

The Honorable Elizabeth Furse
U.S. Representative of Oregon (1993–1999)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript
June 8, 2017

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

“Well, five sisters and a mother who was quite strong, very strong, I knew that I could do anything I wanted to do. My mother always said, ‘Women can do anything they want to do; whatever you choose you can do.’ And she also felt very strongly that if there was something going wrong in your community, you have to get out and do it. Now that wasn’t always comfortable for a teenager who wants to be like their friends, but I was more afraid of my mother than I was of my friends and so I did demonstrate and it was very liberating.”

The Honorable Elizabeth Furse
June 8, 2017

Table of Contents

Interview Abstract	i
Interviewee Biography	i
Editing Practices	ii
Citation Information	ii
Interviewer Biographies	iii
Interview	1
Notes	43

Abstract

Elizabeth Furse's path to Congress began as a young woman involved in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Greatly influenced by her mother's activism, Furse followed in her footsteps becoming a community organizer and voice for those in need. Before running for elected office, she advised Native American tribes about the intricacies of lobbying Congress and writing legislation—an experience that provided her valuable training and insight for her future House career.

In her oral history, Furse describes how her pacifist background and a desire to slash military spending propelled her from activism to politics. Her community engagement contributed to her ability to appeal to and work with a diverse Oregon constituency. Elected in 1992—the “Year of the Woman”—Furse shares her observations about the role of women in the institution and the bonds that formed among Congresswomen during her three terms. She also describes her tenure on the Armed Services Committee and her commitment to reduce the military budget and the production of nuclear weapons. During her interview, Furse shares her thoughts on how women Members balance work and family life, as well as her personal reasons for founding the Congressional Diabetes Caucus.

Biography

FURSE, Elizabeth, a Representative from Oregon; born in Nairobi, Kenya, October 13, 1936; B.A., Evergreen State College, Olympia, Wash., 1974; director, Oregon Legal Services restoration program for Native American tribes, 1980–1986; co-founded the Oregon Peace Institute in 1985; co-owner and co-operator of a vineyard; elected as a Democrat to the One Hundred Third and to the two succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1993–January 3, 1999); was not a candidate for reelection to the One Hundred Sixth Congress in 1998; was an unsuccessful candidate for nomination as Washington County, Oreg. commissioner in 2014.

[Read full biography](#)

Editing Practices

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

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

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

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

Citation Information

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

“The Honorable Elizabeth Furse Oral History Interview,” Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, June 8, 2017.

Interviewer Biographies

Matt Wasniewski is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. He has worked in the House as a historical editor and manager since 2002. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), and the *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, forthcoming 2013). He helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 2004. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master’s degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.

— THE HONORABLE ELIZABETH FURSE OF OREGON —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: My name is Kathleen Johnson. I'm here today with Matt Wasniewski, who is the House Historian. The date is June 8, 2017, and we are in the House Recording Studio doing a phone interview with former Congresswoman Elizabeth Furse of Oregon. This interview is for a series that we're doing to commemorate the centennial of the election of the first woman to Congress, Jeannette Rankin. Congresswoman, thank you so much for joining us today.

FURSE: Thank you, it's a pleasure.

JOHNSON: To begin with, what we were wondering is we read that you were born, and you grew up in Africa. How would you describe your childhood in Kenya and then in South Africa?

FURSE: Yes, I was born in Kenya. My parents had a farm way up in the mountains. I was born in '36. And in '38, when the Second World War began, my father, who was a British Naval Officer, was called up to go to Cape Town, where all British naval officers were sent from Africa. So we moved to Cape Town; my mother and six kids, six girls—I'm the youngest. We were in South Africa for quite a few years, although we did go back to Kenya once that I remember, where we were there for about two years.

JOHNSON: When you were young, did you have any female role models?

FURSE: My mother. She was an extraordinary woman. She was quite upset in Kenya, about the sort of colonial rule, and had been in India which she thought the Raj were just appalling. Then, when we got to South Africa, it was before the

nationalist government came in, but still, it was colonial, white overlord type, and she did not like that at all. She told us that was not correct. So we were early on aware that the colonial way of doing business and telling people, Africans, or indigenous people that they didn't know how to run their own lives . . . We were told early on that was very, very, very wrong.

WASNIEWSKI: We had read that your mother also established an anti-apartheid group, the Black Sash.

FURSE: Well, the Black Sash, she did. The Black Sash was actually started at Johannesburg with six women, and then my mother was very much instrumental in having it in Cape Town. Cape Town was important because that's where the houses of parliament—South Africa has two houses. One, they have Pretoria, but also Cape Town, and so there were a lot of demonstrations by Black Sash. Black Sash is a great—was—well it still is, but a great organization of women who just stood in silent protest of a move by the South African government to not allow people of color—by that I mean what in South Africa are called coloreds. Those are people who are black and white, mixed race. They were allowed, under the constitution, to vote. The nationalist government tried to remove them, did in fact, and that's when the Black Sash started.

WASNIEWSKI: So your mother was very involved in that. As a young person, did she bring you to various events for the organization? Do you have any memories of that?

FURSE: Yes, I remember the first march in Cape Town. Then, I had been in England and I returned, and I was in the demonstration around the Houses of

Parliament. I was 18. We were quite roughed up by people, and the police did not do anything to protect the women—but you didn't say anything, you just stood there with this black sash. It was very effective. President [Nelson] Mandela thanked the Black Sash when he came out of prison, so I think that was wonderful.

JOHNSON: What were the societal expectations for you as a young woman?

FURSE: Well, having five sisters and a mother who was quite strong, very strong, I knew that I could do anything I wanted to do. My mother always said, “Women can do anything they want to do; whatever you choose you can do.” She also felt very strongly that if there was something going wrong in your community, you have to get out and do it. Now that wasn't always comfortable for a teenager who wants to be like their friends, but I was more afraid of my mother than I was of my friends, {laughter} and so I did demonstrate, and it was very liberating.

JOHNSON: Do you think that that involvement had any influence on your future political career?

FURSE: Oh, absolutely—absolutely yes. I think when you've been through an experience like that, where it was really frightening because the police were really rough, you come through it, and you don't fear that sort of thing and that helped me feel it was quite all right to get out there in the front of those issues.

WASNIEWSKI: Who served as your political inspiration or first mentor? Other than your mother, was there anyone who helped draw you into politics?

FURSE: Well, Congressman Les AuCoin, who was my Congressman here in Oregon, was very much, is very much a liberal; he was anti-military spending, which I am. Other than that, I did not know any politicians. I was really deeply involved in civil rights actions, especially for the Indian tribes treaty fishing, and I was more doing those sorts of things than elected political office. But when Les decided to run for the Senate, I thought, “Gosh, there’s nobody there talking about military spending, so I’ll get in and I’ll talk about military spending. I won’t win.” Well, I did win and that was in ’92. I think Les was a big—and Senator Mark [Odom] Hatfield, we had him as a great Senator. He was a peace activist. He was a great man.

JOHNSON: You just mentioned your community involvement, and we know that you worked for the rights of migrant workers, also for Native Americans. You cofounded the Oregon Peace Institute.

FURSE: Yes.

JOHNSON: Can you describe the impact of your community organizing, and also your activism, on your later career in Congress?

FURSE: Well, I think the thing is that when you’re involved in those sorts of issues, you’re not the leader; you’re just involved with people who are the leaders. The tribal people took the lead, Chavez people, the Latinas. You learn how to get along with people, and you don’t have to be number one. Also, I think what was important for me was I was involved, and when I ran for Congress, people knew me and knew that I was sincere. I had never run for any office before I ran for Congress, and I think my involvement in civil rights had a

huge difference. Tribal people came forward and supported me because they knew that I had been involved in their issues.

WASNIEWSKI: Also during this time period, you became a U.S. citizen in 1972. What do you remember about that experience?

FURSE: Well, I became a citizen because I wanted to vote for . . . I'll think of it in a minute, the word will come. I wanted to vote for—well, all right. The citizenship actual meeting was pretty awful because there were all these people. And I thought the judge was drunk, but we all became citizens and that was nice. But you know it was easy for me to become a citizen; it's not easy nowadays. And I say easy because I was married to a doctor. I was an educated person. I could answer all the questions. Nowadays, well then too, I suppose, it wasn't easy at all. People have a terrible time becoming citizens, and I always felt that I was pretty privileged in order to do it.

It was George [Stanley] McGovern I wanted to vote for—that's who it was.¹ That citizenship gave me an insight into the struggles people have, to get to be accepted in this country. It's fine if you're rich and you're white and you're educated, that's easy, but I realized it wasn't so easy for everybody else.

JOHNSON: You said that the first office you ran for was Congress, but we also saw that you had some experience with Congress before you came here, when you were working on behalf of some Native American tribes in Oregon.

FURSE: Yes. I went to law school at Lewis and Clark Law School here in Oregon, and in my third year, a man called Don Wharton, who was the director of the Native American Program of Oregon Legal Services—he and I had met when

he had been on the Policy Review Commission, Senator [James George]
Abourezk's commission. I had been asked to testify in Seattle, about the
treatment of tribal rights, by the then attorney general who became a Senator
for Washington State. I got to know Mr. Wharton, and he called me, and I
said, "Gee, I'm bored with law school. Yes, I'll come work for you." He
wanted somebody who would coordinate, or help coordinate, tribes who
were trying to achieve, in Oregon, achieve restoration of federal status.

In 1953 there was a terrible, terrible act of Congress called the Termination
Act, or it's called Congressional Resolution 108. That allowed states to
petition to have tribes in their area terminated, and the termination was the
termination of the federal relationship, which is the crucial relationship—it's
the government to government relationship. So I went to the Native
American Program in the '80s, and helped. I just helped the tribes by
training them how to lobby, how to get to Congress, how to write bills.
Native American Program helped write the legislation, and by 1986, '87, all
of the terminated tribes in Oregon but two had been restored by federal act.
In order to overturn the Termination Act, you had to get an act of Congress,
which is heavy lifting for small Indian tribes with no money, but they did the
work and we were very successful in overturning termination in Oregon to a
large extent.

JOHNSON: Did that experience—it sounded like it was very in-depth—did that provide
any insight into how Congress worked, and then helped you later in your
House career?

FURSE: Very much. I was not afraid of Congress because it's sort of all the big halls
and everything. You think, "Oh, that's a bit overwhelming," and especially

for tribal people or for poor people, but I learned how to move around in it. I learned how to meet with Congresspeople and how to help provide the kind of expertise that the tribal leaders needed. They did the work. They were the ones who for 30 years had worked to overturn termination, but I became quite familiar with Congress and how it worked.

WASNIEWSKI: Moving on to your congressional career, we would like to know what motivated you to run for the House in 1992, and were you recruited by anybody?

FURSE: No, I wasn't recruited actually, although later, lots of people were very helpful. What happened was, I was driving from a peace meeting in Boston—I was driving up to Canada—and I heard that my Congressman had decided to run for the Senate. And that's when I thought, "Gee, I'd better run because there won't be anybody there talking about military spending." It was so overwhelming and so awful. So I got home, I said, "I'm going to run for Congress, and all I did was I called lots of people and said I'm going to run, could you send me \$25?"

Oregon is a pretty amazing place. It's very conservative, and it's very liberal. Here was I, an immigrant with a British accent and nobody questioned that in my race. My opposition never said, "Oh, she's not capable of running." So in '92, we put together a team. Congressman AuCoin was very helpful and so was Senator Hatfield, although Senator Hatfield was a Republican, but he still gave me lots of good advice. And so we put together this team and we ran a campaign, and I honestly, truly, never thought I'd get elected. When the results came in, I turned to my husband, I said, "This can't be. I'm going to have to go to D.C." And we just laughed. He had had a lot of experience,

my husband, John Platt. He had been Senator Hatfield's first intern, and so he thought it was great. So anyway, that was it, I sort of did it off the cuff because I'd worked with lots of groups; they came forward and worked with me and gave me a lot of support.

WASNIEWSKI: You kind of led in to one of the next questions that we were going to ask. What advice did people like Senator Hatfield have to offer when you were running for office?

FURSE: Well it's the sort of advice that I now give to younger people who might be interested. The first thing is be totally straightforward. Don't fudge what you might or might not be; let people know exactly who you are. The second one is, and this sounds a little sweet, but the second one is never lie. If you lie, you're going to get caught, people will think that, and I didn't want to lie anyway. The third thing that I think I learned very much was to learn to listen because this is a very diverse district, and I was a liberal Democrat with "a funny accent," as somebody once said—and I had to listen, to hear what people whose lives were very different from mine. We have fishers, we have farmers, we have timber, we have high-tech, we have business, we have all that in this district and I had to learn to do that. And that's what I say to people who are running, "Listen, don't tell them always what you are about. Let's hear what they are about." I think that's what one should do in life anyway.

JOHNSON: I think that's great advice.

WASNIEWSKI: All sound advice. Your election also was on the heels of the Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas hearings in 1991, and we're curious to know how big of an issue gender and women's rights was in your 1992 campaign.

FURSE: It was pretty big. It was pretty big and because EMILY's List had started just recently. There was a lot of awareness of women running for office. That was the year they said, the year of the woman. I always thought it was kind of cute—they gave us one year—but anyway. So those issues hadn't been discussed really, as much as they were in '91 and '92. Those things came to the forefront, and women could then talk about their experiences more easily than prior to that.

JOHNSON: Was this something, gender specifically, that you used in your campaign to help you stand out and to gather support?

FURSE: Well, no. I think everybody realized I was the woman, he was the man, in this race. No, I don't think so. I don't think gender—I mean it's obviously very, very important and people have terrible experiences about, but I never had that because my mother always said, I just never thought that being a woman was a disadvantage. And while I was in Congress, I never saw that. I never felt that I was treated differently because I was a woman, but maybe I just don't recognize those things.

JOHNSON: You mentioned that your husband had some experience being in Senator Hatfield's office. How involved was he and other members of your family in your campaign?

FURSE: Oh, very involved, very involved, they all got involved. My son was living in Seattle, he's a lawyer up there, so he couldn't do much. John, my husband, was extremely involved. He came with me to kind of go around my office in the beginning, when I was elected, and he did a lot of work on the campaign. In my second race, when I won by 301 votes I think, the [Newton Leroy] Gingrich years, he was very, very active checking the votes and practically did more than I did in the second campaign.

WASNIEWSKI: Can you describe some of the key moments in that first campaign, in the general election I guess, where you ran against a pretty well-known politician who had been state treasurer?

FURSE: Yes, and who was an extremely nice person. We never ever had any horrible attacks. He was actually, I can say this, he was a gentleman—very different from the next race, the next two races, where I had a very hostile campaign. What can I say about that? I don't know, we worked so hard, but every day was a sort of surprise. "Oh, we have to do this; we have to do that." I had a good campaign manager, who came actually from Les AuCoin's staff, and it was very hard work, I can remember that very much. It was hard work because you were always in the public. I did a Briggs Myers test with my staff later on, and we found I was the only introvert in the whole group. {laughter} And I am introverted. I'm quite a private person. That was a little hard, being out there in the public, always having to answer every question. But if you're very honest with people, it's easier—you don't have to cover up anything.

WASNIEWSKI: Right. You mentioned earlier that you were surprised that you won, but during the campaign, was there any turning point moment or moment where you thought well, maybe I've turned a corner here?

FURSE: No, I don't remember anything like that. We had debates, and it just seemed that I felt so different, a woman and an immigrant, that I thought well gosh this will be . . . When I won the primary against a very well-known Democrat, that was kind of a shock, a man going on to—who became a good supporter. The Democrats played a very strong part in my campaign, but in the beginning, I don't think the Democratic Party thought that I had any chance.

JOHNSON: Earlier you mentioned EMILY's List and we were wondering about fundraising, especially in that first campaign, how difficult or challenging it might have been for you.

FURSE: Yes, EMILY's List was very helpful to me. What I like about EMILY's List so much is they check and see if you've got a good campaign. They don't throw their money at just sort of "I've decided to run for office." We had a pretty good campaign in place when EMILY's List agreed to support me, and that was very helpful.

JOHNSON: Were there any other groups that supported you that you recall, especially women's groups, national or local organizations?

FURSE: Yes. Yes, NARAL because I'm pro-choice, and a lot of women came into the campaign and helped, volunteered.² Again, it's hard for nonprofits to support campaigns, but people who were part of other nonprofits, especially women's rights and abortion rights. That was the big issue of course, was abortion. My opponent was anti-abortion, and I'm pro-choice—so those were two big differences between us.

WASNIEWSKI: You've alluded to the second campaign, that you won by 301, in '94, during the Republican surge, and the third campaign, you won by a larger margin.

FURSE: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: We're wondering if you can describe for us a little bit—what goes into holding on to a House seat in a competitive district?

FURSE: Yes. I think with this district, people are willing to listen to you. They're willing to give you a break. There are some very conservative parts and very liberal. City of Portland, you're going to get 89 percent of the vote. Other places, no. I think people were intrigued that I had a very different background, and people were intrigued that I would leave my farm and my life here to do that. We talked to a lot of people. I know everybody does, but this was such a diverse district, and it was quite hard to go into areas where you knew there was no support for progressive or liberal views. But we had a good campaign, my campaign staff worked so hard, and I don't know, just maybe luck. {laughter}

JOHNSON: How often were you traveling back to your district?

FURSE: When I was in office?

JOHNSON: Yes.

FURSE: That was really what drove me out of the office. I was coming back and forth every weekend, and it was too much. I don't like flying. You get into this thing where your district office says, "Oh, you must come back, this or this."

I came back every weekend. I wish I hadn't—I would do it differently now. I would come back once a month. Nobody knows if you're in the district or not. That travel was extremely stressful to me.

WASNIEWSKI: You've talked about aspects of the district, but can you describe the district geographically, when you were first elected, and then also maybe some of the demographics?

FURSE: Yes. Well, it's a very large district. It goes from the coast, so that's fishers. It goes along the Columbia River and to Portland, which is a big and progressive city, all west of the Columbia River, and then it goes through Washington County, which was then, very rural. Now, Intel is there, and it's much less so. It has these varied aspects. And to travel the district, was not as bad as some people's districts, which are huge. But you were traveling through different aspects of Oregonians. Oregonians are very interested in politics, and so it was very lively. I had to be well informed about everything that was going on in that district, as every Member of Congress should be.

JOHNSON: In 1992, so your first election, you talked about it being the "Year of the Woman." There were 24 new women that were elected to the House, and you were part of this group.

FURSE: Yes.

JOHNSON: What was the media attention like for you and your female colleagues? Was there a lot of attention? I know for the women that were in the Senate, there were many stories written about them, but what about in the House?

FURSE:

Well, I think there was quite a lot of attention in the House. We all seemed to wear red suits. {laughter} That was the big thing—you could certainly pick us out on the [House] Floor. Yes, I think there was that sense, and . . . I love that you're doing this for Jeannette Rankin because she's my heroine. Here she was, the first woman, and here she voted against going to war twice—that is extraordinary. You would think being the first woman would be, "Oh well, I'm the first woman, I can't do any more than that." But no, she was so outstanding, and there were other women like that; Lynn [C.] Woolsey, whom I became very fond of, she would say, "I was on welfare once, I know what it's like," and that's so important.

I think we've changed the dialogue a bit. We certainly got a lot of legislation that year which benefited women, and we had the caucus then, at that time. Gingrich took that away, but we had the Women's Caucus and we did a lot of work together. I think we made a difference, and I think it was visible because women are different to men and therefore it was visible, and I think that was important. Maxine Waters was one of my great heroines. She was very helpful with how things worked. There were some incredible women there.

JOHNSON:

Did you develop a special bond with these women that you mentioned, Maxine Waters and Lynn Woolsey, as freshmen?

FURSE:

Yes, Lynn Woolsey, yes. Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder—Pat Schroeder was on the Armed Services Committee. I asked for a third committee. I got Merchant Marine and Fisheries, which I wanted, and Banking, because Housing is in Banking, and I asked if I could get a third committee and I did, I got Armed Services. That was quite a year. That was when Ron

[Ronald V.] Dellums became chairman [of Armed Services]. Wow, it was amazing, and Pat Schroeder was on that [committee] too.

WASNIEWSKI: Were there any other veteran Members, women or men, who served as mentors when you arrived in the House?

FURSE: Yes. I think that people like Gerry [Eastman] Studds, who was the chairman of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries when I was on it. Gerry became a good friend, but he also was a very skilled politician, and he helped me a lot. I served on Merchant Marine Fisheries because of the salmon issues on the Columbia [River], which affect the Indian tribes. And I wanted to be on that committee and have a hand in that, and Gerry was great. He was a great mentor.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you remember any of the advice that you were offered by Members, about the institution when you first arrived?

FURSE: No, I don't. {laughter} I don't. "Keep your head down" was mostly what people said. No, people were very kind and open. Being a new Member wasn't looked upon as something, "Oh, you're just a new Member, you'll be gone tomorrow." Members seemed to treat one another as a colleague. In those days, Republicans and Democrats spoke to each other and could work together and it's not true now, so it was a much more collegial place.

JOHNSON: There was the spike in the number of women from the '92 elections, but still there were just 48 women serving in the House, in the 103rd Congress [1993–1995]. Because those numbers were so small, did you find that women Members tended to gravitate towards each other?

FURSE: Oh yes, oh yes, and because of the Women's Caucus, we could think about things we wanted to do together, get it through—getting cosponsors. We could work as a team there and so that was very, very helpful.

WASNIEWSKI: You've also answered this in bits and pieces but we wanted to ask the question, about the atmosphere of the House when you were elected: Was it a welcoming place for women in 1992?

FURSE: Yes, it was. I think there were certain male Members who were quite surprised, they hadn't had those many—it hadn't looked like that before. But everybody acted as if you all got there the same way. You got there by the votes of your district, so you are all the same in many ways. I did not find anybody, quite frankly, who treated me as a lesser Member, just because I was a woman, or just because I was a newcomer.

JOHNSON: The Congressional Women's Caucus is certainly something that we're asking all of our interviewees to talk about. Specifically, what were your impressions of the caucus, and also the role that you think it played in the institution?

FURSE: Well, it was very helpful to me. I could go there and there would be other women, I could ask questions, we could have conversations. It's not always possible; you don't always get together otherwise. There needs to be that place, and they had good staff, and so it was a place that you could go and more informally, organize and understand some things that we wanted to get done. We got a lot of legislation that year for women.

JOHNSON: Is there something in particular that stands out, that you did informally, or something more formal, with the caucus?

FURSE: I can't think of it right now, but it's sort of the general support issue, knowing that there are people there who think the way you do. I was the first—I think this is true—the first Member of Congress, a woman, to admit to having an abortion. It was a *Roe v. Wade* anniversary and there was some article, and I had had an abortion—it was a medical issue. Women were pleased when they saw that. It was like breaking through some pretense. I think we were just very collegial.

WASNIEWSKI: We had read also, in some sources, that you left the caucus at one point, is that correct?

FURSE: No.

WASNIEWSKI: Okay.

FURSE: No. Gingrich took away the funding. I think it was in '95, no it must have been '96, so there was no staff there anymore.

WASNIEWSKI: All the legislative service organizations were kicked off campus—that's right.

FURSE: Yes. And being on campus was important because you don't have a lot of time. You're running to votes, you're running back to your office, and so to have it right there was very, very important.

JOHNSON: You brought up the issue a couple times, and again we just want to ask a little more directly about the issue of women's reproductive rights, and how important this was for women serving in Congress in the 1990s.

FURSE: Oh, I think it was very important. I think it was something that probably each and every Member had some part of their campaign in some way. Well, not people like Helen [P.] Chenoweth- [Hage], who was opposed. There were women Members there who were very conservative, but for me it was obvious right from the start that I was pro-choice, and I made that very clear to the voters. I think that's an issue that hangs over women in a way, even if they don't have an abortion, it's still their daughters, their nieces, those things hang over women, and I think women in the Congress were more aware of those than men were.

JOHNSON: Was it an issue that you think ever divided the caucus or caused dissension?

FURSE: Yes, I think it probably did, but more personally than you know, over a piece of legislation. You took your own personal stand, and if there were people there who agreed with that, that was great, but it wasn't forced on anybody.

WASNIEWSKI: When you were first elected in '92, the Democrats had been in the majority in the House for almost 40 years.

FURSE: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: What was it like for you after that 1994 election—which was very close for you, a difficult election—what was it like when the Republicans gained control of the House in the next election cycle? How would you describe the atmosphere in the House, at the opening of the 104th?

FURSE: Well, it was certainly not as much fun being in the minority as in the majority, but also, there was such a sense from the Republicans, of “Oh my

God, at last, we've got it." You can't blame them; they waited 40 years. It took a while before this non-collegiality took place. When I left the Congress, people were still talking to each other; it doesn't seem like they do that now.

In '94, now I believe this is true, but I was the only newly elected Member, Democratic Member, to survive in four western states because it hit the West really hard. And, we lost Mr. [Thomas Stephen] Foley. So, the West was sort of such a switch around it, it had been so progressive, I had thought.

Gingrich did something extremely clever, and you probably know this very, very well, but every day, after business was over, but C-SPAN cameras were still on, he would get up on the floor and talk about how horrible the government was. And what we were doing? Oh, I don't know going to parties all, visiting our families. He didn't. He just spent every evening, and I think that's why the '94 changed. It was this business of this mistrust of government that he just hammered into the American people.

JOHNSON: You've mentioned both of these people. You had the opportunity to serve under two Speakers: Speaker Foley and Speaker Gingrich. What are your memories of them and their leadership, and then how would you compare their leadership styles?

FURSE: Well, my memory of Mr. Foley was, I had met him before I became a Member, but sort of a jolly, go along, trying to help his colleagues, a moderate kind of man.

Mr. Gingrich was not moderate, and you could tell it from the beginning. And of course the hammering of his insistence on the "Contract with

America,” made me very, very suspicious—that he was not a person who had the real, best interests of the United States at heart. So it was depressing to see the way he manipulated his people. Now, he didn’t last very long, but he certainly had a huge influence.

WASNIEWSKI: It sounds like, when you first came to Congress, that you had a pretty good idea what committees you wanted to get on. We’ve asked everybody to this point, and we want to ask you: what advice did you receive about committees that might be a good fit for you?

FURSE: Well, I had been around so much in the ’80s, doing the work with the tribes that I pretty well figured out which committee I could best serve. I would love to have been on Interior Committee because that’s where tribal issues come, but I knew I could work on tribal issues through my office. I wanted to do something on housing, and I wanted to do something on trying to cut military spending—and I did. I actually got a bill to cut military spending by 5 percent, which both the chairman and the Ranking Member agreed to, so I figured well, I did get some of that. Then we got the nuclear ban on mini nukes. I wanted to do those things very much.

JOHNSON: You’re one of a small number, a handful of women, on each of those three committees, your initial committee assignments. Did you ever feel like you had to work any harder as a woman in committee, to be taken seriously?

FURSE: Well, yes, but I had a great staff. My staff were just terrific and so loyal, so that I would go into those committee meetings very well prepared, and I think that that made the difference. I could ask the right questions; I knew what we were up to each time. Serving under Gerry Studds in Merchant

Marine and Fisheries was a dream. He was such a collegial person. I think it would depend on your staff. If you had a good staff who kept you prepared, you could get your questions asked.

WASNIEWSKI: As someone who had been involved in the pacifist movement, what was it like for you to serve on that Armed Services Committee in the 103rd Congress? You mentioned Pat Schroeder, she was a senior Member, she was subcommittee chair, and then Ron Dellums, who was chairman of the full committee, and two very outspoken war critics.

FURSE: Yes. Well, that was wonderful. I hadn't known Ron Dellums. Well, I'd known of Ron Dellums through work I did in Los Angeles, and I loved—one thing Ron Dellums said, after he became chairman, he said, "Elizabeth, now when the Admirals come in, they come right to my office!" What a great guy, both of them, and so that was uplifting.

I thought the budget was so painful. I tried to get C-17 [military transport aircraft] production stopped and didn't get anywhere with that, so that was that. It was such an old boys committee, and Pat and Ron tried their very best to make it more open and inclusive, but it was very much an old boys committee, but I stayed on it.

WASNIEWSKI: Did that change at all over the three terms that you were there or was that fairly consistent?

FURSE: Well, I went to Commerce Committee because Oregon needs a Commerce Committee Member to make sure we protect our Oregon health plan. I went

to that when Ron ran for Senate—Ron [Ronald Lee] Wyden—and so I was only on Armed Services two terms, I think.

JOHNSON: In 1993, you and John [McKee] Spratt [Jr.], of South Carolina teamed up to cosponsor an amendment to ban the research and development of the low yields nuclear warheads. Can you describe that partnership and your efforts working together?

FURSE: Yes. Two constituents came to me and told me that they were suffering from many disabilities, and the Veterans Administration didn't seem to do anything about it. We did some research, we found out that they had been in the Gulf War, handling bullets that had been dipped in uranium, and they were suffering from uranium poisoning. So I went to Mr. Spratt, who I knew had a big interest in protection of veterans, and he and I worked on that and got that passed. And when it came up a few years later—I was not in the Congress, it came up again, when it came up to be altered—Mr. Spratt kept it as we had passed it. I found that a very important thing. I felt so badly for these people, not being told that they were actually handling uranium, and not getting services as they should have, and Mr. Spratt was great to work with.

WASNIEWSKI: Another big issue at the time, in terms of the military, was increased rights for gays and lesbians. We're wondering if you can describe your memories of the debate at the time and your own personal thoughts on the issue.

FURSE: Yes. Well, I met quite a lot with the Campaign for Human Rights, the gay rights group, and obviously supported all those bills, except, I had a really terrible time with the DOMA [Defense of Marriage Act] because I was going

to vote ‘no’ on DOMA, and Gerry and Barney Frank both said don’t vote ‘no’ because that’s a put-up bill. It’s not the gay community calling for this bill, it’s the Republicans calling to trap Democrats in their next election. And that was horrible; I hated voting for that bill. It’s the only bill I think I ever voted for that I didn’t agree with my own vote.

The “don’t tell” situation, I worked a lot with many members of the gay community, and in fact, I was very honored when I was asked, in the Gay Pride March, to speak at the cathedral, which I did. I’m so proud of the fact that gay rights is now so much more advanced—not perfectly, not totally, but so advanced from what we were then.

JOHNSON: We wanted to ask you a couple questions about your experience on the Commerce Committee, specifically about Congressman [Thomas Jerome Bliley [Jr.]], and his leadership of the committee, just your impressions of that, and then also the Ranking Member, John [David] Dingell, [Jr.].

FURSE: Well, that wasn’t a collegial committee. Both of them marshaled everything through. John Dingell, I mean he was so, “John Dingell is right and no questions asked.” That’s not the sort of leadership that I particularly enjoyed. I didn’t enjoy my time on the Commerce Committee, although there were issues that were important to me, and so, I was glad I was there.

WASNIEWSKI: We’re about an hour into the interview, and we still have maybe a third of the questions to go. Do you need to take a break at all?

FURSE: No, I'll just grab a little cup of coffee, which is sitting there. It's nice being home; you've got your coffee. Do you, in this series, do you speak much about the families? Do you ask much about the families of the Members?

WASNIEWSKI: Absolutely, yes. Would you like to talk about that a little bit?

FURSE: Yes, I would. When I came to the Congress, both my children were grown, and then my grandson was born during it. It's a very, very tough life on families. I would never have run for office if I had small children at home because you just wouldn't have the attention for them, but my kids were really, really terrific. They were helpful in the campaigns, they supported me when I would be tired, and they were great. And then my grandson was born and that was wonderful, but it's a very, very tough life on families, unless they all move to Washington, D.C., and women generally didn't. Their husbands stayed where they were, and the woman traveled back and forward. And maybe I'm generalizing but that's the way I saw it. So, I think it's even harder on women, especially if they have younger families, than it is on men, to do that job. And when you get home, you're not your own person. Your staff have organized all sorts of things. But my kids were older, and I felt that was a great advantage, and they were terrific about the whole thing.

WASNIEWSKI: You had indicated earlier, your husband was very supportive of your work and helped you with the campaign and really was your eyes and ears in the district it sounds like.

FURSE: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: Did he live you in D.C., or did he stay home?

FURSE: I should say that I've been married twice. My first husband, I was married to in London, and we lived in Los Angeles, his name was Dr. Richard Briggs. John Platt, my next husband, we did a lot of work in the fishing rights struggle. He was a young lawyer, and we are now divorced, but we lived on our farm. We divided the farm up and we're best friends, and he takes care of my vineyard. So, I've been very, very fortunate with both those, but John has a deep interest in politics.

JOHNSON: Earlier, we had asked you about the press and their response when you were elected, but in a position, being in such the public eye and under so much scrutiny, was that ever difficult for your family?

FURSE: Yes, it was. I think it was, although everybody behaved tremendously. John said he never took a smoke of a marijuana cigarette while I was in office, so, and now it's legal. {laughter} You have to trust your family, that they won't do something silly. There are Members who have had terrible experiences.

JOHNSON: And we certainly talked to some people in the past, where they said it was difficult if there was a negative article written about a family member. Was that something that was a challenge for your family as well?

FURSE: No, I don't think they paid that much attention to it. John, my husband, just took that sort of stuff as, "Well, that's politics."

WASNIEWSKI: We have one more question about committees, and it's a general one. You mentioned Pat Schroeder—when she came to the House in the early '70s, women weren't on every committee, and they certainly tended not to be on the power committees. By the time you come in it had changed a little bit,

but even then it was somewhat limited. We're curious to know, what do you think the importance is, of having a woman's perspective across the spectrum of committees?

FURSE: Well, I think it's essential. I've always said, it's not that women necessarily do a better job, it's just you cannot get a good decision unless you have everyone at the table. If you don't have 50 percent of the country, just this whole horrible thing with Mr. [Donald J.] Trump, he finally put Senator [Susan Margaret] Collins on a committee for health. If you don't have 50 percent represented, then you're not going to get a good decision.

The other thing is that the committee structure is such that seniority is so important, so that the women who came in, in '92, they weren't senior and certainly when I was there, there were very few senior women as ranking, certainly as chairs. I think that that's the problem with the system, is that you don't get new blood up there asking the questions, having the opportunity to bring a new perspective.

WASNIEWSKI: Yes, it's a long process.

FURSE: Yes.

JOHNSON: We wanted to switch the focus and ask a little bit more about legislation, and specifically with women and children. You were an outspoken proponent of more research and better health care for women. Can you talk about some of the ways that you tried to use your position in Congress to achieve this goal?

FURSE:

Well, yes. I started the Diabetes Caucus in the Congress, and we ended up where I think there are now 300 Members of that caucus. My daughter has diabetes and the cost for people with diabetes is just extraordinary, and so I put forward a bill with the caucus, the Diabetes Caucus, to raise the amounts of money we put into things like insulin, things like those sorts of things that are essential to diabetics, but are very hard to obtain. And we doubled the amount. We put a bill through, and we doubled the amount of funding to diabetes, not just research, but also to training medical personnel because diabetes is an extremely complicated condition. I worked very, very hard on that, and Diana DeGette from Colorado, she became a chair of that caucus.

So, that was an issue, it wasn't just women's health, but it was women are so affected by diabetes, so are we all, but it was easy to get a caucus because if you say diabetes, I can tell you that everybody in the room nods because they know somebody with it—and once you know somebody with diabetes and you think, “Ah, yes.” That was a wonderful thing for us. I went to the President's [William Jefferson (Bill) Clinton] signing. My daughter came—it was very uplifting for somebody like her, who has diabetes.

WASNIEWSKI:

One of the other issues that you worked on was to expand health care to uninsured children. We read a floor speech where you described it as a national security issue. We're wondering if you can explain a little bit, what you meant by that.

FURSE:

Well, I believe that if people are healthy and taken care of, particularly children, they grow up to be much more stable, sane people. I think we have a national security issue that I believe is an internal national security issue. We have people who are so out of the system, so unable to get care.

Obamacare kind of met some of that. Children who do not get sufficient health care in their early years have real trouble maturing, and I believe that we need to invest in things like child health because a healthy child can prosper. [Dwight D.] Eisenhower said, every warship made robs from our children, and he was right. We spend vast amounts of money on the military and not nearly enough on our own people, and child health is absolutely vital for a secure country.

WASNIEWSKI: And you introduced a bill, the Children's National Security Act, and you joined together with other Democratic women to draft that legislation. Can you describe that process a little bit?

FURSE: Well, women Members whom I approached were immediately willing to work on that because it made such sense. It's strange, how legislation, what happens. You have to work it, you have to go and see people who you want to be cosponsors and you have to explain, you have to be able to explain it in a way that a person will put their name on a bill. That bill was very compelling because not just women, but women automatically seem to think about children's health.

JOHNSON: Another area of concern that we read about, that you were focused on, was pension inequalities for women. What was the inspiration for your involvement with pension reform, specifically for women?

FURSE: Well, as always, it came from somebody in the district, a constituent who came to my office in D.C., paid her own way, and talked about what was happening for her when she realized that her pension would not cover her life, and neither would her mother's. I hadn't really thought about it much

prior to that, but like any time when a constituent comes and says “Look, here’s a problem.” We did the investigation, we did the research, and realized that women were retiring without sufficient money to keep them going, and retiring at a much lower rate than their male colleagues. That, I thought was very unfair, and we should do something about it.

JOHNSON: Overall, do you feel that the House at that time paid enough attention to women’s economic equality?

FURSE: Well not enough, but certainly there were now women on every committee, who could bring that issue up, the inequality of payment. There’s still great inequality in wages. It was an important civil rights issue to me.

WASNIEWSKI: Another big issue in the early-to-mid-1990s was domestic violence, which began to receive a lot more public attention. How important was that issue to you personally, and then also to other women Members of the House?

FURSE: Well, I think when we would discuss it in the caucus, there was so much more—well, there was so much understanding that yes, those things do happen, not necessarily to one’s self. There’s no resistance to the idea that domestic violence is a problem, and so therefore, it became important to the Congress, through the addition of so many women. We lost a lot of women in ’94, but still, it was that and early childhood education, became very important.

WASNIEWSKI: Are there any memories that stand out in particular, related to the legislation, the Violence Against Women Act?

FURSE: I'm afraid no, afraid not. I don't think of any particular issue. You know, there's so much going on all the time, but no I'm sorry, I'm not too good at all the memories.

WASNIEWSKI: No that's fine, that's fine. There's a lot of different pieces at work, and it's hard to sometimes pick out one and drill down.

FURSE: Indeed, yes.

JOHNSON: And many people have described it in a similar fashion, that there's just so much going on at the same time, that one thing in particular doesn't always stand out.

FURSE: Yes, yes, that's right. Then there are those moments, like I'm just recalling when I put forth the 5 percent decrease in military spending, and I stood up to speak and the chairman said, "Thank you, Ms. Furse, we have it before us and the Ranking Member and I agree." Bam! Down goes the gavel and I thought, oh my God, that was easy. {laughter} And it wasn't that easy.

JOHNSON: After all that work, a little anticlimactic.

FURSE: Yes. And I'm not going to speak on this. Anyway, yes chairmen have such power, such power.

JOHNSON: You represented a district from Oregon in Congress and historically, there have been six women from the state of Oregon. Do you think that women from the West brought a different perspective than women representing other regions of the country?

FURSE: Well, I wonder. Now you see, I don't feel like I'm part of the western experience so much. I wasn't raised on a western farm, although raised on an African farm. But yes, we've had some fabulous women from Oregon and Washington: Senator [Maria E.] Cantwell and people like that. She came in when I did, but lost the next year and now back as Senator. I don't know, are we more progressive in the West? Well, California, lots of women have managed to win office there and I think we are probably more progressive—though I shouldn't say that. I'm not sure why western women are different.

WASNIEWSKI: One of the women that you had the opportunity to work with was Darlene Hooley, also from Oregon. Did she offer you any advice when you came to the House, or did you have an opportunity to work closely together on any issue?

FURSE: Well, she came after me. She came, I believe in '96, is that right, '96?

WASNIEWSKI: Yes, I'm sorry. I meant, did you offer her any advice?

FURSE: Oh yes, I offered here all sorts of advice, like, "Don't fly home every weekend." {laughter} My favorite advice: stay here and have a good time. Darlene is great, she's retired, and I see her once in a while. She lives in Portland. She had a lot of experience as a county elected [official], and so she came with that background.

WASNIEWSKI: Were there any issues that you worked on together?

FURSE: No.

JOHNSON: We asked you questions about the caucus, of course, about women joining together, but what about women from some of the western states? Were there opportunities for you to work together, maybe some issues that drew you in unison?

FURSE: You know, I don't recall anything that particularly the western state women worked on. We probably did, but I can't think of a particular experience where that's when it was mostly women from the West.

WASNIEWSKI: Another contentious issue during your career in the House was NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]. We've read of course, that you voted against the trade agreement. What went into your decision to do that?

FURSE: Well, I think most of all, by talking with people in the unions here who opposed it, and realizing what was happening on the Mexican border, that we were accepting work from lower-wage people, and it would be exploitive. So, yes. It wasn't the Canadian part of NAFTA that concerned me; it was that it would be exploitive of Mexican workers.

WASNIEWSKI: Can you talk a little bit about the role of labor issues during your House career and how important they were in your district?

FURSE: Well they were very important. It's a very big sadness to me that I see the unions not having the power and the clout that they used to have because I believe very much in organized labor. Whenever you find countries that say oh no, you can't organize, or firms, there's a problem there. The labor unions have had such a struggle to get where they've got, and I'm really, really supportive of labor and I would hope that they could get back some of their

clout. They were very kind to me. We would talk on issues, but we had a lot in common just right from the start and they realized it.

JOHNSON: During your three terms, you backed a lot of environmental initiatives, but how did you balance those issues that sometimes put trade, labor, and the environment on conflicting sides?

FURSE: Well, you have to look very closely at it. I think over and all, I have to think about the environment is forever and short-term economic gains, even if it's supported by labor, short-term economic gains, like the forests. The forest here has been of real concern to me. You have to say what's the long-term, and the environment has to win out. I have tried to support the environment and explain to people who may be opposed to it—opposed to certain aspects—that they really have to take a longer-term look. I appreciate what the tribes did with the treaties. They were thinking of seven generations. We don't think seven generations, and we need to do that.

WASNIEWSKI: Because there were so few women in Congress relatively, when you served, did you feel that you not only represented your constituents, but also women across the country?

FURSE: Well, yes, although that seemed a little bit presumptuous of me when I would think that way. But, yes, I think there are universal women's issues. There are very few men who could probably totally understand those issues, although—lots of men are supportive of women's issues. But, yes, I think you do have a rather unique role when you're a woman amongst few. I look at the picture of all the new Members taken on the Capitol steps, and there weren't very many women in it, even though we doubled the number of women in

the Congress. So I think there are some universal issues. Pay and healthcare issues, I think are universal for us.

JOHNSON: Were there any women's staff, either from your office or another part of the House that stand out in your mind as being particularly effective?

FURSE: Well, my chief of staff, who came to me when I was in my first campaign. She was from the East but anyway, she came to work on my campaign and when we won I said, "Okay, we've gone through all this, would you like to be the chief of staff?" She was wonderful because she had a lot of experience. She didn't take things too seriously. She didn't get into a panic over oh, "So and so said this about you in the newspaper." She was terrific, and she was really wonderful with young staff. She would give them the opportunity to make mistakes, but she would also give them responsibility. She was wonderful, Jennie Kugel. She was a great person in my learning. She taught me a whole lot about the Congress because she had been in various Members' offices, but she stayed with me the whole time and we still are in contact.

JOHNSON: What kind of impact do you think women like your chief of staff had on the institution?

FURSE: I think it was big because "A" she knew what she was talking about; she had seen lots of situations. She had a great sense of humor. I think that helped a lot. She could get people to understand issues. She was intensely loyal but then so many staffers are; they're so loyal. I just shudder to think about these people in the White House right now, who must be just living in fear. All my staff were fabulous. I only had two staff leave in the whole six years, and one

was for getting married and the other was, I think her husband moved. Otherwise, we were a really good team.

WASNIEWSKI: One of the things that we've had the opportunity to do this past year, this centennial year, for Jeannette Rankin, is to look at the press attention that was paid to her when she first came to the House, and a lot of it was focused on the way she dressed and her demeanor. Do you think that that had changed very much by the time you came to the House, or did you feel like you and other women Members all faced that kind of attention or scrutiny?

FURSE: Oh, I think so, and we all wore suits. Yes, I think there is much more attention to how a woman looks. Well, Mrs. Clinton was put through that, and what kind of hairstyle, but yes. And then I'm trying to remember, who was the first woman who went on the floor in slacks and gold tennis shoes? She was there when I was there—Cynthia [Ann] McKinney.

WASNIEWSKI: Cynthia McKinney wore gold tennis shoes.

FURSE: Yes. Cynthia McKinney, and she was the first one who went with slacks, and then we all said, "Oh, well if Cynthia can, we can." And then women began to wear trousers, suits, you know. But yes, she was the rulebreaker, a wonderful woman.

WASNIEWSKI: This leads to a larger question about the press. Was that a transition for you, coming from being active in local politics and local causes and issues to having to deal with the national press?

FURSE: I think it was difficult. Now, I was very fortunate in that I hired a woman from Oregon as my press secretary, Mary Fetch, and she seemed to be able to take in that national scene. She and Jennie worked very well together, so I got some very good press, thoughtful press. Not all my local press was great, but I think it was having somebody who was not intimidated by the *New York Times* calling. I think it was the staff who were able to bridge that gap.

JOHNSON: In 1995, we read that you briefly entered the Democratic primary to replace Bob [Robert William] Packwood in the U.S. Senate. Why did you decide to enter that race and then why did you withdraw?

FURSE: Well, I decided to enter the race because I always think well, my goodness, here's a spot why not move up. But Senator Wyden came to me, and he was quite distressed and said it was something he was planning to do. He hadn't announced. I said, "Well, gosh, Ron, I didn't know you were running," and he said well, it was his turn. He also had a war chest that was pretty high, and so I said I'm not going to bother, I won't run for Senate, let him have it. He's done a very good job.

JOHNSON: At the time, did you think—and maybe still to this day—do you think it was important for the Senate to have more women than were presently there?

FURSE: Yes, when I came into the Congress there was only one woman, so it's wonderful to see states with two women representing them. Yes, I think it's always good to have more of a balance.

WASNIEWSKI: You had mentioned earlier that the travel became difficult over time. Was that the primary reason why you decided not to seek re-election in '98?

FURSE: Well, actually the primary reason was that in '92, Oregon had a ballot measure on which it said—part of the ballot measure was that Members of Congress should only stay three terms. Now that was declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court, but I felt that the people of Oregon—it was overwhelmingly voted, the people of Oregon thought that that was the right thing to do, and I always said I wouldn't stay more than three terms. And I always within me said that. I don't think I was too public about not staying, but I thought, "Well, Oregon people have voted three terms, it seems okay to me. Okay, it's not constitutional, but I can choose to do that." So that's why I left after three terms. Also, I wanted to come home. It was a long way away.

WASNIEWSKI: It is, that's a lot of travel. I have to ask, because we don't always get a chance to talk to someone who was there on the date I'm going to mention, but your last day in the House was a historic date . . .

FURSE: Yes.

WASNIEWSKI: Can you describe a little bit about that atmosphere, it's December 19th, and it was the end of the [Clinton] impeachment push in the House.

FURSE: Well, first of all, I read the impeachment papers, you couldn't have impeached a dog on them. It was just horribly thrown together. Secondly, I believe that impeachment has to be a very serious crime. Now I know that the crime was lying under oath, but it was really around his sexual issues, and I wasn't going to vote for impeachment.

I was leaving that day to go home and it was, as I recall a Thursday, and I had a taxi waiting, and I ran upstairs and it was my last vote, to vote 'no,' and then I left and I didn't wait for the final result. I hated that period because everything was focused on it. You couldn't get anything done. The press was only asking about that, and it was one of those things that sucked away everything else. I liked Bill Clinton, I thought he was a good President, and I didn't think that was a worthy thing to do.

WASNIEWSKI: It's something that consumed a lot of Congress's time.

FURSE: Oh my goodness, yes, and not well discussed, just all sort of partisan.

JOHNSON: I know we've kept you for a long time, so thank you for being so patient with all of our questions. We just had a few more, some retrospective questions to ask you if you have the time.

FURSE: Sure.

JOHNSON: You talked a little bit about Congresswoman Hooley, when she came in, that you offered her some advice, but did you serve as a mentor, do you think, to any of the younger woman Members that came in while you were serving in Congress?

FURSE: I don't think so. I think people come, they come with their own sort of idea of how to do things and a lot of them had served on the state level, which I didn't do. I think one could offer friendly advice, but I don't think I was a mentor to anyone particular.

JOHNSON: What about to staff?

FURSE: To the staff?

JOHNSON: Yes. Do you think you might have served as a mentor?

FURSE: Yes, I think so. When we first came in, I told the staff, at the first staff meeting, I said from now on, we represent not the people who voted for us but those who voted against us. I wanted to make sure that they didn't think that we were only going to talk to Democrats.

My staff, I can say, were fabulous. Chris Porter, who was my legislative director, he was so willing to work hard and make sure he gave me good advice. I think I was a mentor because of my background in civil rights. I think people realized that I wasn't just in it for whatever glory, and they were terrific. But I don't think I served as a mentor for any other Member, particularly.

WASNIEWSKI: You described earlier how important it was for everyone to have a voice at the table, but for women in particular, do you think they play a unique role in Congress? Do you think they bring something different to the table qualitatively than men?

FURSE: Well, yes, but not that they're better. It's just that they have the experience that a man doesn't have, just as a man has some experiences that women don't have. I think it's important to have all the experiences there, just as it's important to have diversity of color and religion, so that you get the mix because America is a mixing bowl of all sorts of things. To have only one

group represented is not a good idea, so that when there were only almost all white men, good people maybe, smart people, but they don't have any experience of other people's experience, and I think that's vital. I think it's vital in every group of decisionmakers; there must be more experience than just one particular kind. So that's what women brought and that's what women of color brought, what men of color bring—they bring something very different from the experience of white middle class men, who before, who really were the representation in the Congress.

JOHNSON: Here's a question that we've asked each one of our interviewees. There are now 109 women in Congress: 88 in the House and 21 in the Senate. How many do you think will be in Congress on the 150th anniversary of Jeannette Rankin's swearing into the House in 2067?

FURSE: Well, gosh, let's hope it's closer to 50/50, but that also, I want to say that women of color, women of a different experience, those must be part of the mix; otherwise again, we'll get one kind of decision.

JOHNSON: And if it is that number, how do you think it will get to that point? How will it come about?

FURSE: I don't know. I think it will come about certainly now because people are so energized. I hear young women saying, "Well, I need to be in politics." If we could get the tremendous money out of it, more women would be willing to enter this, a difficult profession. The money is I'm sure a big detriment to people getting in, that just say, "Oh no, I couldn't think of raising that sort of money." I was lucky, I raised it basically, once—well, I think my last election, somebody told me that my average donation was \$58. I don't know

if that's true or not, you know, I haven't looked at the figures, but that's what I was told by one of my accountants. We've got to reduce things to make it easier for people to say, "Yes, I will take the chance and do this."

JOHNSON: Do you think that's the biggest obstacle for women who might want to run, the fundraising and money?

FURSE: Yes. I do, I do.

WASNIEWSKI: Do you think that your service inspired or may inspire other women to run for elected office?

FURSE: Well, I hope so, but not a lot of women have run for elected office here in Oregon. Darlene did and that was wonderful and she came in. I wish more women would—of course, we have Congresswoman [Suzanne] Bonamici, and that's wonderful too. I don't know if I particularly did. I hope I did; I hope I inspired some people, some women.

WASNIEWSKI: Was there anything unexpected or something that surprised you about your time in the House?

FURSE: Well, I think what surprised me was there was so many things going on that it was hard to focus. I'm used to working on a cause or a civil rights issue, but there, there was so many issues and so much to do. I think that was a bit disconcerting. Although I was able to get staff who would focus, but I didn't always feel that I had that focus that I needed.

JOHNSON: What do you think will be your lasting legacy in terms of your House service?

FURSE: Well, I've got Westside light rail all the way from Portland to halfway out of Oregon. We got a huge Westside light rail authorization. But I think, I hope that my legacy will be that I was always a civil rights activist and that that's what drove my decisions, and I continue to work on—I'm working pro bono for two small tribes, hoping to get them restoration. I work in the Latino community, on healthcare. That's what I hope. I hope people realize that I went in there to do some good and did some good.

WASNIEWSKI: Well thank you very much, that's all the prepared questions we have. If there's anything else you think we've missed or you'd like to add. . . .

FURSE: No, not really, except to say that my work over the last 45 years has been with the treaty rights of Indian tribes in the United States, and I lecture on that, and so I'm still—that's very much a part of me. Not part of so much my congressional work, but that is something that I continue to do. My mother was 100 years old and still speaking out against apartheid. She died at 105, so I've got a ways to go.

JOHNSON: That's fantastic.

WASNIEWSKI: Very good. Thank you so much.

FURSE: Thank you both very much.

NOTES

¹ George McGovern won the Democratic nomination for U.S. President in 1972. He lost to the incumbent President, Richard Milhous Nixon, in the general election.

² Originally known as the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws—NARAL—the organization has undergone several name changes, but presently is referred to as NARAL Pro-Choice America.