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Interview with Ellen (Muskie) Allen by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Allen, Ellen (Muskie)

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

May 3, 2002

Place

Bethesda, Maryland

ID Number

MOH 342

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Biographical Note

Ellen (Muskie) Allen was born on September 22, 1950 in Waterville, Maine to Jane and Edmund S. Muskie. When her father became United States Senator, they moved to the Washington, D.C. area. As she was preparing for college, Senator Muskie was making a bid for the presidency, so she deferred to help her father out, traveling the United States. She is married to Ernie Allen and they have a son, Ethan.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: early childhood in the Blaine House; moving to Washington, D.C.; relationship with Steve Muskie; China Lake camp; golf; old-fashioned outlook about girls; impact of the 1968 and 1972 campaigns; Vietnam War opposition; politics in the Muskie home; Muskie's career after 1972; Muskie's love for Maine; Gayle Cory; and Muskie's temper.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is the third day of May, the year 2002. We are in Bethesda, Maryland at the home of Mrs. Jane Muskie, and Don Nicoll is interviewing Ellen Muskie Allen. Ellen, would you state your full name and give us your date and place of birth, and the names of your parents?

Ellen Allen: Sure, I'm Ellen Muskie Allen, and I was born on September 22nd, 1950 in Waterville, Maine. My parents are Jane and Ed Muskie.

DN: And you were fairly young when your dad was first elected to governorship in Maine. Do you remember that?

EA: Well, I don't so much remember it myself, but I've seen pictures and newspaper articles and things that remind me of that. But I was only three, so I don't have a lot of recollection of that.

DN: But you were at the Blaine House for four years, and do you remember those years?

EA: I do, I just remember enjoying living in the Blaine House. And Steve and I were, well we're only eighteen months apart in age, so it was always a lot of fun for us to explore that big house and get into lots of mischief, so.

DN: Including, as I recall, sliding down the banisters.

EA: Hmm-hmm, yeah. Steve had, he had a cowboy outfit for Christmas one year and I guess I had the cowgirl outfit, and we proceeded to ride the banister as much as we could.

DN: And you went to school right across the street, didn't you?

EA: I actually, well, yeah I guess I did go to school, to kindergarten, when we were living there. It was called the Nash School. And at the time it looked like a huge building to me, and we've gone back to Augusta numerous times and I've seen it as an adult. And it's just like an eight-room school building; it's really tiny. But I can remember Steve going off to school, and he went to kindergarten and I had to stay home in the nursery and I missed him so terribly.

DN: Even though there were lots of people around.

EA: Oh yeah.

DN: Did you feel as if you were on public display?

EA: I never did at that time, no, not when dad was governor. It seemed very private and we could play around the yard, and it was a huge yard with lots of pathways and we could ride our bikes around. It was a great place for kids.

DN: And then he was elected to the Senate, and you came to Washington. Was that a big adjustment?

EA: Now that was pretty traumatic. I can remember that quite clearly, because we came in two, I think it was two limousines. And we drove down from Maine, and as we drove into Washington I can remember coming up Constitution Avenue and seeing all the big buildings, and it just didn't look like home to me at all. And we drove back through some of the not so nice parts of D.C., and it kind of scared me. I can remember crying and saying I didn't want to live here. But by the time we got out to our house, that was more of a neighborhood and I was okay. But I can really remember that ride down Constitution Avenue.

DN: Did your dad talk much about the work he was going to be doing in Washington?

EA: No, I don't remember a lot about that. He did take us to work with him quite often, so we started to learn about it. But I never recall him really talking a lot about his work at home.

DN: How did he balance the demands of his job, which included long hours in the Senate and also travel away, sometimes back to Maine, sometimes around the country, with time with you and your brother and sisters?

EA: I think the way that he tried to do that mostly was by spending a lot of time with us in the summertime in Maine. And if he had to travel or there were events and occasions going on around the state, then he would take the family with him. So we became involved in that public aspect of his work. And I think he also just tried to instill in us his love of Maine and, you know, that's where we had all the good times.

DN: Where did you used to go in Maine?

EA: Well, when we were younger we had a camp on China Lake. And of course those are my fondest memories, I think, because I was young at the time, growing up, and we had a tree house, and cousins who also went to the lake in the summer and, you know, just had a lot of great times with family there and playing around the lake.

DN: Did you swim a lot?

EA: We did, we swam, we had a dock right in front of the house. The water to the house was pumped up through a pipe, I remember that, an above-ground pipe that pumped. Do you remember that?

DN: Yes.

EA: And so we had lake water only in the house, so we couldn't drink the lake water. It was a cute little camp.

DN: And later your folks moved to the ocean.

EA: Hmm-hmm. I think I was about thirteen the year that we went to Kennebunk Beach and rented a house to see how we liked it. And everybody seemed to like it a lot. There was lots to do there and they had, it was called the KBIA, the Kennebunk Beach Improvement Association. And we could take sailing lessons and swimming lessons, and go to the beach and there was just lots of people around and lots of kids to play with.

DN: Your dad was a very avid golfer. Did he try to encourage you to play golf?

EA: You know, he never did encourage me to play golf. And in a way, I think that dad had kind of an old-fashioned outlook about girls and what was appropriate for girls to do. Because, even though he used to take all of us, this is going back to China Lake, we used to go out in the boat and have picnics out on an island on the lake, and he would always do that, but whenever he went to, on these fishing trips, he would take the boys, but he never took the girls. And that was something I always wanted to do, and he never took me.

DN: Did you ever let him know that you -?

EA: I told him, too.

DN: What kind of reaction did you get?

EA: I think he was pretty surprised, he had no idea that that was something that I really would have enjoyed doing.

DN: Oh, this is something you told him much later.

EA: Much, much later, yes.

DN: Why didn't you tell him when you were younger?

EA: Oh, I think I did, and he always said that he'd take me sometime, but sometime never happened, so. But Steve and Ned had their fair share of the fishing trips, and I think golf was the same thing. It really never occurred to him to encourage me to play golf.

DN: Now, not too many years after you came to Washington, actually about nine years, he got

tied up in the 1968 campaign with Vice President Humphrey, and then launched immediately into, after that, into the '72 campaign, which was pretty disruptive for most of us who were around at that time. Was that a major problem time for you? I know Martha has commented on some of the difficulties she felt. Did you feel under great pressure from the campaign and the campaign activity?

EA: I don't think so, not in terms of like negative pressure. I think it was a really exciting time for me. I was eighteen, so I had graduated from high school and was looking forward to going to college and kind of moving out of the house to be on my own. So I think for me it was kind of an exciting time. It did delay my starting college, so, you know, that was one effect that the campaign had on me, but I traveled with dad's campaign that fall and it was the most traveling I had ever done, you know, in my life. I'd really just been from Washington to Maine and back, you know. I never had really traveled, so it was really interesting and neat to be able to do that and be right in the middle of a major campaign.

DN: You were eighteen, that was a time of great tension in the society, people taking very strong positions on the war. Did you feel strongly about the war, and about your father's attitudes toward the war? Did you talk to him about it?

EA: I think somewhat. Steve and I both had participated in some anti-war demonstrations here in Washington. And I mean looking back, I'm surprised that mom and dad really allowed us to do that. But they did, I think they were pretty open to letting us try things and be involved and express our opinions, so we did participate in that. And I think, you know, for the most part, I had an anti-war sentiment, but in a way I guess in my mind I had it separated from . . . I just couldn't believe that dad would support something that wasn't good for the country or for us. And so I knew that in whatever way he could that he was working to get the war resolved, but I didn't understand how he would go about doing that.

DN: Now, when you went to participate in the anti war rallies or meetings, did you talk about that with your folks?

EA: Yeah, I mean, we weren't big conversationalists. I think when dad was home he liked to kind of leave his work at the office and, you know. So he was always interested in our opinions of things but he didn't necessarily try to influence us or, you know, he wouldn't go into his own feelings or views about something so much as wanting to hear what we were thinking about it. So he was always open to us talking about things, but he didn't necessarily try and carry on a debate about a subject.

DN: Did he encourage you to, actively encourage you to talk about your views? Or simply listen when you decided to talk to him?

EA: I think it was pretty much up to us to initiate a conversation.

DN: Did you have many discussions, you and Steve, during this time? If your father wasn't engaging in a debate, were you talking to each other?

EA: Oh, Steve and I talked to each a lot, and talked with our friends. And, you know, most people our age were really focused on the war and what was happening and trying to sort it out in our minds.

DN: And that carried through, '68 through to '72?

EA: Hmm-hmm. Well, now, in 1970 I got married to my husband Ernie, and Ernie had just come back from Vietnam, and that gave me a whole other perspective on the war, because Ernie is a very patriotic person. And, you know, he thought what he had done was right and, you know, he told me everything about his experience over there. So it was, that had a huge impact on me and my views of the war. I mean, he didn't necessarily support the war, but he believed that it was his duty to support his country and to do the best he could to get us out of it.

DN: Did he spend much time talking with your dad about his experiences?

EA: Yeah. Now Ernie, I think, you know Ernie a little bit, and Ernie is not shy about speaking or saying his opinion. And he and dad would talk about that and, you know, I think it caused some friction at times because, you know. We, Ernie and I both would say that we were against a certain thing that was going on, and dad might get defensive or, you know, so we had some lively discussions.

DN: How did he react when you gave your opinions emphatically?

EA: Well, sometimes he would kind of lose his temper or get excited and, you know, he'd say, "Oh well," you know. For example, if we said we had read something about such and such, "Oh, well I never saw anything like that in the paper," or, you know, he would discount it like we couldn't possibly be an expert on what had happened. And I think in a way that's how he worked. He relied on having expert opinions all the time to keep him informed and up to date, and therefore if he hadn't heard it then how could we have possibly heard it.

DN: Did you ever feel you were influencing him?

EA: I think Ernie got through to him a few times. I never felt like I did.

DN: Was that a girl question, or was that simply that you were his child, therefore probably not -?

EA: Not going to teach him anything.

DN: Now after the '72 campaign, he started, he went back to legislative work. You were married, had Ethan by then. Did your contacts continue fairly closely through the 1970s?

EA: Yeah, we only lived across the river in Arlington, so we saw mom and dad and the rest of the family fairly often, couple times a month or so, and we'd always touch base.

DN: Were most of the conversations on family business, or did they range into politics during

that period?

EA: Mostly on family issues, yeah.

DN: How did you feel your dad was dealing with the defeat in '72?

EA: I think it got him down for a while, and understandably so. You know, it just, the whole thing didn't seem very fair, and hearing stories about what had happened behind the scenes and why he had lost, or had to drop out of the campaign just didn't seem fair. And I'm sure it affected him, and he didn't quite know what he wanted to do at that point in his career.

DN: How do you think he felt about his appointment as secretary of state?

EA: Well, that was very exciting for him and I think he looked at that as the biggest challenge of his life, and I think he enjoyed every minute of it.

DN: And after that when he went into the law practice, he continued to be involved in various projects. I wondered, did you have a reaction as a mother and interested in social issues when he took over the chairmanship of the Nestle Infant Formula [Audit] Commission [NIFAC]? Or was that not (*unintelligible phrase*)?

EA: I really wasn't even aware of it, no. I knew that he was working with Nestle, but I didn't really know in what capacity, or very much about the company.

DN: Did you ever have a chance to talk to him about his career and his involvements, particularly in the later years as he might be reflecting on what he'd gone through and what he'd done, what he'd accomplished?

EA: No, I can't say that I did.

DN: This is a continuation of the not a lot of discussion.

EA: Right.

DN: And as you've looked back on your dad's life and his career, what strikes you most about what he did and why, from his point of view?

EA: I guess I would say mainly his commitment to his work, and just being dedicated and knowing that what he was doing would make a difference, and believing that he could make a difference. That's probably my take on it.

DN: And you mentioned earlier the sense of ties to Maine. Did that continue as an important aspect of life as he got older?

EA: Oh, always. I mean, that, Maine was where he wanted to be as much as possible.

DN: Do you remember much about your grandparents?

EA: I remember both of my grandmothers very well. I only knew one of my grandfathers, and that was my father's father, and he died when I was about twelve. So I don't remember a lot about him.

DN: What do you remember about your grandmother Muskie?

EA: Oh, I just remember that she was a great cook, and a seamstress, and she could do just about anything. She could run a house, you know, just, with one arm behind her back, you know.

DN: She was a model.

EA: She was.

DN: And what about grandmother Gray?

EA: And grandmother Gray was a really sweet lady that, she always loved having the children around her. And she would have Steve and I come and stay with her for a couple of weeks every summer, and she would, she just made sure that we always had a good time. And she'd give us money to go to the five and ten store, and we could go to the library, and she'd make taffy and just, you know, do all those fun things that grandmothers do.

DN: Now, there were other people associated with your parents, and I wanted to ask you particularly about Gayle Cory and your memories of Gayle and what kind of a person she was.

EA: Well, Gayle was like my second mother because with mom and dad traveling so much, Gayle spent a lot of time with us. And, you know, she really was like part of the family. And I could talk to Gayle about anything, you know, Gayle was always there when you needed her, and that's how I'll remember her.

DN: Do you remember some of the other folks who were involved in campaigns or your father's business, that is the law business, who -

EA: Oh, sure.

DN: And how did they relate to the family?

EA: Well, I can remember Leon Billings and, I mean just, I can't remember all the names but the people who worked in dad's office at the Senate. Whenever we had school vacations, dad would let us come to work. Probably much to the disdain of his staff, but we'd come to the office. And when we were older, say early teens, they would let us help open the mail, and they even let me answer some of the mail a few times. So I can just remember his staff as being kind of an extended family. You know, everybody kind of worked together to keep the whole thing going.

DN: Now, there were some famous trips to Maine in cars that, George Mitchell likes to tell the story of driving on the, I think it was on the New Jersey turnpike and some items blowing off the top of the car.

EA: Oh, my gosh, yes.

DN: Do you remember that?

EA: I sure do. All of our clothes and belongings were scattered all over the turnpike for miles.

DN: How did your father deal with that?

EA: Oh, well he hated that drive anyway. So he was already stressed out when, just because we were making a trip, and then for that to happen, you know, brought out the temper.

DN: The famous temper. Did you ever see him lose his temper over something terribly important?

EA: Oh, all the time. He, I think he used his temper as a tool, kind of. He would bring it out at the right moment and use it to get his point across.

DN: How do you think all of those political involvements and the kinds of pressures on him and the family affected you as, now that you're a mature woman and you look back on it? Do you think it's affected your outlook on life and politics?

EA: Well, I'm sure that it has in a lot of ways. You know, his love for the environment and his love for Maine I think has transferred to everyone in the family. You know, we just, Maine is our ideal of a place to live and spend time. And, you know, I think in terms of politics, it's probably turned me off a lot to politics. I'm very interested in politics, and I like listening to debates and watching what's going on in the political world, but I don't personally want to be involved with politics in any way myself. But, you know, I think he's also taught me that, you know, the value of hard work and the value of working for something that you believe in, that you think you can make a difference doing. So that's, those are all ways that he's affected my life.

DN: Thank you very much.

EA: You're welcome.

End of Interview