office, and it was great, because it was right in the Capitol, and just driving up to the

Capitol every day made me feel so proud. I started to think, “Oh my gosh, how did this poor girl from Detroit get here?” I worked hard to do it, but it was a great accomplishment. There were one, two, three, four of us who did legislative work in the Whip Office, so to speak, floor work, and one of the others was a woman. She was counsel, and the other two were guys. The staff was pretty well split between men and women, but more of the support staff was women. In fact, I think all of them were. So we had two receptionists. We had an office manager. They were women.

I really liked working in that office, and I spent a lot of my day on the House Floor. I got to know Members on a first name basis, and you got to see politics operating up close. Tony was known for being a dealmaker, and so when we had to whip a vote, he was like a Tasmanian devil. He was just this whirling dervish, hitting every single Member that he needed to hit to get that vote. We didn’t have computers back then, either, so every Whip count had to be done manually, literally. We’d have Whip meetings two or three or four times a day with our Whip team, their Members, and we would assign them names of other Members that they had to go talk to, and then they’d come back to us and say, “Yes, so-and-so is a no,” or “This guy is still on the fence.” We would keep track of those—and I was one of the ones keeping track of, first of all, who took what names, and then what the responses were.

When the vote would actually come up on the floor, one of my jobs was to run—there are computers on the House Floor that track the votes, on each side. There’s one at the front of—sort of near the well, not quite, but at the desk where the legislators sit—and then one at the back of the chamber. My job was to track the Members who were our on-the-fence guys—people that we weren’t sure were going to vote with us. If they voted the wrong way, then

we had to send someone to talk to them, keep them on the floor so you could get them to change their vote.

That was a very interesting job, but it created certain problems for me. Like I said, I spent a lot of my time on the House Floor. I got to know Members on a first name basis. But that sometimes encouraged Members to think I was being friendly, and that was not the truth. I at all times tried to be professional in whatever I did. This was a big job, and I was not going to mess this up. But Members, in late nights they'd go out, have dinner, have drinks, and back in those days you could have lobbyists take you out for a whole night of schmoozing.

One of the things I had to do—I hated doing it, but it was one of my jobs. Tony would give me his car, with one of the—he had police who protected his office. So one of the police would go with me in the car, and we'd have to go collect Members from the bars. It was one of the most mortifying things I ever had to do, and I'm thinking, "Why are you sending me? Why don't you send one of the guys?" They would probably be better. I can't tell you how many times I'd go into one of the local restaurants—because you knew where all these guys were. So-and-so always hung out at a restaurant called 209 ½. He always hung out there, always had to go get him. He was always three sheets to the wind, and he was always offensive, but you'd just have to say, "You have to come with me, Mr. Chairman. You have to come with me. If you don't come with me, then Tony's going to have to come, and how do you think that's going to go?" And he'd be cussing. And then I had to put him in the car with me. It was awful. But I did it, because we needed those votes, and it was my job.

But the other thing that happened was Members did get to feeling friendly, and you'd be at the back of the chamber, I'd be working with the computer,

trying to make sure so-and-so voted, and that they voted right, and, “Where’s this guy?” and “We need so-and-so to get on the floor.” There was one Member in particular who used to come and harass me all the time. All the time. He thought he was being cool, but it was awful. It got very touchy-feely. I would always say, “Please, stop. I’m working. Please leave me alone. I’m not interested. Please go away.” My entreaties were just ignored. I don’t want to get too graphic, but there was groping going on. There was all sorts of stuff. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to do, because a staffer who accuses a Member of this, who do you think’s going to come out on the crappy end of that scenario? You know it wasn’t going to be the Member. It was going to be me. Even if he got dinged for something inappropriate, I would never be able to hold my head up. I’d never get another job, because I was that one who got involved in that scandal. Nobody wants people around who get involved in scandals. I was beside myself as to how to address this. I didn’t really want to go to Tony, because I really didn’t want to have to take the nuclear step and reveal that this was going on. Somehow, as assertive a woman as I think I am, it made me feel weak to have to reveal this, that somehow I wasn’t handling this right. Who knew what the questions would be, whether I had encouraged him somehow.

Finally, one night, when it got so bad, I just got up my courage, and said the only thing I could think of. I said, “Look, you touch me one more time and I will go to Tony, and I will make sure you never, ever get another bill on this House Floor, and you will be forgotten.” And he backed off, and he never came back. I don’t know if it was the tone I took, or what I said, or if I just had my guardian angel with me that day, {laughter} but it worked. I never had to go to Tony. And if he ever watches this film, it will be the first time he hears that story. It is not something that you’re proud of, that you get hit on while you’re doing your job on the House Floor. It was awful! He wasn’t the

only one, but others, you finally put them in their place and they leave you alone. But this one was persistent, and it was awful.

**MURPHY:** Is that something that other women had to deal with, as well? Did you have common stories that other people talked about, or was this behind the scenes?

**DORNATT:** Since I kept that to myself and I never talked about it, I never had the opportunity to share tales. I do know that other Members over the years have behaved inappropriately towards staff members. If and when I ever found out I would tell the women, “You have got to stop this. You got to put your foot down, and you got to do it soon, and you have to do it aggressively, because they don’t understand it when you’re nice about it. So be harsh.”

**MURPHY:** Your situation was a little different, as well, because you were one of only a few women who were working in this male space on the floor, so that made things a little more complicated.

**DORNATT:** Right, right.

**MURPHY:** In what other ways did that affect your ability to do the job on the floor as a woman? Were there any particular complications that arose?

**DORNATT:** There were two other women who worked the floor. One was Mimi O’Hara—she worked for Mr. [Thomas Stephen] Foley—and Kathy Gille, who worked for our Deputy Whip, Dave [David Edward] Bonior. But the floor staff who were men were always first and foremost. They were the go-to people before we were. At the time, Speaker Jim [James Claude] Wright, [Jr.], had his chief of staff, a guy by the name of John Mack, who was a very powerful chief of staff, and he sort of ruled the roost, so you always had to be mindful of him and the other guys on the floor.

**MURPHY:** In terms of the space itself, there hadn't been that many women on the floor as Members—the numbers were still relatively low in the '80s—and then staff members.

**DORNATT:** Right.

**MURPHY:** Were there any structural issues they ran into, too?

**DORNATT:** Well, the famous one is the bathroom. Women had no place to go to the bathroom. So the men, the male Members, had a restroom right off the floor. The women did not. They had to go down one story to the public restroom on the first floor where everybody else went. Now the women Members have one, but yes, it was crazy. If you had to excuse yourself, you had to run halfway around the Capitol to just go to the bathroom. The guys didn't get it. They were like, "What's the big deal?" The big deal is it shouldn't be this way.

There were other examples in that office that, again, made me have to assert myself. Mr. Coelho was a very ambitious and political kind of guy, and he always wanted to be in the middle of whatever was going on. He would hold early morning staff meetings, and the guys would automatically show up, and I was never included. I thought, well, the heck with that. So I started to show up. They didn't kick me out, but they were surprised to see me. I was like, "Well, if you're going to have a staff meeting, and I'm staff, I might as well be here." So that was, like, one of several similar instances in that office. I don't think Tony realized it. I don't think he was being—and I'm not even sure the guys were being malicious, or intentionally discriminatory. It was just the old boys club, and that's the way it was.

So when the Democratic Caucus took their annual retreat to Greenbrier, and they'd put 200 Members on a train and go off to West Virginia, all the guys

were getting ready to go, and I wasn't. I finally went to Tony and said, "I want to go to the caucus retreat." And he just looks at me and goes, "Sure." And it's like, {laughter} "Yes, all right, sure, I should be there." So I went, and it was great, and it was very interesting. And, again, you see a different side of Members and politics and what goes on there, because when the cameras aren't on, on the floor, it's a different way of communicating, and a different way of interacting.

But again, something similar happened in almost exactly the same way when, in 1988, leadership was putting together the staff to go to the [Democratic National] Convention in Atlanta that year. All the guys were getting their travel arrangements made, and getting ready to go, and they were doing pre-convention meetings, and I'm like, "Well, what am I, chopped liver?" I went to Tony and I said, "I think I ought to go to the convention." And he just—same thing—looks at me and goes, "Well, yes, of course." But somebody had to tell them. The guys didn't think about it. I was the afterthought, and I think it's because I was the girl. But they were all friendly. We were all friends. It was an attitude that needed to be changed. I was constantly poking them to change it.

**MURPHY:** And there was an assumption or an oversight on their part.

**DORNATT:** Yes.

**MURPHY:** I think that's been a common theme for many of the women we have talked to. Another thing where women kind of are singled out, and have been ever since the election of the first woman Member, Jeannette Rankin, was for their appearance and their demeanor, and considerable attention has always been paid to that, even from the very beginning, from her first moment on

the floor. So do you think that had changed by the time you arrived in the Capitol?

**DORNATT:** No, I made sure I came dressed every day. And it's hell—you guys wouldn't know—walking marble halls with high heels is a killer, but I had high heels on every day. I had a dress on every day. Not during recess. That was definitely dress-down time, and you could wear jeans to the office. But, again, it was part of needing to be as professional as possible, I needed to emanate that professionalism, because I didn't want people to take me for granted, or think I wasn't serious, or that I was just the secretary. So I made sure that I always got dressed, and all the other women in the office got dressed as well. But I'll tell you one thing about that is the offices are set to the temperature for the men who are wearing suitcoats, so women are always cold. Always. Same thing on the House Floor. You're freezing cold because it's set for guys walking around in wool blazers or something. I had to be creative about how you dressed during session.

#### **END OF PART ONE — BEGINNING OF PART TWO**

**DORNATT:** I can give you another clothes story.

**MURPHY:** Go ahead.

**DORNATT:** It wasn't me, but it was one of my friends who worked in the Ways and Means Committee. She was a top tax expert. I mean, nobody could compare to her. But she got in the habit of wearing black or navy blue suits every single day she was at work, because that's how the lobbyists and the Members related to the staff, because all the guys wore black or navy blue suits every day, and so she did. And I'm not sure that she really enjoyed it, but that's one of the ways she broke through: because she looked like all the others.

**MURPHY:** That's interesting.

**DORNATT:** Women—you have to think about it before you go into these things. It's crazy.

**MURPHY:** So, there's a lot of experiences that you had on the floor that were groundbreaking experiences for women staff members. This wasn't a common feature of the House Floor before the 1980s, when you arrived. How did you play a role in the legislative side of things in the Whip Office? You had the vote counting side of things. What else were you doing in Coelho's office?

**DORNATT:** One of my jobs was to send out every night descriptions of the bills and the amendments that were going to be up the next day. Now, of course, it's all done electronically, and it's very easy, but we called these Whip Advisories, and they went out every single night, and if there were 15 bills on the floor I had to do 15 different ones. Everything was on paper back then, so I'd have to run off 500 copies of 15 different bill descriptions, and take them down to the place where they got distributed, and it was a lot of work. I served as a legislative liaison between the Whip Office and the committee staff, because the committee staff would funnel all this information to me, and then we would package it, and it would go out to the Members.

Mr. Coelho had epilepsy, and it was a big part of his persona, because he, in his early years, had been made to feel like he wasn't a whole person because he had this disability. He wanted to do something for other persons with disabilities so they would never feel that way, that they would be full, participating members of society. He started to write a bill on creating civil rights for persons with disabilities, and that eventually became the Americans with Disabilities Act.

When I was in the Whip Office, I was given the task of being the lead staffer on that. I wasn't the only staffer, but I was the lead staffer, and it meant having to juggle a lot of different issues, because you not only had the business community that was opposed to this bill—because they thought it was going to cost them money—you had disability activists who wanted probably more than we could deliver, and then you had Members who had jurisdiction over the different parts of this bill who wanted to make a play of their own. They wanted to be known for doing something on civil rights for persons with disabilities. So you were dealing with all sorts of politics, and trying to negotiate—and then you had the White House. [President] George [Herbert Walker] Bush was there at the time, so you had a Republican White House. There were all these different politics going on, and different demands. Part of my job was to try to corral all that and find agreement, so that we could actually get this bill done.

That bill, because it was so broad, went—I think it went to four different committee and seven subcommittees. That's huge. That's just huge. That meant trying to make sure that every chairman was happy, and every subcommittee chairman was happy. At that time you did not have quite the anger that there is, or the split between Democrats and Republicans that there is today. There was a lot more collaboration back then, but you also then had to keep Republicans happy, because they represent the business community, and the business community wasn't happy. So that was a big job. But gradually we pulled it together, and there was a bill that finally came to the floor, and became law. By the time it became law, Mr. Coelho was not in Congress anymore. But it got me very involved with the disability rights community, and they became a constant presence in our office all the time.

One of the big things that happened with the disability rights group was at that [Democratic] convention, in 1988—the one that nobody thought to invite me to go to until I invited myself—the delegates who were disabled were sort of a forgotten caucus. The arena where the convention was being held in Atlanta was not accessible, and people in wheelchairs had to come in through the loading dock, the same place where they brought in all the supplies for all the hamburgers and food and stuff that they brought in to sell people at the arena, and the same place where they took out the garbage. It made the persons with disabilities furious. They were just furious over being treated that way. They came to Mr. Coelho and asked for redress somehow, that they were being badly treated, and Tony turned to me and says, “Take care of it.” No direction on what to do to take care of it, but just, “Take care of it.”

So I sat down to take care of it, and basically held meetings all day long with the disability rights groups as to what is it they wanted. How could we make this better? And those meetings went on late into the night and the only place we could hold them late at night was on the loading dock. And so here I am—the loading dock is not a place to hold meetings, you know. So I had to sit on the floor with—everybody else was in wheelchairs, for the most part—in the place that was covered with grime and garbage, and try to work out some deal with these delegates, because if they didn’t get a deal they were going to stage a protest the next day in the middle of [Edward Moore (Ted)] Teddy Kennedy’s big speech. And we couldn’t afford to have that happen. The Democratic Convention needed to go off without a hitch, and we needed to look like we were inclusive of everybody, and everybody’s needs were being met. So the deal we worked out was that the committee that the DNC [Democratic National Committee] had that would select the next venue for the next convention would include certain parameters for

accessibility and that there would be someone who was representing the disabled community on that committee. So we worked this out in the dead of night, on the loading dock, where the garbage was being taken out while we were meeting.

I had to talk to—I think I woke him up, Mike McCurry, who was the DNC press person at that time, and the chair was [Paul] Kirk—and agreed to do a press conference the very next morning, early, with this new agreement, and if they would accept that, the persons with disabilities would not disrupt the convention the next day. And that all worked out.

So, one of the biggest things I ever did was something nobody ever knew about, because the show went on. But working on the Americans with Disabilities Act really did sensitize me to the way persons with disabilities live, and the needs that they have, and the fact that they are full human beings, and they're entitled to live as freely as the rest of us. I'm actually pretty proud of that.

The crazy thing was Mr. Coelho would have staff meetings at the convention every morning, like at 6:00 a.m., or some ungodly hour, and I showed up that morning in the same clothes I had shown up the morning before. And the guys were making fun of me. "Oh, someone's been out all night. Where did you go? What were you doing?" And I said, "You know that problem we had with the disabled delegates?" He goes, "Yes?" I said, "Well, I took care of it." And he says, "All right, good work," and just moved on. He didn't want to know what I had done. He didn't want to know what the solution was. As long as it was taken care of, he didn't have to worry about it.

**MURPHY:** {laughter} In terms of the legislation, the process of attracting support for that measure, you mentioned you wanted to frame it as a civil rights issue.

**DORNATT:** Right.

**MURPHY:** But how did that play out practically, in terms of provisions inserted, or the way you framed it in attracting support, especially from the other side of the aisle?

**DORNATT:** It was written as a civil rights statute on purpose because Mr. Coelho feels, and I think rightly so, that disabled rights are human rights, and these people are as human as anybody else, so you really can't deny them those rights. But it did make it difficult. The business community was not interested in this bill. They thought it was going to cost them a lot of money. So what we did was try to humanize this as much as possible, and bring in persons from districts of Members who were not supportive, or on the fence.

We were juggling a lot of balls. Not only did we have a lot of committee work to juggle, because it was such an intricate puzzle, but then you had the business community out there. In our office, between myself and two other guys, Steve Champlin and Tom Nides, we really divided up the community out there—the business community, the civil rights community, the disabled community—to coordinate generating support. All of that would turn into generating the political support we needed with our Republican counterparts.

In the end, it worked, but it was hard. That's the only way I can put it is that it was hard. There were some Members, even subcommittee members, who resented this act being imposed on them, because they thought it would be difficult for them to explain to their business community—especially people on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. They were responsible for roadways and public buildings, and they were going to be on the line for costing a lot of businesses a lot of money, and so it was very hard to bring them along. But in the end, it was the right thing to do, and we got it done.

Mr. Coelho was gone from office by the time it actually passed, but we got it done. We got it done.

**MURPHY:** Did your position involve meeting with other staff members of Members to present these ideas, or were you mainly working on the outside stakeholders, I guess you would call them?

**DORNATT:** I did a lot—mostly the internal stuff. My role was to meet with committee staff, and to get this bill through those subcommittees, and then full committees, and to try to negotiate the best that we could. Committees have their jurisdictions, and they're very selfish about it, and protective, and some of them resented this being forced on them from leadership. It was my job to meet with all seven subcommittees and four full committees to try and make that case that this would have to be done. It was hard. It was hard.

**MURPHY:** You mentioned that Congressman Coelho had left by that time. Did you follow through with that legislation?

**DORNATT:** When Mr. Coelho left, the bill was not done yet, and I went to the Senate, and worked for [Timothy E.] Tim Wirth over there, and got involved in passage of that bill on the Senate side. So that's where I was when that finally passed. I was very happy that all the staff I had worked with in the House and in the White House remembered, and so I got a seat right up front in the Rose Garden when George Bush signed that into law. I was very happy about that.

**MURPHY:** In terms of the actual legislation, did you have a role in writing some of the provisions and adding to that in that way?

**DORNATT:** Yes. Drafting this was not easy. We used a lot of input from the disability rights groups. That was probably the first thing we did is go to the disability

rights groups and try to come up with a draft that would work. We also met with the various chairmen of the committees, because this was going to have to go through their committees, so what could they reasonably expect to get done? There were so many moving parts. It was a big job.

**MURPHY:**

So you said you briefly worked in the Senate, but then you returned to the House for a considerable period of time. But I was thinking about your position when Congressman Coelho left office, looking for other work. Did that make you think about the uncertainty of work on the Hill, or did it just provide another opportunity?

**DORNATT:**

I thought of it as just another opportunity. I had been up on the Hill long enough at that point—or at least I thought it was long enough—to have proven myself, and I had a good track record. And having been in leadership, I had a lot of friends and a lot of connections. I knew a lot of Members, because when you work the floor you get to know them on a first-name basis. So I did go to the Senate for a while, and Mr. Wirth decided to retire, and I came back to the House. Working in leadership was phenomenal, but I liked working at a Member's office as well. I didn't want to leave the Hill. I thought I had found my place. So, finding another job is always a pain in the butt, but it wasn't the first time I'd had to do it, so I just moved on.

I think because I had done a good job in all my other positions, and because I had been in leadership for a while, and even at the DCCC, people got to know me. They got to know me as someone who was serious about the work I did, and someone who knew her way around. So when I left Coelho's office, went to the Senate, then left Wirth's office, came back to the House, I think people understood who I was, and that I had a good record.

**MURPHY:** Why did you choose to work in a Member's office, instead of trying to stay in a leadership office?

**DORNATT:** I had an offer to stay in leadership when Mr. Coelho left, but I think I was just so upset over him leaving that I wanted to get away from it for a little bit, and that's why I went to the Senate. At that time, when he left, Newt [Newton Leroy] Gingrich was starting his rise on the other side, and it was sort of a scorched earth politics that he had. Mr. Coelho had gotten caught in some allegedly bad deal-making, and rather than go through the hassle of some sort of an investigation, he just said, "I don't need this. I didn't do anything wrong, and I'm not going to let you sully my name," and he left. And in the end he was cleared, and he had done nothing wrong. But that was one of the turning points, I think, in Congress where things started to get more partisan, way more partisan, and the bridge between the two sides started to break down. So, I left and went to the Senate, but came back. Leadership was totally different at that point, and I just went back into a Member's office.

**MURPHY:** And how did you get that position? You were chief of staff.

**DORNATT:** I came back from the Senate as chief of staff to a Member from Ohio, Mr. [Thomas Charles] Sawyer. And it was my first foray as a chief. I learned a lot. He was very interested in things that make the world go round but you never see, like the census and population issues. He was an interesting guy.

But when [President William Jefferson] Bill Clinton got elected, I really wanted to go into the administration. My previous stint in the Executive Branch had been short and I thought going into this administration would be interesting. I was being vetted for an assistant secretary position at the Department of Labor, but it was taking so long that I didn't want to wait any

longer. I was sort of unhappy in the job that I had. Somebody came to me and said that this new guy, Mr. Sam Farr, was looking for a chief of staff, and they'd like to put my name forward. Sure. What the heck? So when the Farr people called and said, "Mr. Farr would like to interview you," I sort of famously said, "Who?" I had forgotten that I'd said, "Yes, put my name forward." So, I went and interviewed with him, not really intending to stay in the House. I wanted to go into the administration. But the interview was so delightful, and the White House was taking so long, and I was unhappy where I was. I took the job. I went to work for Sam Farr in 1993, and we spent 24 years together. It was great. It was a great decision on my part.

{laughter}

**MURPHY:** When you took over as chief of staff, how many other women were in that position in other Member offices?

**DORNATT:** Oh, wow. I don't know how many, but I don't think many. You probably found most of them in the California delegation, quite frankly. And you really had to make those connections. They weren't easily made. When the Democrats got thrown into the minority that cycle, at the end of 1994, and the Republicans and Newt Gingrich took over in '95, that connection between women chiefs of staff actually became very important.

The Democratic leadership at the time was all male, and they would hold chief of staff meetings every week, and at the front of the room were all men. They seemed to hold the most important information to themselves. I'm not blaming them—it's just the way it was. I didn't find the chief of staff meetings particularly helpful, because they didn't get into the nitty-gritty of issues. Talking to my other female chiefs of staff, they felt the same way. So we started to hold back. When the chief of staff meetings were over, the women chiefs of staff would remain behind and we'd have our own meeting.

We would discuss issues and get information that the guys were never giving us at the official meeting. Eventually we created—it wasn't a formal organization, but we created a group called the "Sister Chiefs." We used to have our own little post-chief of staff meetings among ourselves, and got more done and more information than in the bigger group.

Eventually I got called by the leadership into the office to find out what was going on, because they thought I was fomenting revolution or something. And I was like, "No, we just want to be informed, and you guys don't ever give us any information, and it's all men at the front of this meeting." So gradually they began to change. They started adding women to the chiefs of staff meeting who would make the presentations, women at the Whip meetings, and we had a little more information that got passed around. That little "Sister Chiefs" group still exists today—a little more informally, but it's still there, and I'm very proud of that. Something Jeannette Rankin would have loved. {laughter}

**MURPHY:** Did you think that was the end goal, or was it just a practical matter of getting information? Or did you think over the long term you would make some substantial change to the way these meetings ran?

**DORNATT:** I think it was a little bit of both. We wanted to see change in the meetings, but I think it was also to develop our own network because you could always turn to one of your sisters for help, and there was no judgment there. I think that's the way it still is today.

**MURPHY:** What kind of information were you missing at the other meetings that you gained from the women chiefs?

**DORNATT:** Again, a lot of these women chiefs were chiefs to very high-ranked Members, so you had Marda Robillard with Mr. [John David] Dingell [Jr.]. You had

Pat Delgado with Mr. [Henry Arnold] Waxman. You had Janet Mays on the Ways and Means Committee. So you had some very high-ranking female chiefs who had access to information, and so that's what we did is we shared information that might not have been shared by the guys who held the official meeting. So here we got sort of the inside scoop of what was going on. Gene Smith with Mr. [Howard Lawrence] Berman. There was a whole host of women with high-ranking Members, and we deserved to know what was going on, beyond what pabulum was being fed to us at that time by the guys. So, I'm glad we did it. And it got the attention of leadership. I got called into [Richard Andrew] Gephardt's office, wanting to know, "What are you doing?" And I went, "We're just trying to figure out what's going on around here! You're cutting us out, and these meetings don't—there's no women at front, and there's no people of color, and it's just a guys' thing."

**MURPHY:** Did you consider the possibility of a negative reaction to that effort?

**DORNATT:** {laughter} Yes, I did. You know, nobody likes going into the Leader's Office to be scolded. On the other hand, I felt comfortable with my position. You're calling me on the carpet for what? For networking, and trying to get information, so I can be a better Democrat, and so I can advise my boss better, to help your boss? I don't think so.

**MURPHY:** How do you think your position as chief of staff influenced the culture of the office, and, more generally, women as chiefs of staff? How might that change the dynamic in the office?

**DORNATT:** Well, I think it probably does change the dynamic in the office, but Members hire who they want to be their chief. When I got hired to be Mr. Farr's chief, there was an immediate connection. Sometimes it has to be

forged, and other times, it's just there. I think, luckily for Mr. Farr and me, it was just there.

I think it changes the feel of the office. I know that I was always especially sensitive to helping empower my staff, whether they were women or men. We probably had more women on staff than we had men. There might be a little bias there on my part, but the guys who we did hire were fully part of the staff. There was never a girls' club/boys' club kind of thing in the office. I tried to help younger staff in other offices as well. There are other organizations—the Women's Information Network was one that I worked with to help young women get into Capitol Hill and empower them. The [John C.] Stennis Center [for Public Service Leadership] has a program for what they call, "Emerging Leaders"—young staff that you would counsel and mentor. So there was that going on. I just kept trying to help young staff establish themselves. In terms of leadership, it was my job to make sure that my boss, Mr. Farr, was always informed of what's going on in leadership—whether it was in our own leadership or on the committee leadership—by sharing things that were going on, so that he could speak up.

**MURPHY:**

I'm interested in some of the issues that you had to deal with while working for Congressman Farr, particularly in the way that this relationship between a local district—and he was representing a district in California—and Washington. How do you handle issues that are important for your district, but get them into legislation here in Congress and work with other offices in that way? And you might be able to provide a couple of examples on how that occurred.

**DORNATT:**

Well, any good chief knows their district. So I made sure that I got out to California as often as I could. We had some very big issues to start with. We had the biggest military base in the continental U.S. shut down. It was in our

district. And that had huge economic ripples. So I made sure I would go out there often when I first came to work for Mr. Farr, to get everything rolling for him because this was a big issue. So BRAC [Base Realignment and Closure] became one of his big issues.

I tried to make sure that staff, whether they were in Washington or in the district, always had the power to speak for the Congressman, and I think that is something that actually creates good staff, because you give them a sense of responsibility, and if it's a good fit, they feel obligated to act on that responsibility and they do the right thing. It's only when you start questioning your staff that they start messing up, because then they don't know if they're doing what's right.

So working for Mr. Farr, especially in those early years, was all about the base closure, and trying to recover from that. In the midst of that, we had I think it was three or four years running where we had floods in the spring. So our ag [agriculture] industry was just decimated. In those early years, we had a lot to do. I just kept busy. I was different than a lot of chiefs in that I kept a legislative portfolio. Not all chiefs do that. Chiefs will always step in when the issue becomes big enough, but for me, I was like another LA [legislative assistant] in the office. That was part of what I did. And base closure was one of them because it was so huge for the district. It had immense ramifications. So I took that on as one of the big responsibilities.

I think, for me, that forged a very good relationship with my boss because not only was I able to lead the staff, and manage the staff, and all of its various compartments—whether it was getting coffee for the office, or fixing the Xerox machine, or getting the mail done—it was being able to create a legislative environment for him so that he could accomplish what needed to be accomplished for the district. I think it worked for us. I kept a hand in

legislation throughout my entire almost 24 years with him, and it worked for us.

**MURPHY:** Those are really local issues, right? Flooding, and then base closure is an economic issue for that part of the country.

**DORNATT:** Huge.

**MURPHY:** How do you bring that to the Capitol and say, “Let’s do something about this because of my district”?

**DORNATT:** Well, it’s the question that every Member has to answer, and Mr. Farr was pretty dogged. I wanted him to be successful. And in 1994, that first term that he was there, ’93 and ’94—you have to remember, Bill Clinton had just been elected, and one of the first things he did was pass NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. He wanted NAFTA passed. And that was anathema to a lot of the Democrats.

I was not with Mr. Farr when he ran for office. I came after he was elected. During his campaign he had said that he would oppose NAFTA. Labor had helped him get elected. So when the new president, Bill Clinton, starts looking for Democrats to vote on this NAFTA bill, he comes to Sam Farr, and he really wants Sam to vote for it. I hadn’t been with him during his campaign, so I was walking on eggshells here, because I couldn’t advise him to go against a campaign promise. At the same time, I could tell that NAFTA was the right thing to do for him. So I just kept advising him, “You need to weigh all the pros and cons,” while on the back side I was trying to work a deal with Rahm Emanuel at the White House, that if I can bring the boss to NAFTA, what are you going to do to protect him? Because now he’ll have gone against a campaign promise. In the end, he voted for NAFTA, and we were in deep doo-doo with our voters. 1994 was the year everything shifted,

and that NAFTA vote came back to bite us in the butt. Labor deserted us on the campaign trail, but the White House helped us. And Sam barely won.

I'll tell you a funny story. I was out there for the election in 1994. In fact, I went out to work a good part of that campaign. We were driving around the district that election night, hitting different campaign locations, and as we were driving the news was coming back from the East Coast on all the Democrats who were losing left and right, and oh my gosh. He was getting nervous. He was getting nervous, because labor had deserted us for that election, and we were running against a Republican who was well known, and we were sort of sitting on eggshells as we were driving around the district. So that night we get back to his campaign headquarters, and we get out of the car, and he's just, "I'm going to lose, I'm going to lose, I'm going to lose." And I just tugged on his arm and I used every four-letter word I could think of, and I'm like, "You are not going to lose. This is going to turn out okay for you. We've done the right thing. And you get in there, and you get in with a good, positive message to those supporters of yours, and I don't want to hear one more negative peep out of you!" {laughter} And I'm thinking he's going to fire me on the spot, but if he loses the election I'm out of a job anyway, and if he wins he'll forget, right?

So, we go in. He goes to the front of the room, and there's this big, happy crowd wanting some good news. I go into my back campaign office, and I tell them, "Get me the latest. Who do we have down at the election office? I want to know the numbers." In the end, he squeaked by, and he won. And I spent almost 24 years with him. And he forgot about that night. He wasn't angry anymore—and, yes, he forgot all the four-letter words I threw at him.

**MURPHY:**

Another less controversial, I think—perhaps now a little more controversial—the Pinnacles National Monument, passing legislation to get

that to become a national park. Why was that an important thing for the office? And then that's another thing that seems somewhat remote in the scope of the country's political needs. How do you frame that for Congress?

**DORNATT:** Well, if you've ever been to the Pinnacles, it's a phenomenal rock formation. It's got great hiking trails, and it's really an outstanding standalone kind of area. Mr. Farr was very determined to make that a national park, and it became one of our goals for his tenure in Congress. It wasn't easy to do. In a Republican Congress, there's always a feel that you're protecting property that could be otherwise developed, and money could be made off of it. I don't necessarily mean to be snarky about that, but if you saw this part of the world, you would know that it did need to be preserved. Getting monument status for it was the first step, and that was good. But getting national park status for it was the cherry on top. It was everything. We worked really hard at that. These are treasures for America to keep. Mr. Farr really wanted to do that. He didn't want to leave Congress until he had that done, so we worked really hard to get it done. People who go there are stunned at the vistas. It's really quite an amazing place.

**MURPHY:** You worked for a long time for Congressman Farr, but you also worked for other Member offices. Do you think that relationship between district office and Member office has changed over time during the course of your career in certain ways? Perhaps technology has influenced that, or means of travel? Do you think that's become somewhat of a different relationship by 2017?

**DORNATT:** Yes. The internet is a curse and a blessing at the same time, because everybody thinks things can be done instantaneously, when they can't. Constituents who write in, first of all, think that they'll get an immediate reply. When you write an email, somebody replies right back, right? Well, it doesn't work that way. It takes a while for us to figure out what you're

talking about, and then to frame the answer. I think the relationship between district and D.C. offices have changed, and relationships between the Member writ large and his constituents have changed, and I think technology is responsible for that. Some of it is very good, because you can share a lot of information quickly, and so that's good, but it also creates expectations in the constituents' minds that they're going to get what they want right away, and that's not always true. For a long time, in my office, we resisted responding to emails with emails—constituent mail emails—because we were afraid that they would be changed in the process somehow, and somebody would intercede and change what we were writing, and by the time it got to the constituent it wouldn't be what we wrote, and it would be wrong, and there would be a problem. So it actually took us a long time to trust internet responses.

The nature of working on Capitol Hill has changed so dramatically from 1981, when I started, to today. Everything is so electronic, and everything is so instantaneous, and yet human nature is not like that. People need time to absorb information and to determine whether they like that information or not. Demanding a split instant answer is probably the worst thing that could happen in politics, because there's no more debate. There's no more thinking about it. So when Mr. Farr was thinking about leaving, I knew that I wanted to leave, because my time had gone. I can't keep up—I'm not that old—but I can't keep up anymore with people who carry two or three Blackberrys and all sorts of things. But, it was a great run.

**MURPHY:**

One interesting thing that you were involved in were international trips to meet with other legislative bodies, or governmental conferences—one in Germany in '97 and Indonesia in '99. How did you get involved in that, and what were you doing over there?

**DORNATT:**

The Germany trip was through a German exchange program with the Bundestag that Congress actually runs, and that's what I was involved in. And it was eye-opening, because I went not too long after the wall came down in Berlin. But Berlin hadn't been reunited yet. It was very interesting to learn how democracy works over there versus how it works over here, and how other nation-states view America, and what we can or can't do for them. Germany is one of our closest allies, and yes, they wanted us to see what was going on, and how they were rebuilding their government once the wall had come down, and how they were reunifying.

The Indonesia trip was very interesting. It was hosted by the Naval Postgraduate School and it was to basically teach democratic principles to a nation-state that didn't use them. It was a whole weeklong sort of mini-school for government in Indonesia, to help train them, or open them up to a more democratic process in their government. It was very interesting, but very hard, because a lot of the ideas that you have as an American that you think are normal and automatic are not that way in other places around the world. You really have to explain one-man one-vote, or representative government, or civilian control over the military. Those are concepts that are not universally accepted. So that was a very interesting excursion. I was glad I went. I don't know if I made much of a difference, but I did my best.

**MURPHY:**

Were those things that you volunteered for, or you were part of a program?

**DORNATT:**

The Bundestag exchange I volunteered for. I wanted to go. I wanted to learn more. The Indonesia trip, I was asked to join that conference, and be one of the teachers on legislative process. That's what I did while I was there.

**MURPHY:**

Looking back at your career in the House, was there anything unexpected, or something that surprised you about your time in the House?

**DORNATT:**

Yes and no. I mean, I was always surprised that there was, especially in the early years, a level of—what’s the word? You know, men running the show. And it kind of bothered me. The college I went to was an all-girl college, a female college. Even though by the time I left we had gone coed, we only had 16 guys on campus. As a woman coming from that all-female environment, I always felt empowered to speak my mind, and not to take any guff from anybody. Coming up to the Hill, you learn it’s a different environment, and you have to learn how to navigate that environment and try to improve it. In the early years it was a little bit harder, but by the time I left I felt pretty comfortable just speaking out, and the heck with whoever doesn’t like it.  
{laughter}

**MURPHY:**

In terms of the experience of women in Congress, what do you think was the most significant change that you saw from the start of your career to the end of your career, both in terms of women Members, but also people in positions like yours?

**DORNATT:**

Well, obviously, it’s got to be Nancy Pelosi. I mean, she broke the glass ceiling, and thank God she did. She really proved that it can be done, and women are competent, and smart, and have what it takes. I think every woman on the Hill is grateful to her for that. I think women everywhere can do whatever they want. There are more women chiefs of staff now—way more than there ever used to be. Probably almost half on the Democratic side—I don’t know on the Republican side—but almost half of the Members on the Democratic side have female chiefs of staff. That is a huge change. I think it does change engagement up here, and how people approach issues, and how they approach other staffers. I think that’s a positive thing. Nobody looks askance now if you introduce your chief of staff as a female, or that

committee leaders [are] women committee members. I like to think I was a little bit of the change.

**MURPHY:** Well, I think so. And thanks a lot for joining us today.

**DORNATT:** Happy to do it. Thank you.

**MURPHY:** It was really great to have you.

**DORNATT:** Thanks very much.

**MURPHY:** Thanks.