

Exit Interview with Carol Benefield, Administrative Assistant to the First Lady

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Location: Room 200, East Wing

Interviewer: David Alsobrook, Presidential Papers Staff

Transcriber: Lyn Kirkland

Alsobrook: Carol, first I wanted to ask you a little bit about what you did during the campaign 1976. Where you stayed and what you did, that sort of thing.

Benefield: In 1976 I was living in Atlanta and the Carter/Mondale headquarters was based in Atlanta at Colony Square and I just started out as a volunteer. I was employed full time during the day and I would go every evening and later on on Saturday and just do volunteer work. At one point the volunteer office that coordinated all the volunteers came to me and said the First Lady's Staff is looking for someone who would be willing to commit themselves to come every evening and on Saturdays and we've been watching you and you seem to be pretty regular every evening. Would you be interested in committing yourself to come definitely...every evening as well as on Saturdays and work with the First Lady? And I said, "I'd love to." That's how I started in 1976.

Alsobrook: Now the volunteers...weren't there some members of the President's family involved in that...seems like Alethea Wall or somebody was involved?

Benefield: Probably just all over, I guess, the state. I did not meet any of them at Colony Square Headquarters during that time...not until after we came up here. I am sure they were probably working.

Alsobrook: Did you have any jobs that you felt like prepared you for your campaign role? Was there anything that you had done in the past that helped you get ready for that?

Benefield: Not really, that was my first involvement in politics at all. Other than just clerical experience that I had had. No. I was dealing with people in my previous job and that helped me prepare for the hundreds of thousands that I eventually wound up having to deal with but other than that, no previous experience.

Alsobrook: You spent the whole time in Atlanta, right?

Benefield: That's correct.

Alsobrook: Are there certain things that stand out in your mind about the campaign as you think back about it?

Benefield: Well, I guess I first remember my first evening working for the campaign. Actually, Colony Square Headquarters was the final stopping point as far as where the headquarters were located. We started out in very small offices...in a law firm I believe....and from there it moved to another location, and then finally to Colony Square Headquarters. Those first early days stand out in my mind. And I can remember at one point the President's coming by Colony Square Headquarters and they told all of us who were volunteers "be outside, stand outside and he is going to be coming by very hurriedly" and we all waited with great anticipation and we began to see a lot of camera men and reporters very hurriedly, you know, they were coming before him and then all of a sudden he rounded the corner and there he was with a whole bunch of secret service men and other reporters and baggage and all that.....So I think definitely that's what stands out.

Alsobrook: So after the campaign was over then you got involved in the transition?

Benefield: Right.

Alsobrook: What are your memories of the transition? Your job that you had then?

Benefield: Well, two weeks after the election I found myself in Washington and my life changed very quickly in two weeks. Our transition headquarters were located in the old, I believe, HEW building down at Third and Peachtree. My first impression was that it looked like something out of World War II (both laugh)....very plain.....anything but plush...but they would start functioning. Of course, they were very excited about what they were doing. It was very cold. Of course, the winters down South are cold too....in fact, I found that the weather here in Washington, except for a little more snow, very closely parallels that of Atlanta. But it seemed to be an exceptionally cold winter that year and I didn't have my car so I had to go everywhere by buses. I seem to think about, seem to remember it being very cold, very sparse, very exciting working conditions. And, of course, after that Mrs. Carter and Madeline and most of them in Plains, I did not see a lot of them.

Alsobrook: During transition?

Benefield: During transition. And I can remember when Mrs. Carter did come up and she was staying at Jackson Place, using the office over at Jackson place for the day, and she knew who was hopefully going to be on the staff, and she interviewed each one of us individually during that time. That was exciting to go over and finally meet the First Lady and have a one on one conversation with her.

Alsobrook: What do you recall about that day ...other than just being interviewed?

Benefield: I can't I was so excited (Alsobrook laughs) it's just sort of a blur right now. I was just so excited...and somewhat nervous.

Alsobrook: When did you learn that you were going to get the job?

Benefield: Well, Douglas realized from what Madeline had told me.... I knew there was a probability that I would be a member of the permanent staff. It was that afternoon that Madeline told us....that it was final.

Alsobrook: Do you remember the first day you came to work here? I guess it was the inaugural day. Is that right?

Benefield: Yes, I could never forget it. In fact, those first three days I thought if I can live through these three days I can live through anything the rest of my life. The inaugural date, again, very, very cold. Coming up here, finding a television set, and seeing, I think the military office was located here at that time. Watching Carter on television in this office and in some other places. We did not go out. It was just too cold.

Alsobrook: Uh huh.

Benefield: And during those first days there were a lot of receptions here and there is no manual that tells you how to find anything, or how this office, or how the White House is run. We had nothing to tell us who to call for clearance to get people in. We had people like Martin Luther King, Sr. that just showed up at the gate. We did not know how to clear him. We knew he had to be cleared. There were just so many things and, of course, all the phones were just ringing off, ringing off, and you think am I going to let things drop because there were so many things happening. We didn't know who to contact. I thought, these three days I will never forget. They made an impression all right!

Alsobrook: After things settled down a little bit, how did your job and duties develop during those first few months?

Benefield: Well, initially it started off a little slow and I thought is there going to be enough for me to do here and after about a couple of months everything started falling together and falling into place and the mail started coming in and people's roles became more or less defined. My role here and that of Madeline McBee and Rita Mercer, across the hall, we pretty much formed what was known as her personal staff; Madeline being her personal assistant and having been with her since Mrs. Carter's governor's mansion days...Rita Mercer as her personal secretary, and I was administrative assistant. So, a lot of the things that this office is responsible for are primarily of a personal nature. As I say, at first it was mostly opening mail and answering the telephone, composing some letters. If she needed to have a hair dresser to come over, we would phone for the hair dresser. That has greatly enlarged. Not only are we responsible for those kinds of personal things.....inviting guests for the family who are staying in the family quarters. We, of course, have to get all the security information to get the people cleared. We check with the First Lady to see exactly what bedrooms or what floorswhere she wants the guests to stay. If they want them for dinner. If they have other plans, if there is a picnic or something going on, we make sure the guests get invited. We do a lot of follow up. We have some guests

in the house right now from California, a little girl who the President met at the University of California recently.

Alsobrook: Oh, yeh.

Benefield: The little girl stood up and asked him a question, and as he has done several times, invited a child to come and spend the night in the White House, and so we had to arrange for her and her family, her mother and father and she has an older brother, to come in and spend the night, and I think they went to some kind of concert last night, the children stayed in, the two children in the family, and, of course, the entire family had dinner last night with the President and Mrs. Carter. So, we get in involved in that kind of thing...getting cars if we have a very special guest and working with the usher's office and making sure we have a car sent to the airport.... what time to have it there. Getting them in here, getting them all settled. Having the lady who does Mrs. Carter's clothes. Mrs. Carter wants a few seams so we call her and say, "Joyce, Mrs. Carter would like some seams." She's looking for something in particular. We more or less find out what she is looking for....and have the seamstress come in. The hairdresser. She has one now that she found shortly after coming up here. He's sort of on a fixed schedule...he's pretty regular, so we don't usually have to call him. My job, I would say, probably more than 50% of what I do involves scheduling things and working out things for Amy. Initially I was responsible for all of the family, and when I say family I'm talking about Amy and Chip, and Jeff, and Matt....and to a much lesser extent...only occasionally, Jack...just because he is not physically located here ... scheduling invitations for those family members. But after Chip went to work for the DNC and the Carter/Mondale committee, of course, he has someone doing him and also scheduling him. As I say, Jack, living in Calhoun, more or less does his own thing. Jeff and Matt, they more or less take care of themselves and occasionally we'd get invitations in here which are more or less just forwarded to them, because after they moved out of the Whitehouse, we don't have as much of a working relationship with them, but we still stay in contact, but Amy still being here, I would say at least 50% of that job involves working out things with the school, it's working with the violin teacher, setting up the violin lessons for Amy and Mrs. Carter, making the appointments with the orthodontist; all those kind of things of a personal nature.

Alsobrook: I don't see how you have time to work on any letters and anything like that.

Benefield: You have to make time. The correspondence and the paperwork never stops and a lot of times people say "well, exactly what do you do?" (Alsobrook laughs) And I can't say exactly what I do because it is so varied. We get...this office here gets the mail and the phone calls that don't really fall into any other kind of category. It doesn't fall to press; it doesn't fall to social office; it isn't part of appointments and scheduling. There are just so many varied kinds of requests that we get that don't fall into one particular category. People will write in and will want to design clothes for Mrs. Carter and they will want to perform various tasks to decorate the house. We in this office we are responsible for answering those kinds of personal requests. And,

of course, telephone calls, the telephone back here, I would say, on a very, very busy day would probably approach 75 calls a day. ...just incoming. (Alsobrook grunts) On a slower day, of course, we can have much less, but there are some times you think how am I going to do everything I have to do...and you just have to make time. If your correspondence backs up, you stay late in the evening. One night, two nights, or whatever, or you come in early. You just have to make time. This is not a nine to five job. I think it's probably the case for most people working here in the White House....not nine to five, it would never be.

Alsobrook: So there is no such thing as a typical day?

Benefield: No.

Alsobrooks: Are there certain projects or special things that you have worked on that have given you a great deal of personal satisfaction...other than everything that you do each day?

Benefield: I cannot think of any special projects.

Alsobrooks: Are there certain aspects of the job that you enjoy particularly?

Benefield: I guess the aspect of having worked so closely with the First Lady and the family and just having a very easy and comfortable relationship with the family. I think that more than anything.

Alsobrook: That really leads me to a few other questions I want to ask you too right now. You know, you've had the opportunity to observe the First Lady day in and day out for a number of years. How would you describe her day here? What would it be like ...on a typical day, if she could have a typical day?

Benefield: Well, most of the time she is quite busy. I guess, as most people realize, she is, I think, the most active first lady since Eleanor Roosevelt. She is involved in so many things and is interested in so many things. Her schedule...well, some days her schedule is just back to back appointments...or receptions or meetings or what have you. Other days, the calendar may look like, well, like we have more time between...like we have only two or three things on the schedule and it should be a pretty easy day. That's not really the case, because if she is not here in this office working, she usually works over in the house, making a lot of phone calls which she makes over there. She does a lot of work over there...sees a lot of people over there...but also she may see people in the Map Room...or various places. She usually chooses the Map Room or the Library over the Oval Office. But it never has ...it is just amazing how she can get done everything that she has to do. She's always busy...and when I first came to the White House, someone told me that the President and Mrs. Carter would never ask more of their staff than they would ask of themselves and that is certainly true, and while the staff works long and hard hours, so do the President and Mrs. Carter and they are vitally interested in everything that Mrs. Carter expresses interest in.

Alsobrook: Uh hum.

Benefield: Like the mental health issue, the handicapped, the elderly. She is genuinely and deeply concerned about these special areas. If you ever talk to her off the record... she may just come out and be chatting with some of us, which is not that often because she doesn't have that much time to just chat, but there is a genuine and deep concern for people who are underprivileged, and old people living on a fixed income, and families... and people who have to deal with mental health issues. Another thing that never ceases to amaze me is that she sometimes.... she...she can always find time for her family. She will make time particularly for Amy. That's one of the reasons for the violin lessons. Every.....once a week, and it usually falls either on a Tuesday or a Wednesday, she and Amy go to the violin teacher's house in McLain, Va., and for an hour, they usually have an hour's lesson, and it is a half hour out there and a half hour back, so we are talking two hours just for the violin lessons. She enjoys that time with Amy and it is rare that she would miss that violin time. If she is traveling out of town, then isn't practical for her to make it, but first, that violin lesson is always on her schedule every week.

Alsobrook: And she always seems to make time for the President too. Is that....

Benefield: That's true.

Alsobrook: Is that the same way? Do you have any examples of that?

Benefield: Well, I know if they are both here, they usually try to have dinner and I think everyone knows about their working luncheons....

Alsobrook: Oh yeh.

Benefield: ... And I think that is an excellent idea, because I am sure they probably talk shop after hours. Nevertheless, that gives themthe once a week working luncheon... gives them an opportunity to really sit down and talk about things of a business nature....hopefully freeing up a little bit more time that they would have time just for themselves and the family. It is not unusual....in fact, only in the last two weeks, one evening I was walking down the east colonnade and lo and behold I look out and I see the President and Mrs. Carter and Amy jogging, (of course, he tries to make it usually every night) but there the three of them were running, so they always seems to make time. The family is very important to her.

Alsobrook: I guess they go to the movies here together.

Benefield: They do. They see quite a number of movies.

Alsobrook: Being an election year, does this make the First Lady's schedule even more difficult for her?

Benefield: She has done a lot of traveling, a lot of traveling. At one point she had committed herself to traveling every Thursday and Friday. Sometimes it was even more than that every single week and when you are on the road at least two days out of the week, and sometimes, three, it can be very taxing. You have all the speeches you have to give and study and prepare yourself for and all the people. It has to be physically very taxing to have to do all this because you are going at such a fast pace, but she handles it just beautifully and only occasionally have I ever seen her look tired. She may look a little tired but you would never know it from talking to her. She's always seems bright and ready to go again. She's just an amazing woman.

Alsobrook: I think I read someplace that the President said he would like to have her back every week-end after doing all that traveling. Is that the way the story went?

Benefield: Well, I heard that too. I can't say first hand, but I had heard that too. I think again, that that shows the importance they place on the family unit because he's going to be on the road so much, and I'm sure she will be too and they have to make time.

Alsobrook: Now, Carol, you talked about the fatiguing aspects of traveling. Have you had to do some of the traveling?

Benefield: No, I don't usually travel...the only traveling I have done is on some of the foreign trips, and not all of those....but Madeline McBee, her personal assistant, and Mary Horton, her press secretary, travel with her everywhere she goes. They could probably...probably tell you more about that aspect.

Alsobrook: But when they are traveling, you are here taking care of everything that could come up? Right?

Benefield: Right.

Alsobrook: Are those pretty hectic experiences?

Benefield: Well, it can be...it can be at times. The pace has just sort of escalated gradually so you get used to operating at it. It is sort of a mad cap pace over the years. (Alsobrook laughs) We try to take care of things while she is gone...and while Madeline is gone.

Alsobrook: Which foreign trips did you go on?

Benefield: Well, let's see, my first trip was in 1977. Mrs. Carter went to South America and uh, let's see if I can remember in not the right order, but we visited Puerto Rico, Costa Rica; Bogotá, Columbia; Venezuela; and Recife and Brasilia, Brazil. We made seven stops in something like 14 days. I can't recall really. And Peru, Lima, Peru. As I say, seven stops in about 14 days is a pretty hectic schedule. We were all very glad to get back home. Then the second trip I took was in 1979 on the President's and Mrs. Carter's trip to Japan and to Korea.

Alsobrook: Oh, yeh.

Benefield: That was rather exciting. And then this past year, I was fortunate enough to go on the President and Mrs. Carter's trip to Italy, Portugal, and where else did we go?

Alsobrook: Did you enjoy that one the most?

Benefield: I think so. I think so. South America I could leave....and additionally Japan and Korea I enjoyed but I have no desire to go back. But Rome, Venice. Yugoslavia was pretty. It is largely agricultural. I wouldn't mind spending time again in, especially, I think, in Rome and Spain. Spain I loved a lot and we were only in Spain for one day.

Alsobrook: Oh yeh.

Benefield: Those are the trips I've been on. I love that kind of travel. It is an experience I would probably not have had otherwise. I've never had time to travel internationally, so that aspect of my job has been very pleasant.

Alsobrook: I bet. I want to ask you a little bit about how she prepares for speeches. Could you just describe what the process is, if there is a process, for getting ready for a speech?

Benefield: Many times *she* will write her speeches. A great deal of the time, Mary Horton, her press secretary, will write her speeches and always Mary would do the editing, the changes and rewrites. Of course, if Mary writes the speech, Mrs. Carter will review it and make some changes....additions, deletions, or whatever....and Mary will work on it some more. And it finally comes to the First Lady and it is typed on cards for her and I'm sure she practices. She doesn't practice over here, but I'm sure she probably practices in the house. But usually, I think, probably by the time she gets to an event she has a pretty good idea of what she wants to say and she may use the cards that she will look down to occasionally, but by and large she knows what she wants to say and she can just deliver the speech where it appears it is more or less extemporaneous. She will occasionally use note cards to look over and if the speech has a lot of statistics, facts and figures, she may refer to her notes more often. But it is not uncommon for her to do a lot of the writing for her speeches....a lot of cut and paste kind of thing and then she'll send it down to her personal secretary.

Alsobrook: Rita?

Benefield: Rita, yeh. She will type most of those speeches and sometimes she will still be working with her speeches that morning. Rita, I think, has gotten a call as early as 6:30 or 7:00 o'clock in the morning at home. The First Lady has revised her speech and Rita, of course, would come in early and get the speech typed and Mrs. Carter would be going out the south portico to her limo to go to the plane at 8:30. And occasionally she's still working on them on the plane.

Alsobrook: Goodness. Would Rita keep drafts of all the speeches?

Benefield: I think there is a catalogue of the First Lady's speeches which the press office now keeps. Usually Mrs. Carter, she makes final notes on her typed cards for her speeches. After the speech or after the event, those cards go back to the press office for the final-typing-as-they-were-given kind of thing and they go to the catalogue from there.

Alsobrook: OK. That was the main thing. I wanted to make sure we had all the various stages that the speech had gone through. So, they would all be in the First Lady's press office?

Benefield: Yes.

Alsobrook: OK. How about, would Rita also be the one that takes care of the diaries, the cassettes, or whatever to be transcribed?

Benefield: Yes. Mrs. Carter, I don't know if she is still using mini-cassette tapes now. She has in the past. And yes, Rita is in charge of those and they are in the safe over there and no one, I'm not even sure Rita has heard all the tapes yet. Well, as I read it, it is probably just a day to day observation on what has happened, and that kind of thing. What the First Lady is trying to do now is that every day on her written schedule she'll just make notes after an event, after a reception, or whatever. Then those go to Rita and she will just type from the notes.

Alsobrook: Hopefully, a lot of those will find their way to the Carter Presidential Library. We are hopeful.

Benefield: I'm sure sooner or later it probably all will. Rita does keep all of those in the safe.

Alsobrook: Oh, that's great. That's just terrific. A woman in New Hampshire last year said of Rosalynn Mrs. Carter, "she's so damn human I wouldn't be afraid to speak to her. Some President's wives would make me feel humiliated." I'm sure you've heard quotes like this before, but do you feel like this is an accurate description of the First Lady and her ability to deal with the average citizen on the street?

Benefield: Yes. Yes. This comment is so very typical of so many that I have heard. One of the parts of this job too, of my job, is to escort people that are to see the First Lady...either up here to see her or over to the Map Room to see her. Usually, I guess, it could be out of town friends or family---- people who have not met her before, they are usually pretty nervous. But, of course, she will come down to see them and it is my job is to escort them out, and so many times afterwards they'll say (she whispers like the visitors, "She's just lovely")...and they are so... she has that special ability, really, to put people at ease. (End of tape 1)

Alsobrook: (first part of the question is cut off with change of tapes).....there was this effort on the first Lady's staff to tone down her so-called *image*. Do you remember anything about that?

Benefield: No.

Alsobrook: Was there anything to that?

Benefield: I remember hearing some in the press. There was no effort to tone anything down. Mrs. Carter has always been vitally interested in things that are going on. I don't think that she would try to interject herself where it was not appropriate. If it was a high level meeting on military or something, I don't think she would try to interject herself or her opinion or her influence where it was not appropriate.

Alsobrook: OK. Is there any area of your work here, Carol, that we haven't....I know we haven't covered everything, but is there any area you think you need to sketch in more detail on anything you have done here?

Benefield: Looking back, I can't think of anything.

Alsobrook: Can you tell me a little bit about your future plans?

Benefield: Well, this is my last day here with the White House and as of September 1, I will be the new director of the warehouse ...

Alsobrook: Um hum. Wow.

Benefield: ... And so I could be right across the street. I am very much looking forward to that. Working at the White House has been a wonderful work experience, working so close to the first family, and I am looking forward to continuing that association over at the warehouse.

Alsobrook: This is for the library. Could you give me perhaps a permanent address in Georgia....some place we can always get in touch with you?

Benefield: Certainly, I'll give you my mother's address. Mrs. Ernestine Benefield, 1191 East Avenue, Cedartown, Ga. 30125. And the phone is 404-748-5679.

Alsobrook: OK. Well, thank you very much.

Benefield: Thank you. I have enjoyed it.