

**GRETCHEN POSTON
EXIT INTERVIEW**

This is an interview with Gretchen Poston in 210 East Wing of the White House on January 2, 1981. The interviewer is Emily Soapes of the Presidential Papers Staff.

EMILY SOAPES: Now you came on to the First Lady's staff Ms. Poston, when? At the beginning?

GRETCHEN POSTON: At the beginning [indiscernible]

EMILY SOAPES: That's definitely [indiscernible]-- what was your first duty, the inaugural balls or is that done by the inaugural committee?

GRETCHEN POSTON: No, I had nothing to do -- I got my first phone call New Years Eve asking if I would come in and talk to Mary Hoyt about the job and then the day after New Years I saw her. The next day Mrs. Carter came to town and I saw her. And the next morning they called me up. So I would say this probably [indiscernible] January.

And I was involved in doing many things around the inaugural. I was working for the Democratic National Committee and doing a lot of events that were going on. And also was actively working on the Vice President's inaugural parties -- swearing-in parties. So that was the first thing.

[Interruption]

GRETCHEN POSTON: We're doing a taped interview. Could you take a message for me?

EMILY SOAPES: You had no work with the Carters in Georgia in common. That was not how you came to their attention?

GRETCHEN POSTON: No, I had been working -- I did a couple of funds raisers for the Governor, but primarily I had been working with the Democratic National Committee. I went to the convention and did the events at the convention. And then did several things here in Washington that were connected with fund raising for the Governor. Then went to St. Louis and did a large fundraiser there.

But had not met them and had not anticipated obviously working [indiscernible], but nevertheless that was a concern and then I had a -- was doing things with the Democratic National Committee. All of those satellite events that go on during the inaugural and asked if there would be anything that I would do.

So, I was not responsible for setting up any of the early receptions that went on here in the White House although, I was here as of January 20th and took over from there. But that was all done by the inaugural committee, all of those massive receptions that were done and done well. But I had, they had asked me about it when I talked to them but that just went on -- I showed up and of course was active [indiscernible] were taking place.

EMILY SOAPES: So your experience [indiscernible] was in planning fundraisers.

GRETCHEN POSTON: Well no, I had a convention business.

EMILY SOAPES: Oh, so that should be excellent experience.

GRETCHEN POSTON: My experience has been working for forty years in the party and had worked for almost every presidential candidate, much more so than we ran the campaign from Washington. And probably would have had we [indiscernible] Washington.

But have worked Hubert Humphrey and Johnson, Muskie, and you know, have always been involved, actively involved in campaigns. But my business is convention planning [indiscernible]

EMILY SOAPES: I would think that would have been great experience, large advantage in the planning. How was the position described to you by Mrs. Hoyt and Mrs. Carter?

GRETCHEN POSTON: They never explained it to me. Mrs. Carter and I never really talked too much. I don't think anybody knew. Mrs. Hoyt didn't -- there was just a position. I, though, felt pretty confident that it was the same kind of thing that I would be doing.

It's like getting married. I don't know that it can be described, even now with transition coming in, I've talked to Nancy Reynolds. I'm not sure that all of -- or that it makes much difference whether you really know what it is because till [indiscernible] starts up and it takes on a life of its own depending on who is here.

But no, I didn't know anything. Never talked to anyone in transition.

EMILY SOAPES: Did you have any advice to go on?

GRETCHEN POSTON: No and no records, but I am not sure that that's bad [indiscernible].

EMILY SOAPES: [indiscernible] a lot of people have said that to me. Now your job is to coordinate any kind of official function that the First Family holds in the White House.

GRETCHEN POSTON: In the House, right. Well, and or traveling.

EMILY SOAPES: That is what I was going to ask. What about all the way to Europe.

GRETCHEN POSTON: Well, I, yes, although we don't do the reciprocals, I did go to -- I have made two trips with the President. One to New York when he went to the UN and had a series of dinners at the UN and Mrs. Carter at that time had an elaborate luncheon for the wives of the diplomatic --

EMILY SOAPES: What are they called? [indiscernible]

GRETCHEN POSTON: No, no, back at the UN and so I was there for about a week with the President planning Mrs. Carter's event which we had at the Guggenheim Museum and the dinners were at the -- in the Secretary's quarters of the -- of our embassy in New York.

Then I went with the President to Mexico because this time we did have a reciprocal there in Mexico. We had a dinner preceded by a [indiscernible], a cultural exchange event where we brought Leonard Bernstein down to Mexico and he directed the Mexican Symphony. So we had a Hands Across the Border cultural event.

I went one other time for Mrs. Carter, when we had our Hands across the Border cultural event in Texas, on the border. Mrs. López Portillo and Mrs. Carter met on the border and did a cultural exchange.

So those are the only three times that I've -- that was down at El Paso.

EMILY SOAPES: Now then, are you, you are responsible for the entire event I take it, the food, the entertainment --

GRETCHEN POSTON: Sure. Anything that goes on in the House is the responsibility, during this administration, that is not necessarily true of other administrations. In this administration anything that goes on in the House comes through here whereby, whether it [indiscernible] the Outreach Program that Sam Wexler [ph] did which really included only the President but she would -- I would meet with Ann [ph] [indiscernible] some of her aides and we would discuss how -- what she wants to do and how she wants to do it.

Then it's our responsibility to come back and set it up the way we feel that it accommodates their wishes and the way that I know the First Lady would want to do something in the House. So that it had both of those considerations.

Then we do what we call, tasking. We have a task chief that alerts the House [indiscernible]. All of the support staff have to be alerted as to the event, what it is and what requirements so we then send out those requirements. And then, continue working with [indiscernible] at the time of the event when all of that comes together with the scenario.

EMILY SOAPES: And then follow through with the events?

GRETCHEN POSTON: Yes, we also, the House more and more as time went on, we became more involved in the Rose Garden kinds of events and even some in 450 [indiscernible] because of the components of the -- well for one thing, just because of the list that had to be so accurate.

You know a lot of offices couldn't handle them or really didn't have the facility to handle them so we not only do all the inviting, all the inviting that goes on in the White House comes from this office.

EMILY SOAPES: As it should.

GRETCHEN POSTON: Yes.

EMILY SOAPES: For example, I [indiscernible] there's a staff member who wants to hold a function. Do they propose it to you and it is your duty to approve or disapprove the setup? How do the functions happen? How does someone --

GRETCHEN POSTON: Well, a lot of people will write to me and then it depends if it's Presidential or then it goes into a meeting. If it's Presidential -- a lot of things originate here for ideas and asking if they think it would be workable. For instance, outside -- well let's go back into the staffs.

Staff events normally would go right to Phil Wise [ph]. They would send me a copy of them, Phil and I would talk together or all of us would get together and discuss the event and if Phil thought that it was something that should go on the schedule for approval it would. Then, once it's approved by the President, I work then with the sponsoring office.

For instance if we open up the Department of Education and the event was approved and the President wants to do it here, then I work you know, specifically with the [indiscernible] office.

If it's [indiscernible] event, once it's approved then it's added -- you know they just wait then for it to develop.

The swearing-in ceremonies for instance. Once the swearing-in [indiscernible] we would deal directly with the swearer and his list and his family and his coming and then we would set up the scenario and work with him as well as the President so that they would know exactly where to go, what to do and brief them as to where they would go.

So once it's approved, then we take over and develop it and work -- then of course I work closely with the First Lady. It's her house, but if it's a Presidential event or a First Lady event, it is always a First Lady event because she is very concerned and has been about how people are treated.

EMILY SOAPES: [indiscernible]

GRETCHEN POSTON: Common problems with people who don't deal with the House all the time is not thinking in correct terms of numbers and over-loading the house can be one of them -- one of the biggest disasters we can do because if they can't get in the room they can't get in the House.

So we have been very careful, and we monitor numbers. Not necessarily guest lists, if [indiscernible] Martin has an event or Ann or [indiscernible] or whoever or Jack even with the mayor and some city officials, what we will do is all of a sudden look at a list and say no.

It's not that we care who is invited, except we do -- it's our responsibility to take a good look at those lists and we do and we do find mistakes and you know we will call in the person and do you know that so and so is honored, do you know that so and so is dead or -- we deal with lists all the time and we are able to pick up mistakes. But we primarily monitor numbers.

And then we'd call the sponsoring office and say, you know, this isn't going to work. We try to do that in the interview. Just as in the convention business people would come over and sit down and discuss and we would then give them the guidelines as to what feedback to [indiscernible] event [indiscernible].

EMILY SOAPES: Now are you involved only in the planning or do you get to attend --

GRETCHEN POSTON: No, we have to attend -- well we get to. We stay until --

EMILY SOAPES: Have to?

GRETCHEN POSTON: [indiscernible] and in most cases until it's cleaned up because we, you know, are ready for a tour at 7:00 in the morning.

No, no, we execute it, we meet the President and First Lady as they get off the elevator because even though there is a military aide, we have seen changes by the time he goes over to pick him up and come back or a senator can appear at the door or a cabinet member -- so we are there and everything sort of comes --

The same old story about one person with so many components going on. The [indiscernible] and butlers and the ushers' office and the sponsoring office. Primarily you need one person who either can make changes or have the final say. So we have always held that final control of all of the different -- you can't have one person running up to [indiscernible] and telling him to turn off the system.

EMILY SOAPES: Right

GRETCHEN POSTON: I mean it's always been controlled by our office.

EMILY SOAPES: [indiscernible]

GRETCHEN POSTON: [indiscernible]

EMILY SOAPES: [indiscernible] nearly 393 last year or maybe it was 1980.

GRETCHEN POSTON: Oh, many more than that. But yes, we've had an inordinate amount of events. I mean right now we have back-to-back. This is what will happen in January, from luncheons and receptions and black tie dinners so that we will -- but we have gone at that pace almost since we've been in.

EMILY SOAPES: A good bit of the entertainment that the First Family has [indiscernible]

GRETCHEN POSTON: [indiscernible]

EMILY SOAPES: Do you find that the Carters accept this and it's something they enjoy?

GRETCHEN POSTON: Oh sure they enjoyed it and there again, we just also have learned what is traditional. I'm not sure that we didn't start some of that tradition too. But -- oh sure I think they enjoyed it.

I think they enjoy people and I think they've always enjoyed entertaining. I think that they enjoy the evenings. [indiscernible] I've had is listening to their enjoyment of an evening and making it as enjoyable for them, as well as giving them a chance to enjoy it with other people.

No, I think they've always enjoyed it. I'm sure when we started having three black tie dinners back-to-back, it -- but I even think these kinds of things do well because there are people who he wants to see and say thank you to.

And I think we all get tired sometimes. At Christmas it's a heavy schedule. There are times when we have heavy schedules so we do two and three a day that may, you know, make you weary but it's never that you don't want to do it.

EMILY SOAPES: In order to learn Mrs. Carter's preferences as a hostess of the House, you must have had a good deal of personal contact with her?
[indiscernible]

GRETCHEN POSTON: Of course, you know that she has an office down the hall. I think that we did all that in the first two years and worked very closely. I think now I can do, I mean and I shouldn't have to, continue to talk to her as much just because I now know exactly what she wants.

I think in the first year, certainly constantly and the second year more so. And sure, I communicate by writing. I find that in the month of July, although she's down the hall or I can pick up the phone and call her, if I call and say I'm talking about the staff Christmas party, what do you want to do? It's too out-of-context and it's just hard to reorganize your mind when we are talking about something on the lawn next week [indiscernible].

So I developed a book that I put together, either on a monthly -- it used to be on a weekly basis -- sometimes if I have enough lead time I would do them ahead of time and I put all kinds of proposals and ideas and they took them to Camp David where they both could read them.

I give them not only the background of what the event is, how we will do it, that is in terms of decorating because often times the whole thing comes together as a final unit.

Who the guest artist will be and what we want to do and why and that gives them time to write notes back on what they like and it gives them time to jump from one week to one month, and in some cases, a year without being -- without having to make a decision on the phone which doesn't make good sense.

So it developed that I more and more would work through a book. Then if we wanted to talk, we at least had notes in front of us. It's hard enough for me to keep the calendar clear and I'm dealing with it every day.

EMILY SOAPES: Yes, sure

GRETCHEN POSTON: And so, I've just found it the best way. And that way the President also, because he's, I've found is very interested in everything that went on. It gave him a chance to know.

And we tend to forget that they don't, and particularly you know, things that are going on in the house, sometimes we deal with it so much we can forget that they really don't know what we are doing all the time.

Or they do, you know she will say this is what I want to do or yes I want to have a reception for these people but then when it gets into the details, you know they, we tend to overlook that I think sometimes.

So by putting it down in a book and they have it and they can communicate if they have -- and oftentimes she'll write back and say that she doesn't like this and doesn't want to do it and would like to do this or add this. So it works very well.

EMILY SOAPES: I know that Mrs. Carter has been very interested in and being known for her work on issues. Has this had the effect of giving you, I don't know, more independence on the social side?

GRETCHEN POSTON: I would think so.

EMILY SOAPES: That's the logical conclusion. Then do you also work with the protocol office of the State Department or are there other offices --

GRETCHEN POSTON: No, the only time we work with protocol or protocol works with us --

Well that's not true, we work very closely with protocol when, and again the first two years it was -- well throughout the four years. When a visitor -- when we knew a visitor was going to come, I would go with the Chief of Protocol to make a courtesy call on the embassy so we could sit down and meet the ambassador and talk about the head of government that was coming.

So in that case we would do that which is very helpful because Mrs. Carter was very anxious to do things on a personal level and it's just so much easier to do it and makes it much more fun for everybody -- fun and meaningful. So we would do that and oftentimes I would go to the Chief of Protocol's office for the same kind of meeting, a backup meeting.

Once it got into the point of what we were doing -- we're -- the White House is independent of protocol. They do all of the things outside the White House. but once they get here, we finish up to what the President and Mrs. Carter want to do.

We've always -- we in this administration, I'm not sure that that's been true -- have worked very closely with protocol with no problems. I think there has been a great deal of problem in past administration and I do not know why.

I think it's because of that fine line between White House and State Department. But we've worked very well together and I think with great success because I think the President and Mrs. Carter have succeeded in making their guests feel very comfortable and very wanted and very special because of the background material that we had on them. We were able to really know what kind of artists they liked. I mean its food and flowers and any of that kind of special things and then move into that area of how we wanted to entertain them.

EMILY SOAPES: They are bound to feel much more welcome.

Are there some special highlights that you could describe, things that you personally most enjoyed through the four-year period? Or were most proud of the execution of how your office --

GRETCHEN POSTON: Well, I think that the things that will be foremost -- I mean think that some of the small things -- you know for instance, we're most proud of -- I mean we've -- I think the things that are obviously -- I would think that President and Mrs. Carter would be most proud of in the future will be obviously our Sunday afternoon concerts.

EMILY SOAPES: The ones that were on PBS.

GRETCHEN POSTON: Yes. I think some of the things we'll be most proud of as the special events will be the jazz concerts and probably the gospel concerts and [indiscernible] salute to country music all on your own, in your own way and values.

And also one that was not as well known, but was the Labor Day event that we did, when was it -- at any rate, was a salute to bluegrass. The Smithsonian was very excited about it and have tapes for their archives.

I think every state dinner that we did was a great tribute to the Carters and to their interest in the arts. And I think that all our state dinners were special.

And, then I could go on, because I think that we tried to make every event, no matter how small or how maybe insignificant in the eyes of maybe the press, I guess you have to look in terms of coverage of it -- that we tried to make everything from Mrs. Carter's Girl Scout receptions to any of those things -- we tried to make each and every one of them very special. So I would like to think -- and we were very fortunate -- we feel that the execution of them, what we did was successful.

I would have to say at this point, we didn't have, never, we did not have a failure. Everything was done and our weather cooperated in many cases. We had a lot

of outdoor events. And I would, from my standpoint, and I think from the Carter's, I think we felt that everything we did was successful.

EMILY SOAPES: Were there things that you learned as you went along that made your work much easier?

GRETCHEN POSTON: Not really. We tried not to be very easy. I think that --

EMILY SOAPES: Well, it's a very daunting task, you know?

GRETCHEN POSTON: I think one of the things that possibly could happen here is that one would fall into the pattern of being easy because it's so easy to say, have a reception, but it's so difficult to have a different reception every time.

Something -- I think probably one of the pitfalls would be, it's so easy just to say we're going to have a reception and sort of forget about it. But we tried to make them different and special.

EMILY SOAPES: Obviously, it's special to the person coming in to be invited to the White House. They'll remember it all of their lives.

GRETCHEN POSTON: So it's easy just to continue to do the same thing over and over again and probably think that nobody knows the difference but the Carters did and that's the difference.

EMILY SOAPES: [indiscernible] to be able to [indiscernible] in front of you for four years is quite an accomplishment.

One of the things I wondered, do you think this position of Social Secretary should be made a permanent position?

GRETCHEN POSTON: No, I think it's very political.

EMILY SOAPES: It's very dependent upon one's relationship with the President [indiscernible]

GRETCHEN POSTON: No, something political. I think that people assume I can catch guest list mistakes and I certainly know a lot about the party. I know a lot of names.

I would say not. I think it's very political and I think it has to be political unless the Social Secretary has no specific function.

I mean if the Social Secretary sits here and does task sheets, and I know that in other years guest lists have not really been as closely [indiscernible]. I don't think you're going to see any [indiscernible] though that, or any office in the East

Wing as independent and as in the forefront if you have another strong First Lady.

But [indiscernible] I think a Social Secretary can be what, as far as I can figure out, what has been the Social Secretary up until now which is almost the definition of one from Eleanor Roosevelt's first one through [indiscernible] and on down which is a matter of what one thinks of an embassy Social Secretary, one who addresses initiations and does the mechanics.

The Carters have not made that true in this administration, to practically producing the kinds of entertainment and artists that we've had and having the full scale of responsibility of the entire events here.

But I think they, I think that was primarily due to Mrs. Carter. And the fact that the [indiscernible] was [indiscernible]. So I think that if you had a Social Secretary like you have a Chief Usher that does nothing but mechanics. But I think if you have a Social Secretary who will be counted among senior staff or as an important position in the event and in the outlook.

And I think that if we look today, and I'm sure that it happens every time. But if you look today, back at the four years, every administration cannot escape being known for the visual things they did in the House.

And so there's not an [indiscernible] person in this position could have destroyed the image or maybe could have [indiscernible] the societies of what they [indiscernible] could have had a lot to do with that image.

And although it's the image of the President and First Lady, I think you need to almost be an extension of that person in order to fully realize. And with that, along with that your responsibility is, today that the word is such a misnomer number one, but it's now become a classic, title. But it's certainly has much more to do with management and much more to do with coordinating and all of those things that we don't think in terms of as a secretary.

So it's much more -- sure menus [ph] are there, but it's much more involved [indiscernible] and made to be involved. So no, I think it should change and rightly so.

EMILY SOAPES: And would you say the job should stay on the First Lady's staff?

GRETCHEN POSTON: Oh yes. I do. I think she is the hostess and it doesn't matter, sometimes for her new work, if there is that distinction, then of course, we really did have that distinction. It may never happen again, that may be another reason why the office has become so involved because the First Lady was not home very much the last two years.

She was campaigning which meant that the President really did use the House more.

We had more events and more Rose Garden events and East Room events and we did a lot, so we've become very accustomed to working for the President in the West Wing.

But no, I think it should stay on and I think the title is fine. I've always hated the title. I went to her when I first came, but when it comes right down to it there's hardly a title --

EMILY SOAPES: What are you going to call it?

GRETCHEN POSTON: So I think inside and the person who takes the job and how it's looked upon by both the First Lady and the President and the staff, makes the job what it is and I think that's something that probably is accumulated in time.

EMILY SOAPES: And the staff too has gotten good cooperation from [indiscernible] the party giver in the East Wing. There hasn't been any of that you've run into?

GRETCHEN POSTON: No.

[indiscernible]

EMILY SOAPES: As you say, it's not a job that necessarily [indiscernible] what is involved and is a very important part of the relationship with the First Family [indiscernible]

GRETCHEN POSTON: Oh sure. And even, you know, even the seating at a dinner becomes very important and there is where you're political.

You really need to be political in order to do that. That is, unless someone else is going to do it and I do know that in other administrations that's happened. The Social Secretary never really did that kind of political thing. It was always done by someone else.

But I would, you know, [indiscernible] from here on out and maybe what we feel is until the East Wing becomes active again, that people in it will probably not be as active and involved in the administration as we were.

I'm glad I was here at a time when -- sure it's always exciting to be a part of -- but I'm glad I was here when we really felt that we contributed something and had the opportunity to.

I mean speech writing comes over here all the time when we have an event and they have to be sure that they have all the background and will ask my opinion as to, not only what to say of course on the arts thing, and we've done so many art things and I'm glad that we now have an input on the art events that go on and how we relate to them and what we do.

So I have found that as far as the West Wing is concerned is that they come over here and ask my advice.

EMILY SOAPES: [indiscernible]

GRETCHEN POSTON: Normally, before we get too far and we have just worked -- I mean I've never felt that they have felt that they had to do it or that they grudgingly came over. They call me up and say we've got a great idea can we come over and talk about it. You know, what do you think we should do with it?

And so, that has made it great fun for me, very exciting and very stimulating.

EMILY SOAPES: An excellent point to make. And I take it that you found your political experience was as much help to you as your convention planning experience.

GRETCHEN POSTON: Oh sure.

EMILY SOAPES: I'll go on and stop it here because I know you've got a [indiscernible]

[End of tape]