

CAPITOL OPERATORS ORAL HISTORY

An Interview by Donald Ritchie with

Joan Sartori, Ellen Kramer, Martha Fletcher and Barbara Loughery

Friday, August 4, 2006

RITCHIE: I'd like you to introduce yourselves and tell me where you came from and how you got to be Capitol operators in the first place.

SARTORI: I'm Joan Sartori. Now, when you say where you came from, you mean what state you came from?

RITCHIE: Sure, what's your background? Where did you come from before?

SARTORI: I came from Pennsylvania. When I got married, my husband came to Washington and I worked for the phone company. At that time, the switchboard was closing their toll board. One of the girls that worked there worked at the Senate, and she notified me that there was an opening. And that's how I ended up here.

RITCHIE: And that was in 19--?

SARTORI: 1970.

RITCHIE: 1970. Very good, thank you.

KRAMER: My name is Ellen Kramer, and I came in '73, in July.

RITCHIE: Where were you from?

KRAMER: I'm from Iowa. I came here with my husband, military, and then we divorced, and I worked for Drug Fair for about three years. I had a good friend that worked in the telephone office and she encouraged me to come down. I applied for the job in '72 but didn't get it until '73. I was very happy to get it.

LOUGHERY: And you'll soon be going back to Iowa.

FLETCHER: Yes, she's retiring on the 15th.

RITCHIE: Congratulations.

KRAMER: Thank you.

FLETCHER: I'm Martha Fletcher and I was born in Washington, D.C. I started in the government when I was in high school, just a part-time job in the summertime after school. I stayed in the government for almost four years, left, and came back in 1976. I had a friend whose mother had been in the telephone exchange and that's how I found the job. And that's it.

LOUGHERY: I'm Barbara Loughery. I came in '76—1976. Let's see, I was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, left when I was 18, went to Philadelphia, worked for the telephone company for nine years. I was a pre-approved bride [laughs], meaning I was friends with my husband's sister. I didn't know he existed. We worked together, and I met his family and we got together. He was in the military, came home and we married about a year and a half later. We traveled somewhat and then came back to the area where we decided to retire from Andrews Air Force Base. I was 37 when I got a driver's license—oh, yes—and got my job at the age of 42 here on Capitol Hill. I was supposed to stay for three years, but I'm a late bloomer. And I love my job.

RITCHIE: Well, these stories are typical of Washington. People come from all over. Actually, it's much less typical to be born in Washington and stay here, but especially the military connections of families moving around and settling in this city. All of you started in the 1970s. I wondered if you could tell me what the telephone operations were like when you came here between 1970 and 1976.

SARTORI: When I started we were up in the Dirksen [Senate Office Building] and we had a switchboard, the cord board, and that was for all in-house calls. The senators and the congressmen came in on the switchboard. When you answered that you knew who you were getting. And then we had the consoles for the incoming calls from the outside. The cord board was the more personalized service. We really liked it. Your hands were always moving with those cords. Then it wasn't long after that they took the cord boards out and we got our consoles, and went into conferencing on the consoles. It was good because when we were

up there you had this switch behind the switchboard. If anything went wrong, we could just go back and have them repair whatever was going wrong on it. We never thought we would ever leave there, but in '98—December of '98, wasn't it?—we ended up down here at Postal Square.

RITCHIE: So you were in the Dirksen Building until then?

SARTORI: Oh, yes.

RITCHIE: Whereabouts in Dirksen?

SARTORI: It was SD-180. It's where the Com Coordinators are now, that whole area.

RITCHIE: Would you like to add to that?

KRAMER: I can't think of anything.

RITCHIE: I guess I have a mental image of operators with all those cords, pulling them out and plugging them in. Were you by yourself or in a large group?

KRAMER: We had 50 girls when we came. How many were on the cord board? Ten or 12? And then you took turns.

RITCHIE: It must have been kind of noisy.

KRAMER: Not really.

FLETCHER: It changed, you see, six years later when we came. It was different for us.

LOUGHERY: But we still used the cord board. I remember using it. We were trained to use it. Was it just in case the equipment went down?

FLETCHER: In case something would happen, right. For emergencies, I guess.

LOUGHERY: In directory assistance they didn't have a cord board, we just had the buttons that we used.

RITCHIE: I'm not sure I understand what a console is. I have a mental image of someone putting a cord into a board, but what was the next step?

SARTORI: It was the console that was on our desk. Each one had a desk. And incoming calls came in on that type of console.

LOUGHERY: Like a large telephone, actually.

FLETCHER: Where the lights would light up. You would have a handset or you could plug a headset in.

RITCHIE: When it was a cord board, you could tell where the calls were coming from?

SARTORI: Oh, yes, all of them were identified. You knew who you were getting when you answered the calls.

RITCHIE: But on the console, could you identify the calls?

SARTORI: Just if it was House, Senate, in-house or coming into the Senate switch or the House switch. But the cord board was just members and leadership.

FLETCHER: Did you like the cord board?

LOUGHERY: I didn't work it that much. Did I like it? No, I was a little confused because you had to reach over everybody. You didn't just plug into this thing in the wall, you had to reach.

FLETCHER: Some did, some old-timers just loved working that. I never did. I never had to work it. Because there were what—I can't remember how many there were in a row.

LOUGHERY: At the cord board? Like the one we had in SD-180? It wasn't that large.

SARTORI: Each individual had how many cords, I'm trying to think. Was it 10 or 12, I don't remember. We were trying to get them all answered. Then you sat there until one came down and you answered another one.

RITCHIE: Do calls tend to come in as a rush or are things spaced out over the day? What's a typical day like?

LOUGHERY: You mean now? It depends on the issue.

RITCHIE: So if there's a hot issue on, the phones are ringing?

FLETCHER: Through the night, it will go through the night, but it depends on who's on the floor speaking. All of a sudden our board will light up.

LOUGHERY: A particular member.

RITCHIE: Through the night brings up a question. There was a memo in the file about 1983 when they were changing the shifts. I gather that all of you have had experiences with different shifts at different times. Has that changed over the years, the types of shifts that you have worked?

SARTORI: You mean as far as the amount of calls that came in?

RITCHIE: Well, in terms of when you worked, did you have any options when you first came, to working days or night?

LOUGHERY: There are different shifts. Like we work very early, a quarter to six, to quarter of two, and then we have an eight o'clock, we have an 8:30, we have a nine, we have a ten. That's what you're referring to?

RITCHIE: Right.

LOUGHERY: Ten, 11. Do we have a 12?

FLETCHER: Yes, we do.

LOUGHERY: We do have a 12.

FLETCHER: And then 10:30 to 2:30 And then a quarter of 11, and then 11 at night to 6 in the morning. We're always covered.

RITCHIE: And was it always that way? Was it that way in the '70s.

FLETCHER: Oh, yes.

LOUGHERY: No, we didn't have an all-night during the '70s.

KRAMER: We did, when I started, but then they stopped it.

FLETCHER: They stopped it for one year, because that's when they said they wouldn't have a night shift, and they transferred it to the Capitol Police.

LOUGHERY: Yes, they did, at 11.

FLETCHER: Then they gave it back to us.

RITCHIE: It didn't work?

FLETCHER: No.

SARTORI: When I started they had six women working the night shift. Then in '83 when they put the night shift back on, there were only three girls working it, and only two at a time, and then the third one was off. We'd work three weeks and we'd have Tuesday and Wednesday off, and then we'd have three weeks we'd have Thursday and Friday off, and then three weeks of Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, and then on the third weekend we would throw our own day in on the Monday and go into Tuesday and Wednesday again.

LOUGHERY: You have to like it.

KRAMER: I worked days for 10 years and then I've been on nights for 22, 23 years.

RITCHIE: Well, what's the difference between days and nights? Is it a different workload?

KRAMER: Oh, yes, it is. It's less traffic coming in and less traffic going out. And I don't hear as much fussing. [laughs]

LOUGHERY: Less traffic in the office.

RITCHIE: Do you wind up doing a lot of West Coast calls coming in later at night?

FLETCHER: Oh, yes.

RITCHIE: I know a lot of the West Coast offices stay open later at night.

FLETCHER: Three hours difference in time.

RITCHIE: People call without realizing what time it is in Washington, I suppose.

FLETCHER: And some people think the offices are open 24 hours. The switchboard is. And they'll say, "Oh, a live person!" They think they're going to get a recording.

SARTORI: But then they got a lot of complaints, too, because by the time she comes in the voice mail machines are filled up and then they complain to her, "Can you do something about it?"

RITCHIE: So the individual offices have their voice mail, but they only take so many.

LOUGHERY: When you have a major call-in, they get filled up.

FLETCHER: A lot of the people take it in stride. You tell them, "You'll need to try back tomorrow, when the voice mail is cleared," or when they have people in the offices. Some of them want to argue with you: "Well, I'm a taxpayer and I want to talk to her right now!" [laughs]

LOUGHERY: They pay your salary.

RITCHIE: Yes, I've heard that one. [laughs] When voice mail came along, did that change the way things operated up here?

FLETCHER: It helped a little, but then when it gets full it's back to square one again. It comes back to you. And when they don't answer, it comes right back to the operator.

KRAMER: Business changed when special interest groups started buying 800 numbers that would feed into our switchboard. So maybe before if they were paying for it they thought twice before calling us. But when they had a free number put out on television or whatever, they would call and want to hold on an 800 number. "Would you put me on hold?" Can't do that.

LOUGHERY: They also try to use us for directory assistance, the outside, because directory assistance charges. Of course they use those 800 numbers, they want an agency number. We have them as a courtesy thing, but we don't handle their switchboards.

RITCHIE: I suspect that some of those people want to tell you what they think about the world.

LOUGHERY: Oh, they tell us all the time! [laughs] But you become immune.

RITCHIE: And I suppose part of your task is to get those people off the line as quickly as possible, to get to the next call.

LOUGHERY: Oh, yes, especially when there is a call-in. We try to handle as many as we can. They're entitled to call the board, that's how I feel. They're entitled to their opinions.

RITCHIE: Well, what would you say is the bulk of the calls coming in? Are they mostly public calls or are they internal Senate calls? How does your workload divide up?

SARTORI: It's more incoming from the outside, but then we have a lot of internal calls, too.

LOUGHERY: Before we got the 800 numbers, before these special interest groups bought up some of these 800 numbers, it was mostly on the Hill, the Hill people, and local. But now, Joanie's right, it's more from the outside now. And a lot of elderly, a lot of elderly.

FLETCHER: You tell someone you're taking away their pension, and the board lights up. But they only get just a little bit of what is said on the radio, and then they'll call.

LOUGHERY: Whatever that group wants to tell them.

FLETCHER: Mm-hmm. They're calling in to vote.

RITCHIE: And you're the election booth. Well, what about internal calls? Are you dealing with senators who are trying to get in touch with their offices? Do you handle them separately or do they come in with the mass of other calls?

SARTORI: During the day, I guess, they just go through their offices, but after hours they would come through the switchboard, and we do handle conferences for the members.

LOUGHERY: But we do have a board for the senators.

RITCHIE: Do they ask you to track somebody down?

LOUGHERY: Oh, absolutely.

KRAMER: On weekends.

RITCHIE: They're looking for one of their staff?

LOUGHERY: Another senator.

RITCHIE: And can you find them?

SARTORI: Normally, with luck we can.

FLETCHER: And then, of course, we handle the House calls also.

LOUGHERY: You don't deal with the House, do you?

RITCHIE: Well, I'd like to know about that, too. What's the difference?

FLETCHER: We handle everybody, 535 members.

RITCHIE: It's a lot harder to keep track of the House members, it seems to me. How do you deal with that?

LOUGHERY: We try, we really do try to find one House member for another House member, but we can only help them if we have the information. It's up to them to send us the information if we don't have it. And sometimes they do get angry. It's not our fault. But then when we release the call, we vent! [laughs]

SARTORI: All four of us have been House operators all these years, until March of 2005 when we all became just one under the Senate.

RITCHIE: So before they had separate House and Senate operations?

SARTORI: We were all in the same room and we worked together. Half of us were House and half of us were Senate. The only difference was the House got paid once a month and the Senate girls got paid twice a month. Other than that—you really didn't know who was House and who was Senate.

KRAMER: There was a difference on cost-of-living raises, and that caused a problem.

RITCHIE: That's right, for a period in the late '80s and early '90s there was a difference in the salary structures. That might have caused a little bit of friction!

LOUGHERY: Sometimes it did.

SARTORI: Yes, it did.

RITCHIE: In the files I came across a letter that Senator [Robert] Packwood had sent in because he was on the side of a highway, calling for some information, and he thought that the operator didn't speak loudly enough, that he couldn't hear because of all the trucks that were roaring by. I was thinking that you couldn't possibly be yelling into the phone because you worked in a room full of other operators. You must have to talk to people under all sorts of circumstances, where they're located, at least.

LOUGHERY: Speaking of Senator Packwood—shall I tell the story?

FLETCHER: I don't hear anything.

LOUGHERY: Okay, I won't. Martha, why don't you tell the story.

FLETCHER: I just brushed it off.

LOUGHERY: Martha was very cute. She's still cute. Packwood was a flirt. They're walking down the hall, you and Rita Freeman, and Sue, and he was really, really flirting with you, remember that?

RITCHIE: He had a reputation.

LOUGHERY: He really did.

KRAMER: He and Senator [J. Glenn] Beall from Maryland came over and took group pictures with us. What year was that? '75 do you think?

SARTORI: Or was that Mark Hatfield?

LOUGHERY: That was Hatfield.

SARTORI: Senator Hatfield always admired the operators. He was a telephone

operator when he was in the service. He was in communications and he worked at Bridgeport at that time when he was in the service, and he said he knows what it was to be an operator, and he always admired the operators. But that was when Senator Hatfield and Senator Beall came over and took the pictures.

LOUGHERY: He knows what it's like to be an operator, but I don't think our job is all that hard.

FLETCHER: I think the repetition—

LOUGHERY: Probably when you get older you kind of like the repetition.

FLETCHER: A lot of the senators, they call on us. In the other building it was easier. But they come during the holidays.

LOUGHERY: Senator [Joseph] Lieberman would come with his wife Hadassah. That was very nice. They brought us cookies. And who else?

FLETCHER: John Warner, Carl Levin.

LOUGHERY: Ham, and candy with the booze in it.

FLETCHER: [Strom] Thurmond brought a big watermelon, looked like the back of a truck.

LOUGHERY: They're really very, very nice.

KRAMER: Jessie Helms was always very nice to us. They all have been, basically, really, rather nice.

RITCHIE: Tell me, was there much difference when you moved from the Dirksen Building over here to Postal Square? Did you sort of move outside of the sphere?

LOUGHERY: That's right, we got out of the loop.

FLETCHER: In fact, we were demoted.

LOUGHERY: We were very upset. Yes, we were out of the loop. My whole family works up here. I used to have lunch with my daughter, sit outside, go seek out my husband for some money, but it changed.

RITCHIE: So your family works for the Senate or the House?

LOUGHERY: My husband is deceased, but my daughter works for Senator [Christopher] Bond. My son is Capitol Police, my daughter-in-law is Capitol Police. I don't see them up here. I think I've visited Barbara twice and she's been up here over 20 years. They just have their jobs and I have mine, thank God.

RITCHIE: Well, the size of the staff has grown considerably over time, and has spread out. When you started in the '70s there were only two Senate office buildings, and lots of apartment houses and temporary space, but now you've got the Hart Building and so many more people that are working on Capitol Hill, so it's harder to have a sense of community. And now that you're here, which is not that far, it's a five-minute walk, but still it's in a separate complex.

SARTORI: It is a separate complex. It just seems you're not part of the Hill.

LOUGHERY: No, you're not, and if you belong to the Credit Union, on your lunch hour it's hard to get down there and back within that hour, because you don't know what it's going to be like in the Credit Union, if the lines are long or whatever. But we've gotten used to it.

FLETCHER: We sat in the Dirksen office when they were building the Hart and running the switchboard with all the construction and a steel beam went through our manager's office—she was called the chief operator at the time. Just all kinds of commotion, and of course we had all kinds of little "pets" that came in because everything was being torn up out there. Four-legged creatures.

LOUGHERY: I was going to ask what pets are you talking about. Mice!

FLETCHER: We had mice running around.

KRAMER: You had to walk over the planks to get in.

FLETCHER: We still had to run the switchboard, but we did. We got through it. They'd be drilling and we'd have to say, "You have to speak a little louder, they're drilling."

LOUGHERY: But it wasn't that bad.

FLETCHER: No, it wasn't. We can laugh about it now.

LOUGHERY: We're very close. And we have the best operators in the world. I'd like to put that in.

RITCHIE: The operators work for the sergeant at arms. Does it make much difference who is sergeant at arms? Have you noticed that there have been changes when different sergeants at arms have come and gone?

FLETCHER: Well, for less than two years the four of us have been Senate employees, so we were always under the clerk of the House until they moved it to the Chief Administrative Officer. We were under that group until less than two years ago when we went on the Senate payroll.

RITCHIE: Well, did that make much difference, reporting to different clerks of the House?

FLETCHER: Well, it's like if they were establishing some sort of a leave policy they had to check to see what the House wanted to do and what the Senate wanted to do, and they had to get together—and you know what that's like.

LOUGHERY: It took a while. It took longer.

SARTORI: Yes, the telephone exchange had their own guidelines, because it was between the House and the Senate. They would have to agree and disagree and then come up with one for us. But we were under the House up until we became Senate staff.

RITCHIE: You had Donn Anderson as clerk of the House.

SEVERAL VOICES: Yes, we did. He was wonderful.

RITCHIE: He was a real institution man.

LOUGHERY: A really nice person, a really good person.

RITCHIE: Having worked his way up from a page to the clerk of the House, he understood how the place worked and had seen it change himself very much over time. He once told me that when he first came to work for the House he couldn't plug anything into the wall because there was still direct current in the Capitol in 1960, and it was only afterwards that they switched to alternating current. I thought if you're here longer than alternating current, that establishes you as a veteran. We talked about working conditions and you mentioned construction, what about natural conditions? What happens during blizzards and other times when it's difficult to get in?

SARTORI: We are here.

LOUGHERY: We brought our jammies and we stayed the night, to be sure we were here.

FLETCHER: The board was never shut down, ever. The blizzard of '96, when the federal government was closed for three days, if you did not get into work as a telephone operator you used three days vacation.

LOUGHERY: I was here for four days, was that '96?

SARTORI: Yes, we were all here. I think that was '96.

LOUGERY: My son came down and came in the room and said, "Dad wants you home." [laughs] I had no power at home, why would I go home? I was here for four days.

FLETCHER: And if there's an ice storm, you just leave the night before to make sure you're going to be able to cover your shift. At least this is what the people here, who have

been here 30 years, this is how we feel.

SARTORI: We know in the fall to pack our suitcases to stay in case of bad weather.

RITCHIE: So you keep an emergency kit around?

SARTORI: Right.

LOUGHERY: Well, it was easier for us, too.

SARTORI: Because if you couldn't get out, you had to have a change of clothes.

LOUGHERY: And some of us live pretty far and we couldn't really drive in the snow or whatever.

FLETCHER: We know where the showers are in this building. And we know where they are in the Dirksen. We've been there, done that, all of us.

RITCHIE: And hope that they've kept the cafeteria open for you.

FLETCHER: No, it's vending machines here.

LOUGHERY: See, in the Dirksen we had a full kitchen. Were you ever in SD-180 when the operators were there?

RITCHIE: No.

FLETCHER: Oh, it was a full kitchen with two refrigerators, a stove, oven, and microwave.

LOUGHERY: And we had a smoking lounge.

SARTORI: That's a thing of the past now!

FLETCHER: There were two entrances. One was the hall down by the hearing room. The other was the hall where the nurses' office is. The back to our office touched the Credit Union, so if you know where the Credit Union is, that's where our offices were right behind that.

RITCHIE: But they didn't provide similar accommodations over here?

FLETCHER: We're renters down here. We rent this floor.

LOUGHERY: This is the penthouse. It's not an attic.

FLETCHER: That's what they told us.

RITCHIE: In the Dirksen Building you also had the Senate cafeteria which was operating presumably at odd hours. If the Senate was in late there was usually some kind of food service available, but I guess here if you work the late shift you bring your own provisions.

KRAMER: Just a snack and a drink. You usually have dinner at home. I eat the wrong things, but [laughs] don't have to cook it.

FLETCHER: But for the late hours you could never count on the Senate being in and the cafeteria being open. You just prepared to bring your own.

RITCHIE: When the Senate is in session late, until one o'clock or two in the morning—the same with the House—does that also affect the flow of calls coming in? Is it busier when they're in those late night sessions?

SARTORI: Sometimes. It depends I guess on what legislation they're working on.

FLETCHER: The State of the Union, that day they always make sure they get a few more operators to cover the evening through, when the President is speaking, and then an hour or so after, because a lot of senators or members want to make calls.

RITCHIE: And they'll use you to place the calls from where they are. Another question I have is that everyone carries a cell phone now. Has the cell phone changed anything in the way business is conducted over the phone these days?

LOUGHERY: No, it's just very annoying because sometimes they cut out and we can't hear what they're saying.

FLETCHER: The cell phones, I think, gave us more business, don't you?

LOUGHERY: My peeve is the cell phone and the speaker phone. Oh, good grief!

RITCHIE: It's hard to hear speaker phones?

LOUGHERY: Oh, absolutely.

FLETCHER: A person on a cell phone in a car, that's just about impossible, but they're calling in and we have to take the call, and we have to figure it out.

LOUGHERY: Most of them use their cell phones to call in.

RITCHIE: I once got a call from a senator from his car and it cut out six times. Finally, he said, "I'll call you when I get to my home." So I imagine you encounter that sort of situation, you get them on, they get cut off, have to call back, and they're probably angry at the phone and take it out on the operator.

LOUGHERY: Actually, the senators aren't too bad. I think they're very kind to us, really, don't you?

FLETCHER: Mm-hmm.

LOUGHERY: I haven't had any trouble except—he's still alive, I can't talk.
[laughs]

RITCHIE: Well, you don't have to give me any names.

LOUGHERY: No, no, this is just too recent. This was actually on the news the other day. But I think they're very nice to us, they really are. They don't treat us too common! [laughs]

RITCHIE: Well, you mentioned that during the blizzards you've always been here. What happened on 9/11? I know that there was a situation where the operators had to leave. Can you tell me what the situation was then?

KRAMER: I had worked the night before and I was home asleep, and Fletch called me and she said, "You don't have to come to work tonight because they're trying to blow up the city!" I went to Waldorf to be with my granddaughter, and then I started getting curious about the middle of the afternoon. I thought, well, I'm going to call in and see what's going on. They said, "They've had subs working the phones. Get in here!" So I had to come to work that night anyway. [laughs]

FLETCHER: Our supervisor was off, so she missed out that day. But we were working on our early shift and we had the televisions on. All of a sudden they broke through and we saw—

LOUGHERY: I was putting through a conference call for Senator [Charles] Grassley and I looked up and I saw this building blow up. I thought it was a simulation. Then I hear it on the phone. The reporters obviously had their TVs on and they said they were blowing up buildings. Then they said everybody had to leave. Then I got a call from the VP's office and he was trying to get Denny Hastert. We didn't know where Denny Hastert was—he's the Speaker. Martha stayed, the conference stayed, who else stayed?

FLETCHER: But the police down the hall were just pulling us out.

LOUGHERY: The police said you have to leave, and the conference said, "Okay, you take the phone. You talk to the VP and tell him that we have to leave because the VP wants Denny Hastert." We found him. We honestly found him. We found him in a squad car with one of the inspectors on the Capitol Police. And then we didn't want to go out because we knew we were going to be in a mess out there. And we were. I would rather hide under the desk and wait a while!

SARTORI: Yes, I was in Pennsylvania at my aunt's funeral.

FLETCHER: And I had just gotten home—it was a long trip home—and I got a phone call: “We need operators because the hundred senators were going to make a hundred-person conference call and we need operators to come back in and place it.”

LOUGHERY: Now, she's referring to a conference call with 100 people on it, on one call.

FLETCHER: On the 9/11 day. So I got back in the car and drove back downtown. Of course, my family thought I was crazy. But we came in and I think I stayed until 11 p.m. and through the night ladies were in.

LOUGHERY: It was frightening because my whole family was here. I couldn't find my daughter, I couldn't find my son. My daughter couldn't find her husband. And then finally there was a text message on my cell phone, which I didn't know how to do! I finally got Barbie and she said, “Oh, it's Larry.” Larry is my son, and he told us where everybody was and that everybody was okay. But it was kind of scary. And Brett was at the Capitol at the time that the plane went over [in June 2004].

FLETCHER: When I arrived, they had pulled some people from either the secretary of the Senate or the sergeant at arms' office, so all these people that worked in the Capitol had come over and they were learning to work the switchboard until the operators got back in, and that's how it worked.

RITCHIE: So it was the Capitol Police who evacuated the building?

FLETCHER: Yes.

RITCHIE: Not realizing that you were the communications hub for all these members who were scattered all over the place.

LOUGHERY: Well, you see it's the desk. When you came up it's the desk there, it's one of the Capitol Police officers who has that post permanently. He came in and he said we had to leave.

FLETCHER: And the whole building was leaving, of course, so everybody was trying to get out of the Capitol Hill area at the same time.

RITCHIE: But your jobs were essential.

FLETCHER: Essential was leaving.

RITCHIE: Have they established any policies for the future?

LOUGHERY: Oh, all this did go over to the Capitol Police. The calls went to the Capitol Police, didn't they?

FLETCHER: Do you mean, do we have a new backup plan if something like this happens again?

RITCHIE: Yes.

LOUGHERY: No, it would be the same thing. We would have to leave and the calls would go over to the Capitol Police.

SARTORI: They are updating the evacuation plans.

LOUGHERY: But you know, seriously, you evacuate and you go out there and you see all these people. You're in more danger out there than you are in the building.

FLETCHER: I think they had a reason why. Did they say there was a threat on Union Station or something like that?

LOUGHERY: Well, Union Station is right next door.

FLETCHER: And they felt we needed to leave this building. We do have other places to go to, but I don't know if we should talk about that.

RITCHIE: Well, every office up here has a Continuity of Operations up here, and all of them have alternative places they can go to.

FLETCHER: Well, we have three. Two around here and one would be in Virginia.

KRAMER: A lot of offices moved up here at that time and they were putting them in any little cubbyhole they could find.

RITCHIE: That was during the anthrax incident that shut down the Hart Building in October 2001. So you had boarders.

LOUGHERY: We surely did.

RITCHIE: My office was displaced from the Hart Building and we worked out of the basement of the Russell Building, where we had one desk and one phone for nine people for three months. But I'm sure you had plenty of people over here in Postal Square. But 9/11 was the day when communications went crazy in Washington. Nobody's cell phone worked. Nobody knew where they were going. The members weren't quite sure what they should be doing. You mentioned this 100-person conference call, how did that work?

LOUGHERY: I didn't come back.

FLETCHER: Well, I'm not sure if they got all 100 people on, but they were placing a call and they were all just there.

LOUGHERY: I think it went well.

RITCHIE: Do you have to work through AT&T or the phone companies to set up a conference call?

SARTORI: No, we have our own conference system here.

LOUGHERY: We're more efficient than AT&T and Verizon. I'm serious! We're the best! We are the best, girls, trust me.

RITCHIE: Do you arrange conference calls for members in their offices very often?

SARTORI: They have a staff member that sets up the conferences and then they send the names to us. They go through the Republican Conference, the Recording Studio, and then they email us or they fax the names over to us.

LOUGHERY: Or their own offices, too.

FLETCHER: We have standing conferences every day of the week, and sometimes there will be one on a Saturday or a Sunday. Certain days we have many and other days it's slower.

LOUGHERY: Mondays it's usually staff, except for [Pete] Domenici.

FLETCHER: But every day, every day.

RITCHIE: Do Washington offices then conference with their home state offices? Is that the idea that they bring the various offices together?

SARTORI: They have the staff conferences, mm-hmm.

FLETCHER: It's like when she was on the conference with someone, there were reporters who would get on with the member, and he would tell them what's happening, and that's how she realized what's happening on 9/11.

LOUGHERY: That's how I realized that "Hey, this is real. This is not a simulation." Because the TV was right in front of me.

RITCHIE: So with a conference call, do you need to monitor the call? You said you were on the call.

LOUGHERY: We just call the people and say, "This is a conference call with Senator Grassley," and we put them in conference. If they don't want to go into the conference, we go back into the conference and tell the greeter that so-and-so is not participating, and it just goes on and on.

RITCHIE: So you are introducing people, essentially.

LOUGHERY: Exactly. Yes, we can't just put someone into a conference.

RITCHIE: That's true, they have to know that someone is coming on the line. But if you have an office meeting you must have a lot of people that you're tracking down to include in the call.

LOUGHERY: It depends. Like there's two senators who had really large conferences. That's Senator [Chuck] Hagel and who?

SARTORI: [Sam] Brownback sometimes, and so does [Charles] Schumer.

LOUGHERY: Schumer, yes, they have a lot of reporters. Some of them are just five and six.

RITCHIE: So it's like a press conference.

LOUGHERY: If there's three in the conference you have to have a senator on. If there are only three staff people they can do it on their own phones. But if the senator is on the line it's a different matter.

RITCHIE: That's true. I guess everyone has the facility to do smaller conference calls.

LOUGHERY: But we cater to the senators, of course.

FLETCHER: But you can't call the board and say, "I want to be in Schumer's conference." The greeter would have to call us and say, "I want to add this person and here's his phone number." Because you could be someone from the opposite party.

LOUGHERY: You could be a Republican listening into a Democratic conference.

FLETCHER: You have to turn them down. You have to say, "The greeter will have to call me."

RITCHIE: So people know that there are these conference calls going on, because they hold them on a regular basis.

SARTORI: In the House, we don't do any House conferences. They have to go through their MCI. They use outside conferencing.

RITCHIE: Why is that, I wonder, that they have a separate system?

SARTORI: They always have had to go through the outside. Each member is responsible for their own conferences. We never did.

LOUGHERY: They're not catered to as much as the senators are. I think they are allotted a certain amount of money, aren't they, for the conferences?

SARTORI: Yes.

LOUGHERY: And you're talking about 435 people on the House side, plus the 100 that we have here. That's a lot of people. Although I could sit there and do conferences all day long. I like to do conferences.

FLETCHER: She's our conference gal, she loves to do it.

LOUGHERY: It's not boring! [laughs]

FLETCHER: And we don't call them. They have to initiate it. So if the member is running late, she doesn't have to go tracking people down, that it's time to start our conference—

LOUGHERY: They call and say "We're ready to put our conference up," and we start it.

FLETCHER: —that's like babysitting. We can't start that.

RITCHIE: That's true, schedules are strained on Capitol Hill and I'm sure members are always running behind.

SARTORI: They'll always back their conferences up.

FLETCHER: Or you get them all on and they say, "Oh, the senator is not going to be able to make it."

LOUGHERY: It doesn't happen that often, but it does happen. That's not a big deal. I still get paid!

RITCHIE: We talked about the switchboard and the console. What is the equipment like that you're using now?

SARTORI: We're using computers now, but it's still the keyboard.

RITCHIE: What do the computers do that the previous systems didn't do?

LOUGHERY: Well, everything is right there. We don't have to pick up a book. We do have the books—you know, the House and Senate telephone directories. In case something happens we can pick them out. But we can look everything up on the computer.

RITCHIE: That must be a real Godsend.

LOUGHERY: Well, if you're computer savvy, which I am not, but I know what I am doing there. I don't go too far into it. It's easy, but I like the books too. When you're old you get used to the old way of doing things.

SARTORI: You'll have to come in and see the switchboard.

RITCHIE: So, before, you had a stack of telephone books?

LOUGHERY: We still do. We still have the print, which I think is important to have.

SARTORI: In case the computers go down we do have the books as backup.

KRAMER: Remember when the girls would go around and manually correct a number or a name, at each desk?

FLETCHER: And we have a card that has everything right there.

LOUGHERY: We used to do it not only on a card but in the book, remember?

FLETCHER: Of course, the committees were always changing.

LOUGHERY: When someone came in with a change of number, we wrote it in, literally, we wrote the new number in.

RITCHIE: There's such a flux of personnel up here. The staff is constantly changing, so as soon as you print something it's obsolete to some degree. At least with the computer they can update the numbers regularly. We get a telephone card just for the Secretary of the Senate's office, and we get several of them every year because of personnel changes.

FLETCHER: The Senate has always been easier to find employees. The House had a service like that until '95, when Newt Gingrich's group came in and they wanted to scale back on things. That's when the Republicans took over the House.

LOUGHERY: Don't say it that way!

FLETCHER: I don't mean to sound that way, but we really couldn't locate House employees anymore unless they were in the book. Now we can look in the computer, but if they're not there, that's it. For the Senate you can call the Disbursing Office and they have a locator service.

LOUGHERY: Why don't we have a locator service?

FLETCHER: I don't know.

LOUGHERY: We did at one time.

SARTORI: We did, it went to the Finance Office.

LOUGHERY: That's right. Now if you dial that Finance number, 56514—God, I wish I could get it out of my mind! Let's face it, it doesn't exist. You get a busy [signal.] It's a problem if someone is trying to find an employee on the House side. I don't know, they should have some type of service.

FLETCHER: They should; and then of course if it's a police officer they're looking for, we can give them the police personnel. And then Architect [of the Capitol] go that way. But if they are with the House—

LOUGHERY: Well, I think, actually, the House is cheap. You can leave that in. [laughs] Really, because they should have a locator service for House employees.

FLETCHER: They should.

LOUGHERY: Of course they should.

RITCHIE: The Senate has always treated itself a little better as an institution.

LOUGHERY: Yes, they have. We have no complaints about the House, except for little things like this. They should be more accommodating when it comes to something like this, of course.

RITCHIE: And it's interesting that these two institutions operate side by side and yet they are very different places.

FLETCHER: But if you get a child on the phone and they are looking for their mother, we don't care who we have to ring on the House side, we're going to go find their mother.

LOUGHERY: Exactly. Oh, we find their mom.

FLETCHER: It's just sort of shame, shame on you. This child might be sick at school, or has a problem. We don't care whose office we ring, but we try and help people

like that.

LOUGHERY: We do the right thing. We try anyway.

FLETCHER: We're operators.

RITCHIE: You get calls from people who have a request, they have a problem. How do you decide where to send them? Sometimes they have a specific name they are looking for, but what happens if they just have an issue?

LOUGHERY: The first question you ask is what type of work do they do, because many of them come in under the Architect, which we can call the Architect's personnel. What type of work? Secretary or anything at all, that kind of gives us a little bit of hint and then we take it from there. But we do try to find the people. Because we're in the same boat. If somebody was trying to find us they wouldn't be able to find us. Not that I really care—I don't know that I want to be found!

FLETCHER: Well, if they call about an issue, then we just sort of narrow it down. We let them know what we have to offer them. Your House and Senate members work here. If you have a problem with some military issue, you go to them first, and then they can direct your call. Or they'll call for another agency, and of course then you just send them to the agency. We don't dial it, we just give them the number.

LOUGHERY: If our job sounds boring, it's really not boring.

RITCHIE: No, there's a lot of detective work in there. In my office we get a number of calls from people—the polite way to describe them would be “crackpots.” People who really have issues. What do you do with somebody who thinks that the Queen of England is taking over the U.S., for instance? We get that call pretty regularly.

KRAMER: You listen to them for a while and then give them to the Capitol Police.

LOUGHERY: Actually, they're not making a threat. Do you know that Threat Assessment is closed on the weekends! That really annoys me. Can you believe that!

RITCHIE: So if people call in with a threat, what do you do with them?

LOUGHERY: Well, you call the Capitol Police and it goes over to the Watch Commander's office. But I think it would be better even to give it to Communications, because they record everything that comes into Communications. I don't think the Watch Commander's office records any of that.

SARTORI: Well, where is Zimmerman? Isn't he with—

LOUGHERY: He's with Threat Assessment.

SARTORI: Because he takes those annoying calls.

FLETCHER: Monday through Friday, yes. And they don't open early in the morning either. We'll get collect calls from overseas, and then he has a real nasty message. You wait and then you tell the recording "No," you won't accept it. We have a nasty-mouth man—we call him dirty-mouth. We'll let the operators know that he's up, he's making the rounds. Then we had the White House operators over here checking things out, and they get his calls also. He's not just picking on us. Then what other? We have a lady who comes on halfway normal, Darleen.

LOUGHERY: She really does sound normal when she first comes on, and then she really harasses the offices. I just don't think we ought to connect her. I think if we recognize her voice we should just not even bother saying anything to her. It only adds to it. She's only going to add to what you're saying.

RITCHIE: We've found that a number of them sound reasonable for the first minute or so and then you begin to realize that they're in a different world completely.

KRAMER: They start repeating themselves.

LOUGHERY: Then they go off, exactly.

RITCHIE: So we try to make it a very short and polite conversation and get quickly to good-bye and hang up.

LOUGHERY: But I just feel that if you recognize the voice and you know, just [gestures] drop them in the box. [laughs]

RITCHIE: Going back to Threat Assessment. People must call to claim they're going to blow up the building.

LOUGHERY: Well, when 9/11 happened a lot of that came in. We became paranoid a little bit, but there were bomb threats, we got bomb threats.

RITCHIE: So those just automatically go to the Capitol Police?

LOUGHERY: Yes, we call Threat Assessment.

FLETCHER: You kept one on for quite a while so they could trace the call. When was that, in the other office?

LOUGHERY: Yes, that was years and years ago.

FLETCHER: And she kept them talking so they could tape it or trace the call.

LOUGHERY: They did, but they only got so far. I guess it takes a while to trace those calls. I don't have the knowledge of that, but I had him on for the longest time. But I don't know what they did, because they don't come back to you. I remember he wanted my name and I told him my name was "Barbara Henry." [laughs] But I remember that and what else I remember was to me it was a young kid. For some reason, I just had this compassion. I felt this is not a real thing. But Shirley was there, and Shirley thought it was a real thing

SARTORI: You were good though, you were calm with him.

LOUGHERY: I talked to him like I was his mother. Thank God I wasn't his mother! But I don't know what happened after that, I really don't. I have no idea. I didn't ask.

RITCHIE: You have to be part psychologist in the job as well.

LOUGHERY: I didn't think he was going to blow anything up, if you want to know the truth. I think he just wanted somebody to talk to.

RITCHIE: Well, there's another issue. People are lonely and they do want to have someone to talk to. Do you get the situation of people who just want to call to talk? How do you deal with it?

LOUGHERY: Well, it depends upon how busy we are in the room, okay? If we're not busy, we try to be kind. But if we're busy, we can't.

FLETCHER: You listen as far as you can let it go, and then say, "Gee, my board is backing up, I'm really sorry to hear about this, but let me try and transfer you to someone, because I know this is costing you." Trying to get them off the line.

LOUGHERY: Martha's right. This is usually what we do.

SARTORI: And usually when they do spout off like that they just say what they have to say and that's all they needed to do.

LOUGHERY: And they tell us they pay our salary, and they pay taxes, like we don't.

FLETCHER: Like the irate customers. "Well, I'm going to give you my supervisor," because we can't do anything with them. Ah! They turn so sweet when they get onto the supervisor.

LOUGHERY: And the operator is sitting back and saying "Joanie," [gestures] and has no idea. [Laughs]

SARTORI: Or you could turn right around and go to the supervisor's desk and answer it, and you're the same person but they change their tone.

LOUGHERY: And that has happened.

FLETCHER: Sometimes we have to do that when you're working with two operators on the weekend, and somebody's mad, and you have to run up there and say

“Supervisor’s Desk.”

LOUGHERY: If we wouldn’t get them up there, we’d pacify them.

FLETCHER: And on weekends you really pacify them through the night. Because you pull their chain and they’re going to call you back, as long as it takes them to redial.

KRAMER: They accuse you of hanging up on them, and carry on.

RITCHIE: Well, there are angry folks who want to be heard, and their senators and representatives aren’t around to hear them, so whoever’s on the phone is going to hear it.

LOUGHERY: What always amazes me is why they don’t call during normal business hours and talk to a live person. They just want to talk to this machine. If I have a gripe I want to talk to somebody in person! But they won’t call during normal business hours. They want to leave a message on their machines. I have asked, “Well, why don’t you call during business hours and get a live person?” I’m trying to get them off my board, I’m not being kind, I’m just trying to get rid of them. But they just don’t want to. I had a man the other day: “Operator, what number is coming up on your board?” I said, “You’ve blocked out your number. It came up as private.” “Oh,” he said, “I wanted to be sure it was blocked out.” Because he just wanted to call and yell at somebody in an office.

RITCHIE: He didn’t want to be traced back.

FLETCHER: Oh, and the man that calls and makes insulting remarks about a senator. We’ll get him and he’ll say he wants [Edward] Kennedy’s office, and he says awful things—

LOUGHERY: Oh, yes, terrible, terrible things.

FLETCHER: But then he got mad when he didn’t like what we were saying and we gave him to the supervisor and he changed his tune. He said he had a right to make these calls, but he doesn’t have a right to put names on—

LOUGHERY: He doesn't have a right to say things like that. You know that guy who calls Senator Kennedy's office.

RITCHIE: Do you find that there are certain members of the Senate and House who attract more of these angry calls?

LOUGHERY: They are more focused on the Senate than they are on the House. But you know it depends upon who's speaking on the floor, it really does.

FLETCHER: It's a Democrat mad at the Republicans, or a Republican mad at the Democrats. Or Dick Cheney. Oh, did we get calls after he didn't shoot his gun straight, or rifle, or whatever he was shooting, and made little remarks about him!

RITCHIE: I wanted to ask you about memorable moments in the years that you have been here. What sticks out in your mind when you talk about your experiences with the House and the Senate?

FLETCHER: Well, it's amazing when you leave your office job, how many times the word "Capitol" comes out when you're not answering the Capitol telephones.

KRAMER: You say that on your phone at home.

FLETCHER: And you're embarrassed! I was down on North Capitol Street waiting for the light to turn green, and when it turned green, out of my mouth, in my car, I said, "Capitol." I thought, oh, my.

SARTORI: Had you been especially busy that day?

FLETCHER: Could have been, but I opened my front door one time and said "Capitol."

LOUGHERY: Hasn't it happened to you?

SARTORI: Oh, yes.

FLETCHER: I've done it about four times, and I thought there was something wrong up here. And the call-ins. I remember the Supreme Court nomination—

SARTORI: [Clarence] Thomas.

FLETCHER: Thomas, that was one of the worst call-ins we ever had. Was Watergate like that?

LOUGHERY: Prayer in school was bad, too.

SARTORI: Prayer in school, and the Budget Committee one year. Remember we had all those calls?

LOUGHERY: Who was here, Joanie?

SARTORI: Mr. McCormick. It was something with the budget. I can't remember what it was, but it was really bad call-ins. But I guess Thomas was the worst.

LOUGHERY: Thomas was bad. Prayer in school was bad.

RITCHIE: Bad in the sense that the phone just rang steadily?

SARTORI: Oh, yes. You couldn't even answer all the calls.

FLETCHER: If you wanted to take a sip of water, you'd have to let your board just ring.

LOUGHERY: That's how bad it was. She's right, you couldn't take a sip of water.

FLETCHER: I remember we had a committee room near the operators' room in the Dirksen Building, and when they would bring a witness in that they didn't want the reporters to know was coming in, they would bring him through our back door and walk them through our office. That was kind of different.

RITCHIE: During the Clinton impeachment trial, my office was inundated with calls. You'd come in in the morning and there would be a little stack of pink notes of calls that had built up during the night. We've never had anything like that before or since. I'd go home at night and my ear would be red because I'd spent the whole day on the phone answering questions.

LOUGHERY: Yes, I'd forgotten about that.

SARTORI: I did, too, but I don't think it was as bad as Thomas.

FLETCHER: Thomas was really bad.

LOUGHERY: It's the people who are angry, and a lot of people liked Clinton, let's face it. I'm sure there were angry people out there, but it wasn't as bad as Thomas. They didn't want Thomas on the Supreme Court. They were all adamant about that. But yes, I forgot about the impeachment.

FLETCHER: I remember the first time that Senator [Hillary Rodham] Clinton called our senators board, and that was kind of like a big deal because she was First Lady. We would say, "Oh, I just got Mrs. Clinton and she was nice on the phone," that type of thing. Little things like that.

LOUGHERY: I had her one time to put in a conference call and she is a lovely lady—and I'm not a Democrat. I mean, she really is, she's very nice. Who else? Oh, I had [Ronald] Reagan on the line one time, when he was running for the presidency. I had Arnold [Schwarzenegger] on the line not too long ago, and he said "Mahriah is in town. Mahriah is with me." But I wasn't quite sure if someone was pulling my leg, but I think it was him. Because he referred to her not as Maria just Maria Shriver. Why would you refer to your wife by her maiden name? But come to find out he was in the Capitol, so it probably was him. That was last year. He was looking for money I guess—for California.

RITCHIE: You mentioned Dick Cheney before, calling on 9/11. Do you deal with vice presidents very much, since they are semi part of the legislative branch?

SARTORI: Well, they have an office here. But not that much.

LOUGHERY: Yes, they have an office and staff in the Capitol and in Dirksen, but we don't deal with *them* of course, it's their staff. We get a lot of calls for the VP's office, though.

RITCHIE: I guess they usually go through the White House operators.

FLETCHER: But they don't call us, except for 9/11 when they were looking for the Speaker.

RITCHIE: Well, the interesting thing was that the White House operators were also evacuated on 9/11. They were all in Lafayette Park, across the street, because the entire White House was emptied. So their switchboard was vacant.

LOUGHERY: Yes, but they have the Signal board over there.

RITCHIE: They must have had somebody around, but if you tried to call the White House that day you just got a recording. There was nobody answering the phones.

LOUGHERY: Years ago, the White House operators weren't very pleasant at all. Now it's kind of different. They're nice now. See, they handled the senators' home listings, years ago. We didn't. Do you remember that, Joanie? We used to have to call the White House.

RITCHIE: And they would be abrupt?

LOUGHERY: Oh, very. Oh, yes. But then we finally got the numbers here. I never could figure out why they had all the senators' home phone listings, as opposed to us.

SARTORI: I guess it was because of the president trying to reach all the members, they had to have them.

LOUGHERY: Well, they still have the numbers. But why didn't we have them?

RITCHIE: I've been listening to Lyndon Johnson's taped telephone conversations, and he tended to call senators at home late at night. I guess when the phone rang at midnight

they knew who was calling in those days. Recent presidents don't seem to be so insistent on reaching senators in the middle of the night.

FLETCHER: Take their cell phone and go out to the Rose Garden and make it private, so that nothing's taped. Was Bobby Baker the secretary of the Senate?

RITCHIE: No, he was majority secretary. He never got to be secretary of the Senate.

FLETCHER: He had a past, didn't he?

LOUGHERY: Wasn't he during your Dad's era here?

FLETCHER: No, he was with Lyndon Johnson, wasn't he?

RITCHIE: Yes, but he stayed with the Senate when Johnson went to become Vice President. That's when he got into trouble. He was running a motel in Ocean City and a variety of other ventures, and got caught up in tax problems.

FLETCHER: Did you ever interview him?

RITCHIE: No, we've offered to, but he's retired in Florida and hasn't been available. But I interviewed the man who took over his job after he left, that was Frank Valeo, who did become secretary of the Senate.

LOUGHERY: How far back was that?

RITCHIE: That was in 1963 and 1964 when that was going on. Of course, it was a smaller community in those days and everybody on Capitol Hill knew everybody else, so when he got into trouble it really rocked the boat.

LOUGHERY: I think it's better now. There's much less patronage.

SARTORI: Yes, at that time there was more patronage than anything.

LOUGHERY: Well, that's all it was. If you didn't know anybody up here, you didn't get a job. Even in '76, let's face it.

FLETCHER: We were even in a secret location. We never, ever gave out where our office was.

SARTORI: No, when we started we were told never to give out our location, where communications was.

RITCHIE: Why was that?

SARTORI: I don't know.

LOUGHERY: I guess they protected the communications. What other reason would there be? We weren't allowed to say where we were, and if they asked how many operators there were, we couldn't say. Of course, we still don't. We weren't allowed to say any of that.

RITCHIE: Of course, now there's a lot more security, just to get into the building.

LOUGHERY: Then Bob McCormick came in, and he brought the press in the room! Big deal. You remember that?

RITCHIE: What was McCormick's position?

LOUGHERY: Director.

FLETCHER: Was he Director like Kim [Winn] or like Rick [Kauffman]?

SARTORI: I think Rick's position; Mr. Kauffman, that you just met.

LOUGHERY: There's Kim and then there's Rick, and we love them both. We really do. I'm being facetious, but it's true. We like them.

RITCHIE: You mentioned reporters, and that is something else I wanted to ask about. One of the biggest constituencies on Capitol Hill is the press. How do you deal with

reporters?

LOUGHERY: We don't tell them anything.

SARTORI: No, if they come in and ask your opinion or anything, we just refer them to Becky Daugherty of the sergeant at arms' office. She deals with the press.

LOUGHERY: And many times they call on the weekend. They want to talk to a senator. If we know it's a reporter, we may call one of the staff people and say so-and-so is on the line, but the senators don't want to be bothered with reporters on the weekend, I can assure you. We've been around a long time.

RITCHIE: That's what I was thinking of, the reporters who are trying to track down senators, do they try to use you to get their sources?

LOUGHERY: Yes, they do.

FLETCHER: But they never get through. Never.

LOUGHERY: Because when calling a senator it's one senator to another senator, especially on the weekend. If it's a reporter or somebody else, we call a contact person on the senator's staff and they can make the decision as to whether the senator wants to speak to that particular person. This is what we do. We're around a long time and we know what the reporters are up to.

FLETCHER: I'm not even as kind as she is. They've got to say, "This is Fox News and he's due here in 12 minutes and we can't reach him." Then I buy it, I'll go to the contact person. But they've got to prove to me that they're looking for him for a purpose, not just to make up an interview of some sort. No, because they have all the tricks.

LOUGHERY: They really do. They're not very honest people.

FLETCHER: We're treating them like used-car salesmen, aren't we? [laughs]

LOUGHERY: Worse. We're polite, but they won't get a senator on the line, not by way of us. They'll get a contact person, perhaps, and let the contact person decide whether he or she should get to talk to the senator.

RITCHIE: Do you have to deal at all with former members?

LOUGHERY: Yes, we do.

RITCHIE: Do you keep track of the former members' telephone numbers or addresses?

LOUGHERY: It depends on whether they want to leave anything with us. Fine. Most of them don't. I don't think we have any now.

SARTORI: And then there's a Former Members of Congress association.

LOUGHERY: But they have to belong to that.

SARTORI: If they belong to that, then we just refer people to that organization.

LOUGHERY: Or if it's a Democrat or Republican, I always give the Democratic National Committee number or the Republican National Committee number. I usually say, "Maybe they can help you in some way." We try to help.

FLETCHER: Once in a while we'll get a call from John Ashcroft, looking for someone. Charles Percy from Illinois used to call us after he retired. He'd come back on the board looking for someone.

LOUGHERY: Percy's wife is named Margaret. Margaret was supposed to pray for me. [laughs] Percy was making a lot of calls and he didn't say what for. He was placing calls and he would give us a list. But he was soliciting money for his reelection, and that's not legal. I think he picked up my attitude. I think I got an attitude at this point, because he would give us a list. He told me that Margaret was going to pray for me. That's what he told me. "Senator, I don't think I would go any further than this," because in my mind I'm thinking: what you're doing is not legal, not at all. But he had that list and everybody was doing it.

What could we say?

SARTORI: But then they stopped it.

LOUGHERY: Somebody got a hold of him. Oh, yes, I know what it was. He retired, or was he defeated?

RITCHIE: He was defeated.

LOUGHERY: Anyway, he kept calling and he wanted to use the senators' board, and Bob McCormick told myself and Barbara Broce to tell him he wasn't allowed to use the senators' board anymore! Brose looked at me and I looked at her, and I said, "He's making over a hundred thou. I am not going to tell him he can't use the board. Let Bob McCormick tell him he can't use the board!" And we refused to do it.

SARTORI: Yes, because after they leave office they can only use the senators' board for so many days.

LOUGHERY: Yes, 30 days.

SARTORI: No 60.

RITCHIE: I think senators get so used to the "perks" of office that they don't realize they don't carry them with them forever.

LOUGHERY: That was the only one. There was one other.

FLETCHER: From Minnesota, long last name.

RITCHIE: Rudy Boschwitz?

LOUGHERY: Oh, remember when Rudy came in the office that day? He was standing right next to me. This guy had this little sports coat on and I thought it was a maintenance man! [laughs]

FLETCHER: Didn't he come back wanting the freebie service?

LOUGHERY: Yes.

FLETCHER: I think they did tell him and he came right around and said he was entitled to one more day. He didn't take no easily, but didn't threaten you. He was just pushy.

LOUGHERY: No, they don't threaten.

FLETCHER: Now, people like Tom Daschle. We never hear from him.

LOUGHERY: After he was defeated, history.

FLETCHER: Sometimes you'll get a congressman throw out his name, and you'll think, "Sounds halfway familiar." You just say, "Oh, how are you doing? I hope you're enjoying retirement," and just play the role.

RITCHIE: You do encounter such unusual characters on Capitol Hill. Every personality from every part of the country.

LOUGHERY: Don't you think that's interesting?

RITCHIE: Oh, yes, that's what keeps the job interesting.

LOUGHERY: I think it's very interesting. Don't tell my boss that, okay?

RITCHIE: Every two years there's an election and there will be changes.

LOUGHERY: And that was always exciting, wasn't it, Joanie? Elections and inaugurations.

SARTORI: And the big thing is when parties change. The printing would all change.

LOUGHERY: That's the hassle for Joanie.

SARTORI: Yes, the printing of the Capitol Directory. Right now the Republicans are all in Roman and italic for the Democrats. When the majority changes, all the names have to change.

FLETCHER: Or one group doesn't want to give up that phone number, even though it was a Democratic majority that went to a Republican, that Democratic person is not giving up that phone number. Right?

LOUGHERY: There was a congressman a few years back who wanted a different telephone number because he didn't think his constituents would remember that number because it was too difficult! [Laughter] Do you remember that? We had to change it. That doesn't say too much for the constituents.

RITCHIE: My office's number was one digit off of Shannon and Luchs, the real estate agency, and for a while we got calls constantly. People would say, "I saw your listing for the house." Our secretary would say, "This is not the House, it's the Senate."

LOUGHERY: You've been there a long time, haven't you, since '72?

RITCHIE: Since '76.

FLETCHER: What month?

RITCHIE: I came in March.

LOUGHERY: Because you're the only person I knew in that office, the only name.

RITCHIE: I handle a lot of the reporters who call our office.

LOUGHERY: Why do they call, though?

RITCHIE: If something's happened, they want to know: How often has it happened? What's the background to it? Would it be correct to say this? What does it mean when they do that? And also because it's harder to get their calls returned from some other offices that are shy about answering calls from the press. The reporters are trying to write a story in a

short time, and we're a neutral, non-partisan office, so they tend to call us. And I'm foolish enough to let them quote me, so they call all the time, and that's probably the reason why you've heard my name.

LOUGHERY: They ask for you, whether you know it or not. [laughter] They ask for you by name.

SARTORI: When Ma Bell broke up they were tied, and one of the senators broke the tie vote when Judge Green introduced that legislation. It was Senator Beall we thought. Because we were trying to figure out which senator cast the deciding vote.

RITCHIE: We can probably find that information.

LOUGHERY: Yes, that was last week we were talking about that. It's time to retire, girls, when we go back that far.

SARTORI: We were trying to figure out because Senator Beall and Senator Hatfield came to the office, and I remember when the Senate was tied and one of the senators broke the tie.

FLETCHER: We do homework. We get children or the parents of the child calling in and asking questions. We know it's a homework assignment, and we say, "I hope I get an A."

RITCHIE: So you answer their questions?

FLETCHER: If we're not swamped.

LOUGHERY: Don't forget, we all had kids. I remember years ago my kids having to call the Capitol. It was like "What is the number?" "How do we find the number?" Now everybody in the world has the Capitol number. But they've always had to call the Capitol operator.

RITCHIE: Then you get people who are doing contests, or radio quizzes, and you get the same question over and over, and you know that something is driving that question.

LOUGHERY: Or “we have a bet going on, operator.”

RITCHIE: We get calls like that. We assume they called the Capitol operator and someone forwarded them to our office.

LOUGHERY: How many people do you have on your staff?

RITCHIE: We have nine people, three historians, an archivist, and a photographer, but we handle a lot of calls every day and we assume that a lot of them probably do get forwarded from the Capitol operators.

LOUGHERY: You were on C-SPAN.

RITCHIE: Oh, that was their program on the Capitol.

LOUGHERY: Yes, I watched that. I don’t know why I watched it—did you all watch it? About two weeks ago.

RITCHIE: Right, it was their 25th anniversary. I did the tour down to the bathtubs in the Capitol basement.

LOUGHERY: Are there tours up into the dome. We’ve never been up into the dome.

RITCHIE: In 30 years I’ve made it twice. You have to have a member of Congress go with you, although might arrange it through the Architect of the Capitol’s office, or the Senate sergeant at arms. It might be nice to arrange for your retirement.

KRAMER: I wouldn’t attempt it!

LOUGHERY: He’s nice.

RITCHIE: It’s a long walk up, but it’s worth it, because you go inside the dome and look down into the Rotunda, and then go outside under the Statue of Freedom, and that’s quite spectacular.

LOUGHERY: When you say a long walk up, you mean steps?

RITCHIE: Yes, a lot of steps—360 or something like that.

LOUGHERY: Ah, geez. [laughter]

RITCHIE: That's why you need a younger member of Congress to go with you.

FLETCHER: There's a redheaded kid who's from the House side, from Florida maybe, who looks like he's about 14. I know he would make the steps. Have you ever seen him? He's probably 26 or whatever.

LOUGHERY: In other words, they have to go with us?

RITCHIE: Right, you need a member or the Sergeant at Arms or the Architect of the Capitol. But once you get up there, there's a beautiful view of the city in all directions. You spend a lot of time up there because you're catching your breath from climbing all the stairs, and then you have to climb all the way back down again.

SARTORI: Would you try it if you got the chance?

FLETCHER: Yes.

KRAMER: I wouldn't! I wouldn't even.

LOUGHERY: Would you like to do it?

KRAMER: No! My goodness.

LOUGHERY: Oh, I would go three steps at a time. I would definitely try it.

SARTORI: Well, I don't like to be on—

RITCHIE: Well, you're actually between the two domes. There is an internal dome and an external dome. You climb up with the outside of the dome around you. It's not a

convenient climb, but it's not an impossible one either. I would say, pick a cooler day than right now. Once it was open to the general public and anyone could make the climb. There was even a couple who got married on top of the dome in 1905, we found a newspaper article about that. But everything is more secure now. That's another issue. How has security changed during the years you were here?

LOUGHERY: It's just a pain in the neck, that's all. No, it's for our good.

RITCHIE: Well, you have family who are on the Capitol Police.

LOUGHERY: That doesn't make any difference. It doesn't mean a thing, trust me.

FLETCHER: I remember someone picking me up right there at that northwest door of the Dirksen Building and parking their car right there and I could come right out.

LOUGHERY: But not now. Now to go down First Street you have to show your ID and then you have to go through the barricade and let them open the gate for you to go through. You have to have a Senate ID to get through. Sometimes on Fridays I go down First Street because Second Street is too crowded. Yes, the security is more.

SARTORI: Before it was more relaxed.

LOUGHERY: Before they worked on the need to know. I mean, if you knew the person coming into that building, that Capitol cop let you in, but now even if they know you they have to see your ID. And rightfully so. They're doing the right thing.

RITCHIE: Especially because you're often here off-hours, late into the evening.

FLETCHER: We handle questions about the Statue of Freedom, so we don't send them over to you. We have it printed up, and if somebody wants to know what she is wearing, we read all this out to them.

RITCHIE: So you have a number of those "evergreen" questions that you have answers printed for?

FLETCHER: That we keep them from you. Aren't you happy?

LOUGHERY: Evergreen, is that what you call them?

RITCHIE: Those are the questions that always get asked and you can answer them in your sleep.

LOUGHERY: I just read it right off. I have it sitting right there.

RITCHIE: Besides the Statue of Freedom, are there any other regular questions like that?

SARTORI: Wagonmaster. And that's a term you haven't heard for years.

LOUGHERY: You know, I had a call for it about two weeks ago.

SARTORI: Did you, really?

LOUGHERY: For crying out loud, it's been years and years, but it's still in the computer. The girls were saying, "What in the world is a wagonmaster?"

FLETCHER: And then they'll call wanting to know what Congress is this? Is this the first session or second session? Things like that. It's amazing that people don't know that they get two senators and one representative, and the length of their terms.

RITCHIE: You hear a lot of visitors to the Capitol who don't know the names of their senators.

FLETCHER: Every other one.

RITCHIE: Well, I promised that I wouldn't keep you past 10 o'clock.

LOUGHERY: Ellen worked all night.

RITCHIE: Yes, I understood that you were leaving at this stage while everyone else was just coming in. But I want to thank you all very much for participating.

LOUGHERY: Don't let the boss listen to it!

RITCHIE: I enjoyed this enormously.

LOUGHERY: We did too.

FLETCHER: Will you step into our office and see our equipment?

RITCHIE: Yes, I'd like to see that, thank you.

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