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Sturbitts, Charlene oral history interview

Don Nicoll

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Interview with Charlene Sturbitts by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Sturbitts, Charlene

Interviewer

Nicoll, Don

Date

September 18, 2002

Place

Washington, D.C.

ID Number

MOH 371

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Biographical Note

Charlene Sturbitts was born in Chicago, Illinois on June 16, 1950 and grew up in Washington, D.C. Her father was employed on the overt side of the CIA. She attended private schools, and Sweet Briar College. She worked on a volunteer basis for the Muskie presidential primary campaign. After graduating from college she spent a summer as an intern on the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution and was then hired in the fall by Leon Billings as a researcher for the subcommittee. She attended law school at night at Catholic University while continuing her work preparing drafts for what would become the 1977 Clean Air Amendment, graduating in late 1978. When Senator Muskie left the Senate to become Secretary of State, Sturbitts was asked by George Mitchell to join his staff working on environmental issues.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: Clean Air Amendment 1977; 1972 presidential campaign; gender issues/women in government in the 1970s; and Muskie's legislative skills.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Wednesday, the 18th of September, 2002. We are at the Charlene Sturbitts' office in the Billings and Sturbitts firm, 1625 K Street NW, Washington, D.C. Don Nicoll is interviewing Charlene Sturbitts. Charlene, would you spell your name, and give us your date of birth, please.

Charlene Sturbitts: Charlene Sturbitts, C-H-A-R-L-E-N-E, S-T-U-R-B-I-T-T-S, and my date of birth is June 16th, 1950.

DN: And where were you born?

CS: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, and moved back to Washington when I was two years old, and I've lived here ever since.

DN: Were your parents in government, or?

CS: Yes, my parents first of all were native Washingtonians, which is very unusual. And my father worked for the CIA for virtually all of his career, all in Washington, D.C., in the overt side of the agency.

DN: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

CS: I have one sister who is two years younger than I am.

DN: And you grew up in the District?

CS: I grew up in Chevy Chase, Maryland, which in those days was one of the most distant

suburbs of Washington, even though it's a mile from the District line.

DN: And did you go to the public schools there?

CS: No, I went to a private school called Stone Ridge, which is a Catholic girl's school out in Bethesda, Maryland.

DN: And were your folks at all political?

CS: No, they were really not involved in politics, except to the extent that my father was very aware of current events and that sort of thing. But they weren't involved literally in politics really at all.

DN: Did they talk much about politics or current events?

CS: My father did quite a bit. My mother really wasn't that interested in it, but my father was very up on current events. And even though I didn't really know what he did, and for a long time didn't even know he worked at the CIA, I just knew he worked for the government, clearly that was one of the reasons he was so involved in current events because it really affected what he did every day for a living.

DN: Did you have any associations with other people in the agency?

CS: Not really. I worked for the CIA for three summers when I was in high school, so, and the only way you could get those jobs was to be a child of an employee, so they assumed that you were safe or something. So I knew, I knew kids whose parents worked at CIA because I worked with them, but I didn't know any other friends of my parents, friends of my father's, that I remember.

DN: When you were in high school, did you get any stimulus in terms of current events from your teachers?

CS: Yes. I think growing up in Washington there's a lot of emphasis on what you're living around. And in my case, the other interesting aspect of it was that the school I went to seemed to be a magnet for a lot of political offspring. For example, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend was a year behind me in high school, Maria Shriver was two years. And you notice this is all Democratic, really, and that's pretty much the way it was. Mary McCarthy, who's Gene McCarthy's daughter, was a year ahead of me. So I was surrounded by names that were in the news all the time, children of names who were in the news. And so that makes an impression, too, and it was really, it was a lot of fun.

And it's probably where I really started getting interested in politics because the, some of the friends that I had at school, their fathers were on the news at night. I also went to school, was in the car pool with the daughter of John Dorr, who was the assistant attorney general for civil rights at the time that the University of Mississippi was being desegregated, which was a very exciting time. I didn't realize exactly what he was doing at the time, but, because it was before,

it was when I was in grade school or middle school that that happened. But by the time I got to high school and still was going to school with his daughter, I remembered, I realized what he had done and how exciting it was.

DN: Did she talk much about it?

CS: No, she really didn't, she really didn't.

DN: Where did you decide to go to college?

CS: I went to school at a small school in Virginia called Sweet Briar College, which was an all girl's school, which at the time was not uncommon. In fact, even the University of Virginia was male only, which is hard to believe now, that a state school would be male only. But that's where I went to school, and graduated in 1972, and then came back to Washington.

DN: And did you go to law school directly?

CS: No. I, I worked in the Senate for three years, from 1972 to 1975, until in 1975 I started night school. So I remained working in the Senate and went to school at Catholic University at night.

DN: And got your degree.

CS: Then got my degree in 1978.

DN: Now in '72 you went to work for the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution, or had the name changed by then?

CS: No, it had not changed, it was still the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution. And I ended up there in a very circuitous way. I had actually done some volunteer work for the Muskie for president campaign when I was in college, and then of course the campaign folded in the spring of 1972. And then I graduated and had no real thoughts about what I was going to do when I came back here. But my grandmother, who was also a native Washingtonian, knew Senator Jennings Randolph and his wife, just because Washington was a very small town then. And she asked Senator Randolph if he might have any jobs for me, because I needed a job.

And I got a call in June of 1972 from Barry Myer, who was the chief counsel and chief clerk of the Senate Public Works Committee, asking if I would come down for an interview, and I did. And he asked me if I would like to be an intern on the committee. Well, of course, I said "yes." And they placed me up in the Subcommittee on Air and Water Pollution, because at that time the subcommittees under Senator Randolph only were allowed to hire one of their own staff people, and in that case it was Leon. And at least theoretically, all of the other people who worked for the various subcommittees served at the pleasure of Senator Randolph. And so I got detailed up to this subcommittee, which I just thought was the greatest thing that ever happened. I mean, Senator Muskie, you know, I just, I couldn't even believe it. And everyone, there was sort of an antagonism between Senator Randolph, at least his politics on environmental issues, and Senator

Muskie's, and so everyone thought I was a spy for the Randolph forces. And, of course I didn't understand that at first, because you know, I was just a twenty-two year old kid, I was just excited to be there.

DN: Had anyone known that you were a volunteer in the Muskie campaign?

CS: No, no. And so I guess I started in July of 1972. And Leon Billings, who was the staff director of the subcommittee, happened to be in Montana on a long vacation, he had driven out to Montana. And so when he got back, I was just there. And I really don't think he was that happy about it. But -

DN: Did that come out directly in conver--?

CS: No, no, it really didn't. I mean, he was intimidating, but he was never, he was never rude to me or anything like that. He was, he treated everyone the same, which was, he was gruff and demanding, but it was sort of equal opportunity. And so I, so that summer I did a lot of different kinds of, you know, entry level things. I answered letters, I xeroxed, I did errands, I did some research.

And then summer was over and September came, and of course I didn't have a job. Most interns go back to school, but. And so I got all my courage up and I went and asked Leon, "Could I stay?" And he said, "Sure." And so I became a research assistant for the subcommittee at that point. And I guess I had proved that I was loyal and that my politics were okay, and from that day on I, at least from the Muskie people's perspective, I was treated as one of them. And that's how I really came to work for Senator Muskie in this roundabout way.

DN: But you had volunteered for him in the '72 campaign.

CS: I had, uh-hunh.

DN: And what led you to work in his campaign?

CS: I had decided that he was the one who could win, and I really had major problems with Nixon. And so it was a pragmatic decision. My politics were probably a little closer to McGovern's, but I didn't think that he was going to win. And this was before the nomination. So that's what led me there.

DN: And what sort of work, you described the rather routine work you did during the summer, but what were your first assignments, or major assignments in the fall, when you became a research assistant?

CS: Well, we were divided by subject area, and so I was assigned to Clean Air because Sally Walker, who had come to the subcommittee a year before and was a research assistant, had already been given Water Pollution. And so I started learning about Clean Air, and it was perfect timing because the Clean Air Amendments, which became the Clean Air Amendments in 1977, were to be written starting in 1974. So in the fall of '72, there was planning started for the

hearings that were going to lead into what were the amendments of '77. But that's a whole 'nother story, which you've investigated, I know, all that, the long drawn out history of the '77 Clean Air Amendments.

But in any event, so I did a lot of research, I did a lot of memos, background memos, that kind of thing. I went to hearings on the House side to, and wrote memos about that describing what they were doing in the House committee with jurisdiction over Clean Air. I went to a long series of hearings at EPA, which related to a decision that EPA was considering to extend the compliance deadlines for auto emission standards, which they ended up doing in 1973. So I basically did a lot of sitting, and a lot of memo writing, but it was a great way to learn. And basically, the way that you kind of stayed on top of everything and got into the good graces of Leon was just to work hard and do whatever needed to be done, and that's exactly what my attitude was. And I thought it was just the best job I could ever have imagined. It was just so exciting to be in the middle of this.

DN: At that time, what was the working relationship between the staffs who were primarily working for the Republicans and those of you who were working primarily for Senator Muskie?

CS: Actually, it was a great relationship. I really never thought about the fact that the Republicans were Republicans. I mean, we were really on the same wave length as far as the substance of the issues went. And there was probably more distance on some issues between Senator Randolph's staff and Senator Muskie's staff, particularly on issues that related to coal. But really, I never saw there being a partisan division so far as the Republican staff and the Muskie subcommittee staff. And we worked together so well, I think that's one reason that the laws came out the way they did.

DN: When did you first meet Senator Muskie?

CS: You know, I can't remember. I really can't remember when I actually met him. I can remember seeing him in action very soon after I started working in the summer of '72, because there was a Clean Water conference going on at the time, House-Senate conference on the 1972 Water Pollution amendments. And occasionally I would go to conferences just to sit and watch, and there had been a lot of conference sessions and they were down to the toughest issues. And he was really quite opinionated and he was really just trying to move the conference along. And it was really impressive. And, so that's my first recollection of seeing him in action. I can't remember when I literally met him.

DN: Now, you were there through '75, and you started law school in '75.

CS: Right, I started law school in the fall of '75, at night.

DN: What led you to decide to do that?

CS: Well I had had vague thoughts about going to law school when I was in college, but wasn't really sure. And then went to work on the Hill and I just liked it so much I, I didn't have any particular view to practicing law, but to be honest, in those days there was so much sexism on

the Hill. There were very few women on the Hill who were not secretaries. And I had decided when I went to work on the Hill that I would say that I couldn't type because I knew that I would end up as a secretary if I could. And my cohort, Sally Walker, had done the exact same thing.

So on the majority side of the subcommittee, and also the full Public Works committee, we were the only two women who were not secretaries. And we were treated fine by everyone on the committee, but the lobbyists just treated us terribly, and would sometimes refuse to talk to us and say things like, "If I can't talk to Leon, then I don't want to talk to anyone." And it wasn't about policy things, I mean, part of our jobs was to talk to people and tell them what was going on with legislation, because there would be just numerous telephone calls every day about: What's happening with this bill? Is this provision in? Is this provision out? And, you know, we were trying to help, as part of our job, to help deflect that all from Leon, but we would have people who would say, "Well, I don't want to talk to you." I mean, just literally. And I had just never experienced that kind of treatment, and it really upset me.

Now, in retrospect, I can see that I was in my early twenties, and someone would want to talk to someone more senior. But I can't see saying it to someone. And so I decided that I needed another credential, so that's why I decided to go to night law school.

DN: It wasn't enough not to type.

CS: No, it wasn't, it wasn't, it didn't even come close. And so, but I didn't want to give up what I was doing. And as I said, I never really thought about practicing law, I just, I really wanted it as a credential. And so that's what led me to do it.

DN: And you continued with the committee during that period.

CS: Yes, I continued with the committee during that period. And that was actually a very exciting period because that's when the Clean Air, the next iteration of the Clean Air Amendments were ultimately enacted into law.

DN: Now, you've mentioned the fact that these were passed in 1977.

CS: Right.

DN: And there was a scheduled review for those amendments which was to start in '75, was it?

CS: Actually, the hearings started in '73, and the first bills were written in '74, let's see, reported from the committee and passed the Senate in '75, and then ultimately the process worked itself through so that the actual conference agreement was finished in 1976. After, oh, I don't know, probably twenty-five conference committee meetings. And on one of the last days of the session, of the Congressional session in 1976, the conference report was called up in the Senate, and it was filibustered to death.

Senator Muskie was up for reelection that year, and he was under a lot of pressure to get back home and campaign, but he agreed to stay and to ask the leadership to stay in session, so that we

could get the conference report enacted. And then when he called up the conference report, one of the westerners who was totally opposed to it, stood up and asked that the conference report be read in its entirety, which meant that it would take probably another couple of days. And it was already, it was maybe close to the third week of October, it was very close to Election Day. And, so Muskie made a motion to the Senate to extend its adjournment date by a couple of days, and it failed. Everybody wanted to go home. So our conference report died, and it was one of the most demoralizing times. And then -

DN: Do you have a sense of what, well I guess the procedural votes would not have worked in that case because the senator filibustering it, was not actually filibustering.

CS: No, he did it the easy way, he just asked that it be read in its entirety, and the only way to stop that is by unanimous consent. And the one who asked for it would not give his consent, so that the only way to get over that hurdle would have been to get it read. So, that didn't happen.

DN: How close was the vote on overturning it?

CS: You know, I don't even think it was that close, which is another depressing part of it. Just to see your work, just sort of go up in smoke. And it had been a full two years of working on that bill, and we then had to come back the following year and start all over again.

DN: Now, what were the major issues that, that really triggered that western senator's, that was Senator McClure, was it?

CS: No, it was Senator [Edwin Jacob "Jake"] Garn, I think, I think it was Jake Garn. The major issue that the westerners were so upset about was significant deterioration, which is keeping Clean Air areas clean, not letting them get degraded up to the level of our urban areas. And this was the first time that this kind of a policy had been imposed on areas of the west, which are far cleaner than the east, eastern urbanized areas. And the law, the bill was going to affect the construction of new power plants. Not prevent them, but they were going to have to put on more controls than they would have otherwise, and probably not locate as close to national parks as they might have wanted to. So that was probably the issue that really brought the bill down, though it, it was a controversial piece of legislation. But I think that that being such a new concept, the utility industry in particular, had done very well in creating this sense that nothing was ever going to be able to be built again in the west. So.

DN: How did that change after the '76 election, when you went back?

CS: You know, substantively, the provision really didn't change. It may have been a function of there being more time, I mean it's a lot easier to kill a piece of legislation when you're dealing with the clock. But because we had two years of a Congressional session starting in 1977 to get another version of the law enacted, we didn't have that time pressure. And the pressure that did exist was the pressure for the auto industry to know what auto emission standards they were going to have. And so that, in a sense, was helping us because they had to know by August. They said it was earlier than that, but they had to know by August of 1977 what cars, what the emission standards were going to be for the cars they were going to start producing that fall.

And so ultimately, it was a showdown between the House, which wanted weaker emission standards, and the Senate which wanted stronger emission standards, and Senator Muskie just held out. He just, it was amazing, he stared them down essentially, because they were threatening to shut down the auto industry with hundreds of thousands of jobs that that entailed, and it was an enormous amount of pressure. And I'm sure that you heard this retold by many people, but it was, it was really quite a *tour de force*.

DN: Were you able to be in on the sessions where those negotiations took place?

CS: Some of them. Probably not, not the most sensitive ones where strategy was discussed in terms of what the next strategic moves were going to be. But I was in on a number of the meetings of the Senate conferees where they would have received an offer from the House, and they would go back to meet, to discuss whether or not they were going to take it, and would decide, "no," they were going to hang tough. And so that was, that was very exciting, too. To see, really to see the way those policies were made by people under enormous pressure, but deciding that they really were going to do what they thought was the right thing.

DN: You were, at this time, studying law as well as doing your work as a research assistant.

CS: Right. By that time I had actually graduated to being a professional staff member, so.

DN: So, there. Had your job changed?

CS: My job had changed. Basically, within probably a couple of years, two or three years, probably two years, of when I started, I became a professional staff member and I got responsibility for some Clean Air issues that were sort of mine. And by the time of the actual House-Senate negotiations, I even had responsibility for negotiating some of the less important provisions of the two bills. I did things like some of the fuel additive provisions, the administrative procedure requirements, the judicial review requirements, things like that.

DN: And those were delegated by the members of the Senate committee.

CS: Well, yeah, they were really delegated by Leon who, you know, as the staff director, dealt with those details.

DN: Now, by '77 you were probably about halfway through law school.

CS: Right, right.

DN: And you finished when, '79?

CS: I finished, I actually finished in December of '78, I actually went year round and finished in three and a half years.

DN: Did well, you pushed yourself.

CS: Yeah, I wanted to just get it done.

DN: And at the end of that time did you feel you were getting a little more respect?

CS: You know, it's really funny, I did. And I don't know, some of it was real, I mean some of it was the passage of time, some of it was probably the fact that things were changing on the Hill. Because by 1980 or so, there were so many more women on the Hill in professional slot. It just, it was, I guess partly the passage of time and younger people, younger members coming to the Senate who had different views about men and women, you know, both being able to do the same kind of work.

DN: Did you ever get a sense of how Senator Muskie felt on the question of gender differences and professional competence?

CS: I felt that he never noticed. I felt that he was totally gender neutral. I felt like he would, he would treat anyone equally well or badly, without respect to their gender. And, you know, he had Karen Williams as his first counsel to the Senate Budget Committee, which was a landmark. I think she was the first woman to ever hold a position like that in the Senate. And so that says something; that says volumes really.

DN: And what about Leon?

CS: And Leon the same. When I would have those run-ins with the lobbyists who would say they didn't want to speak with me, occasionally I would tell him that that happened. And the next time that person called, he would get on the phone and say, "You can talk to Charlene or Sally, or not to anyone." So he was a big promoter also of, not necessarily women, but just of gender neutrality. Sally and I got paid less than the men on the committee who did our same jobs, because the salaries were set by the full committee. And so Leon always was lobbying for us to get raises, and you know, sometimes he was successful and sometimes he wasn't, but he was always trying.

DN: Now, when did Karl Braithwaite join the staff?

CS: He joined the staff in maybe '75, does that sound right?

DN: That's about right, I think.

CS: He came from another senator's office, Senator Moss I think, from Utah.

DN: I guess that's right, it was Montoya first, and then Moss.

CS: Right, yeah, I think that's right.

DN: And then he became staff director.

CS: He became staff director in '78 I guess, when Leon went over to become AA in Muskie's personal office.

DN: Did you stay with the committee at that -?

CS: I stayed with the committee then. I stayed with the committee until mid-1980 when Senator Muskie was appointed secretary of state, and at that point we got a new subcommittee chairman, who was Senator [Maurice Robert] Mike Gravel from Alaska. And I didn't really want to, we had been given about six months to stay with the committee, from June to December of 1980, but I didn't, I really didn't want to work for Senator Gravel. And so I hadn't really decided what I was going to do, but I didn't agree with his environmental views.

And so about the time I was deciding what I might want to do, Senator Mitchell, who'd been appointed to take Senator Muskie's seat, actually called me and asked me if I would come talk to him about doing his work on the environment committee. So that's what I ended up doing, and I did that until 1985.

DN: When Karl Braithwaite took over from Leon, were there any changes in the way the subcommittee ran?

CS: Well, there were differences in style, obviously. And probably, I'm trying to really think what the other real differences might have been. Perhaps Karl delegated more. I think he did actually delegate more. But on the other hand, the rest of the staff had gotten older and more experienced also. So it was, in a way the staff had evolved, too, by the time Karl took over in '78. So, yes, it was different, but substantively we functioned the same. We all had our own issue areas that we looked after and, you know, Clean Air, Clean Water, Hazardous Waste, and then, you know, it all filtered up to Karl.

DN: In that period, the staff was evolving, you've described the 1977 amendment process. Were views within the committee and among the staff members on how pollution or environmental problems should be addressed changing as well?

CS: I would say what was changing was the complexity of the pollution issues. I'm not sure that our views about how to deal with them were changing, because we really did have pretty much a command and control approach to controlling pollution. But it just, the, sort of the pervasiveness of pollution was becoming more obvious as the seventies went on. So the solutions became more complex. It wasn't just a matter of putting controls on cars, and putting controls on power plants. It was dealing with growth, and when a new power plant, for example, was constructed, creating requirements that that new pollution had to be offset by reductions elsewhere so that there was no net growth in pollution. Well, that's something that evolved in the late seventies. In sort of the pre-1975 era, we really were just looking at the specific sources of pollution and trying to reduce them. But then it became obvious that that just wasn't going to be enough.

DN: Was that a perception that the members of the committee shared?

CS: It definitely was. And the bills got longer, they got more complex, and it really did become a much more complex exercise. And it just became obvious, through the hearings in particular, that we would hold, the oversight hearings, that more and more needed to be done.

DN: As you look back on that experience in the seventies, what strikes you most about Senator Muskie and your observations of him, as a legislator and as a person?

CS: Well, I guess a couple of different things. The first is as a person, and I'm talking more as in the professional context, how thoughtful he was, and how just dedicated he was to doing the right thing in a legislative context. Not ever taking the easy way out, even if it was less controversial or would take less time.

As a legislator, I just marvel at his incredible skill at being able to think strategically about how to get to an end point and bring people with him. And that included knowing when to compromise, so that you didn't end up with nothing at the end. But he also knew when not to compromise, and when it wasn't worth compromising. So, and I, to this day I still think he's one of the most skilled legislators I've ever seen in action. I don't really know that there are people like him in the Senate anymore.

DN: Thank you, Charlene, we'll continue this because there are other things I want to talk to you about.

CS: Okay.

End of Interview