

Interview with Jess McDonald

ISG-A-L-2010-040.01

Interview # 1: August 20, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Friday, August 20, 2010. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today it's my honor to have Jess McDonald here with us. Good afternoon, Jess.

McDonald: Good afternoon, Mark. It's a pleasure to be here.

DePue: Jess, we're talking to you because of your affiliation with the Jim Edgar administration, but we're going to cover quite a bit more territory than that. You have the experience of being a veteran during the Vietnam War; we'll spend a little bit of time developing that. As we always do with these, we'll learn quite a bit more about growing up and how you ended up in the career field you did. In that career field, you didn't just work in the Edgar administration, but you have some experiences with Dan Walker and Jim Thompson, so we definitely want to get those opinions as we go through this. Whether or not we get to talk much about Governor Edgar today is a matter of some dispute, I would think, but there's an awful lot of important stuff to cover before that. Let's start at the beginning. Tell us when and where you were born.

McDonald: I was born in 1941 in Chicago, Illinois.

DePue: Did you grow up in Chicago?

McDonald: Grew up outside of Chicago in Maywood, just a near west suburb.

DePue: Had your family been longtime residents of Chicago?

McDonald: Well, my father and mother moved there from Washington, DC, in early 1940. He took a job with the Treasury Department. I think shortly after I was born, he was drafted, was in the service. But they lived in Maywood I think for most of their married life and then moved out to Downers Grove and eventually down to Florida.

DePue: What did your dad do during the second world war?

McDonald: I'm not real certain about it, but he was stationed in the European theater, I think probably most in England. He didn't talk much about his service. I found out my uncle, who was in the Pacific, didn't talk much about his service, so...

DePue: That's common for that generation.

McDonald: I think it is.

DePue: Did he see any combat that you know of?

McDonald: I don't think he did. He didn't mention it, but my understanding was he was more in combat support roles.

DePue: Did your parents grow up in Washington, DC?

McDonald: No, my father's originally from Springfield. His family, I think, has been in this area probably since the mid-1800s, coming over originally from Virginia into Farmer City, and they settled here on South State Street. My mother's family is from Spain. She's first generation. Her father worked for the Pan-American Union; he was an interpreter for them.

DePue: When did her relatives move here, then?

McDonald: It was probably in the early 1900s. My mother really would be fascinated if she were still alive that I was actually doing an oral history, because we tried forever—genealogy of the family was one of my brother's interests—and he got a lot of cooperation from my father, but my mother would not. She just was not going to share a thing about her family. It was a very peculiar trait.

DePue: What was your father's name?

McDonald: Jess. Jesse, J-e-s-s-e, McDonald, so I was known as Junior or whatever else they would call me.

DePue: What is your given name, then; is it Jesse or Jess?

McDonald: Jesse. Jesse Frederick Montes McDonald.

DePue: And you were forever after known as Jess to differentiate you from Dad?

McDonald: Actually, I went to Jess later in the professional career. All my legal documents are Jesse, but just because it seemed to be an unusual name for people, they couldn't figure out how to spell it which I thought bizarre: "Oh, is your name Jessica, or is it..." Really, when people hadn't seen me, they'd say they weren't sure what it was; they thought Jesse was spelled -i-e, and it's not. It's spelled with an -e.

DePue: Isn't it a biblical name, though, too?

McDonald: Well, there you are. How many people read the Bible?

DePue: (laughs) You've got to be reading your Old Testament for that. I noticed you filled out the paperwork with J-e-s-s.

McDonald: J-e-s-s. It's what I tend to do, and in business I use Jess.

DePue: Did you tell us your mother's name?

McDonald: My mother's name was Carmen Montes, M-o-n-t-e-s, and McDonald, obviously.

DePue: How did the two of them meet, then?

McDonald: My father in the late '30s moved to Washington, DC, to go to law school. He just thought staying in Springfield wasn't going to be... The Depression was difficult, so he went out East, attended law school, and met her in law school.

DePue: What was the law school?

McDonald: American College of Law, which is now part of—I think—George Washington University in DC.

DePue: When he came back from the war, did he pursue law?

McDonald: No, he had a job working in Treasury, stayed in accounting. I don't know when they set up the IRS, but he went to work for the IRS, Internal Revenue Service. Not exactly sure when it came into...¹

DePue: I don't know the answer to that either, though they had been collecting income taxes for decades at that time.

McDonald: So that's where he went to work.

¹ Bureau of Internal Revenue was renamed the Internal Revenue Service in 1953.

DePue: Did he have a law license? Did he pass the bar in Illinois?

McDonald: He did not sit for the bar. My mother, who graduated from law school, chose not to practice. She became a housewife and mother; that was their choice, as they revealed to us later in life.

DePue: So both of them had law degrees.

McDonald: Right.

DePue: That had to be rather unusual at that time.

McDonald: They both worked full-time in DC and went to school nights, and I think they had an awful lot of friends. At the time of my mother's death a year ago, we were going through some of her old documents, including some of the stuff from the law school which we had never seen before, and it was interesting just how many... I think her entire class was composed of people that worked full-time and went to school part-time. I think that was not uncommon.

DePue: Did she stay in the DC area during the war?

McDonald: No, they had actually moved to Maywood. Lived in Chicago for a short while on the Near North Side and then bought a home. Shortly after I was born, my father then went into the Army, so my mother stayed in Maywood. He was stationed in Tallahassee, Florida, for a short while—and my brother was born as a result of that—and then he was overseas, but I don't know the details of his service.

DePue: Was he an officer?

McDonald: I think he was a sergeant. I don't...

DePue: So it doesn't sound like he was practicing his profession of law, then.

McDonald: Oh, no, not at all. Not at all.

DePue: Now, you mentioned a brother. You have any other siblings?

McDonald: I have a brother Bob, Robert—he's an architect—I have a sister Carmen, and a sister Gloria.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about growing up in Maywood.

McDonald: It's interesting. To be honest, when you look back at it now, it actually seemed a peaceful time to grow up. You kind of remember the shows, *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Marcus Welby* and all the different shows about family stuff, and you think, Well, that must have been the way it was. You know, it was easy. When I say "easy," I think about what my kids grew up with and what

they're facing now—much different times, much different pressures. Just even communications were simpler; we didn't have cell phones, obviously. You just see the complexity of life now and what it does. So life, compared to now, I thought was simple. My parents were strict disciplinarians. They had high expectations about how we did in school, what we did. They structured our—our job growing up was to work. We used to joke that we had work permits when we were two years old, (DePue laughs) just because the expectation was that you have to work in this life, so get used to it. That was a little bit about kind of the way they were.

DePue: Was religion a part of the life growing up?

McDonald: We grew up Catholic, probably nominal more than anything. My parents weren't practicing, but they expected us to practice. I attended church regularly, St. James Parish, and then actually went to DePaul University for a few years.

DePue: We're going to get to DePaul here in just a little bit. Maywood: was that a far west suburb, or had the city already grown past that?

McDonald: No, actually, the city of Chicago boundaries ended at Austin Avenue; then there was Oak Park, and then River Forest. River Forest would go up to about the Des Plaines River. Maywood was the next village over, right across the Des Plaines River around Chicago Avenue. So it was one of the earlier developing—just north of Brookfield Zoo and Hines Veterans Hospital.

DePue: So did it feel like you were growing up in the greater Chicago metropolitan area?

McDonald: I didn't have much experience with Chicago till high school. Our family didn't go down and visit. I think I went to one baseball game, but I think my father had enough of Chicago during the day. I went to work with him one day—I remember that—and experienced an automat [a coin-operated cafeteria]. I thought, Well, that was pretty funny. Nowadays I'd look back at that and think, That's like seeing an episode of *Mad Men*.

DePue: Yeah, our kids might not even know what an automat is anymore.

McDonald: That's right. (laughs)

DePue: What other things kept you interested and busy when you were in high school?

McDonald: I enjoyed sports but was not really particularly good at any sports. I think I was on the scrub sophomore football team, and I did some theater. *Twelve Angry Jurors* (laughs) was one of the ones we did, the Reginald Rose play, and—

DePue: Had to change it from *Twelve Angry Men* because of obvious reasons.

McDonald: Right, and I was thinking about that with the recent trial.² We didn't run around a lot. I had a close group of friends—and a lot of different friends—but we had a lot of work to keep ourselves busy. My parents decided to build a weekend house up in McHenry, so we spent the year helping take down a home that was in Hillside, where Congress Expressway was going through it. A new development had been condemned in order to let the expressway begin. So we took it apart nail by nail, we straightened nails and saved stuff, and then we spent the next, probably two years, in the effort of building that house. So we stayed busy.

DePue: Did you get your union card from your folks for doing that?

McDonald: I didn't, but later when I was working, I actually became a Teamster through a different job.

DePue: Very good. You went to what school, then?

McDonald: Proviso High School in Maywood.

DePue: So a public school.

McDonald: Public school. It was a pretty good-sized class. I think there were a little over five thousand students in the school, and I think there were around twelve hundred or so in the graduating class of '59.

DePue: In the last ten or fifteen years, Proviso has factored big in terms of some of the athletes that come out of there and do well.

McDonald: They have. I think we've got—let's see, Shannon Brown up at Michigan State, and Dee Brown who was at U of I.³ Actually, a former colleague of mine, Dr. John Lumpkin, who was the head of the Department of Public Health—I think in the Edgar administration—graduated from Proviso as well.

DePue: Was it an integrated school when you were going there?

McDonald: Oh, yeah. Yes.

DePue: Were there any issues with that? Because this is at the early stage when—you're in high school in the early '60s, I would guess. Late '50s, even?

McDonald: Yeah, I graduated in '59, started in '55,

² Referring to disgraced former governor Rod Blagojevich's first trial, which had concluded three days before this interview, when jurors convicted him of lying to investigators. The jury could not agree on the twenty-two remaining counts of the indictment, however, resulting in a mistrial on those counts.

³ Both men won the Illinois Mr. Basketball award for the best high school player in the state and went on to play professional basketball.

DePue: But the schools in Chicago through all that time were fairly desegregated?

McDonald: That's my belief. Yeah, Maywood—Proviso's outside. We served about fourteen western suburbs. I just never really noticed at that time any issues around race. I think that's probably as much my ignorance of it, of just seeing the conflicts, but we didn't notice any. We just didn't have big issues at the school. You know, there weren't riots, there weren't fights, there wasn't anything like that.

DePue: Was your neighborhood itself integrated?

McDonald: North side of Maywood was not. The south side of Maywood, which is just past the tracks, was kind of mixed a little bit, but I think Maywood itself in the early '50s, late '50s, was very definitely—I don't know if you would call it segregated, but you would say there were pockets—there were some communities where you would not find any African American or Latino families.

DePue: What would you say is the most important influence you had growing up?

McDonald: I think my parents were, in terms of work ethic. The one thing I always just kind of understood is that you've just got to work hard. You may not be as smart as the next person, you may not have a lot of the advantages, but the one thing you can always do is put the effort out. My parents insisted that we work and work hard at whatever we did. I think that probably was one of the major influences. Then every now and again you run into teachers that strike a chord. Somehow or another they spark an interest in certain things. I had a really difficult time with algebra my freshman year, and I had a teacher who said, "You know what? You'd be better off going to shop. Why don't you forget about doing anything else?" (laughter) I just said, "No, I can't do that." But I went into geometry and had this absolutely wonderful teacher, and it just really resonated with me. You know how some teachers, if you get off on the right foot, they just stimulate your interest in a topic? I just loved it, just ate it up, and kind of righted my—if you will—my academic ship in high school a little bit, because I was kind of struggling with, Is it going to be this bad? I think you run into those people along the way that help you with stuff like that.

DePue: What did you think you wanted to do with your life when you graduated?

McDonald: I kind of thought I wanted to be a lawyer, which was why I think I chose DePaul. DePaul had a law school, and I thought I wanted to be a lawyer.

DePue: Was that something that your parents, both trained lawyers, had insisted on?

McDonald: Not at all. We had kind of a mutual... My parents had this thing—and I know my family would really appreciate my revealing this here—but my mother was from a family of four girls, and she said, "Boys are going to find their

own way through school because they're going to get whatever they need in life. We're going to pay for the two daughters, our girls, to go to college if they want to go to college, because women get screwed in this world." My mother's words. They didn't really support us, myself and my brother, in going to college, —and really didn't have the same interest. Neither of us were interested in accounting. My parents had a strong interest in seeing that we chose a profession that would provide security later, because they knew firsthand what we would deal with later. We were young, and I thought law, but I wasn't certain. I mostly was interested in trying to experience a little more of life. My brother was a very talented artist but wanted to be an architect, so he became an architect. But we kind of did it on our own.

DePue: What year did you start at DePaul?

McDonald: I started in the fall of '59.

DePue: And did you stay with it?

McDonald: I stayed with it for a while. I worked nights at the old Bowman Dairy ice cream plant on Franklin and Kedzie, thereabouts, and I was fortunate to get a good job. I worked there at nights, went to school during the day.

DePue: Did you get free samples?

McDonald: Oh, did I ever. (DePue laughs) I'll tell you. They started making Baskin Robbins ice cream. I worked in the freezer, and we'd stack it up, but we had to do quality assurance on the first one that came through. I did that, and that was pretty good. I stayed with it, and about the second year, I was getting a little tired of the school in the day and work nights, the second shift, and then try and hang in there. I kind of drifted away from that, and said, "I think I'm going to experience some other things in life." I tried it again at DePaul. I was on academic probation for one semester, and then I took time off, worked at the post office as a sub in Maywood and Broadview, and then just kind of bummed around for a little while. I went back and just didn't really connect with anything.

DePue: What were your parents thinking during that timeframe?

McDonald: Not a whole lot. They never really said anything.

DePue: So they figured you'd find yourself here eventually?

McDonald: That or I would suffer the consequences. They just figured you'll find something or find work, but you aren't going to sit around and do nothing. As long as you're working, that worked. I did that. I think I even moved down, did a semester down at ISU [Illinois State University] in Normal for a while. The problem with looking back on that is you get a little hazy on these dates.

Matter of fact, I think one of God's gifts is that you can get hazy about some of these dates.

DePue: (laughs) There's things that are better forgotten?

McDonald: Better, kind of let me round off the first part of my life.

DePue: I believe you ended up down in Danville for a little bit of time.

McDonald: I did. My first stint at ISU, I ran into a guy named Ken Carlson who I had worked with before—we worked at the Bowman Dairy together—and he had moved to ISU. I went down there, and he said, "Why don't you try school down here?" So I did that. He worked a job in a shoe department at K-Mart down there, so I got a part-time job there. I kind of liked sales, so I kind of drifted in that direction, and I went to work there—

DePue: "There" being in Bloomington?

McDonald: In Bloomington at the K-Mart, in the shoe department, then went to Danville to run the shoe department over there in relatively short order.

DePue: That sounds like you're moving up pretty well in the—

McDonald: Or moving around, yeah. (laughter)

DePue: It felt more like moving around than moving up, huh?

McDonald: It felt more like moving around than it did moving up.

DePue: I think life, and maybe America's situation in the world, intervened about this time, didn't it?

McDonald: Yeah. Everyone remembers what they were doing and where they were when President Kennedy was assassinated, and I was in Danville—

DePue: It was November '63.

McDonald: Sixty-three. I was in Danville at the shoe department and stunned like everyone else. Not too long after that you kind of think through, Now, what does this mean for me? What am I going to do? What are your patriotic urges, or whatever? And I thought about enlisting in the service. I don't know why, but it seemed like something better than what I was doing. I didn't have to wait long, because I got a notice, I think in November, that I had to report for a physical, and I was actually inducted in February of '64.

DePue: So were you drafted or enlisted?

McDonald: Drafted. I was invited to the party.

DePue: You got an invitation from Uncle Sam.

McDonald: I got an invitation, and I accepted.

DePue: At that time, February 1964, the Vietnam War is just beginning to heat up a little bit, and you hear some conversation about it. Were you paying any attention at all to that?

McDonald: You know, it's funny. I was kind of going back and trying to remember that—you only remember a little bit about that, occasionally. I remember that when I was in the service, I had a sergeant at Fort Knox who said, "You guys are going to have to get ready because you're going overseas." And we're trying to—"Go overseas where? There's no war." But what we didn't really understand was there was a modest force of about a hundred seventy-five thousand troops that were kind of building up capacity in South Vietnam. So we ended up... Actually, after basic in Fort Knox I went down to Fort Polk, Louisiana.

DePue: Anything you remember about basic training?

McDonald: If you want to lose weight fast, basic training is a good place to start. (laughs) And what's interesting, a lot of the infomercials seem to suggest that because they're all a lot like boot camp.

DePue: Does that mean you weren't being served Baskin Robbins ice cream in the mess hall?

McDonald: No, no. But I actually grew to appreciate army cooking real quickly, because it was much better than anything my mother could prepare.

DePue: Really?

McDonald: Yeah. My brother and I both joked about that; he was in the service as well a little while later. We said, "You know, the mess hall, they knew how to do liver and onions." And you know what, you could actually cut through it, but you couldn't resole a shoe with it, as you could with my mother's. That's a horrible aside, but basic training was really kind of interesting. I felt like almost everybody in the unit would kind of—people tend to gel, in one way or the other. They don't become best of friends, but you become buddies. And I just found myself responding reasonably well to the structure. I didn't mind it. It was okay, and I knew I was going to be in it, so that was the way it was.

DePue: Failure wasn't an option for you?

McDonald: Actually, the bar was pretty low, (DePue laughs) in basic training. This was not like when you look on the Discovery Channel and see something about—there was a show, I was noticing—about Ranger training, qualifying for Rangers. There were some people that would talk about it, they were going to

do Airborne Ranger, and we would just look at them and roll our eyes and say, "I'm working on twenty pushups here."

DePue: And this is during a time when there's a draft for everybody, or there is an expectation that you would do something, even before Vietnam came along. Where to after Fort Knox for basic?

McDonald: I went down to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for advanced training, and I was given an infantry MOS [Military Occupational Specialty].

DePue: You were given; they didn't ask you?

McDonald: They don't ask. Yes, of course. I mean, they said, "What would you like to be? Here."

DePue: And you didn't choose—

McDonald: It's kind of like, "What style haircut would you like?"⁴ (laughter)

DePue: And you didn't choose Fort Polk, which is known as one of the real garden spots of the Army—like the armpit of the Army—perhaps at the time.

McDonald: It's funny you should put it that way. Someone asked me about it. From there I went to Vietnam, and I said, "You know, I actually enjoy Vietnam a whole lot better than Fort Polk." The weather was better, and at the time I actually thought that some of the—what do we call them?—the people in the community were better. I don't think the people in Leesville and Deridder, which were the two towns around [Ft. Polk], really appreciated having an army base there except for the economy. It had for years been a base used by the Texas National Guard or Reserves, and apparently they had a habit of coming over with armored vehicles and just kind of running all over town, including front lawns and stuff like that. That's what I heard; I didn't witness any of that, but...

DePue: Following the advanced individual training, then, did you get assigned to a unit there?

McDonald: I was assigned to the Headquarters Company of the 98th Quartermaster Battalion.

DePue: QM Battalion.

McDonald: QM Battalion. And unbeknownst—

DePue: Which isn't a natural place for an infantryman to be assigned.

⁴ Reference to a joke barbers make when giving new military recruits their standard haircuts.

McDonald: Well, we had a warrant officer who was the head there, and he had a way—and he explained this to us because he asked several of us to do this for him. Anyone coming onto the base that was going to be permanently assigned would go through this Headquarters Company. He said, “I want you to pick out the good ones because I want them working for me. If they got a couple years of college, we can teach them everything else they need to know.” He was a funny guy, but he knew what he was doing. Matter of fact, I did that to a guy I knew in high school. I saw his name come through and I said, “This guy’s a smart guy.” I thought I was doing him a favor, and then I think a month after (laughs) he got assigned to our company, we got our orders to go to Vietnam.

DePue: About that time, you start paying attention to what’s going on in Vietnam, I would assume.

McDonald: Yeah, yeah. You know, you don’t hear much at the base. I didn’t read the *New York Times* in those days. I got married to Andrea in ’60, right after AIT, [Advanced Infantry Training], so we were...

DePue: What was her last name?

McDonald: Andrea Soplanda. Andrea is my ex-wife. She’s from Danville. We had met at Danville. So we were there [Ft. Polk], my son was born there, March 2, 1965, and he was literally weeks old when I shipped out. We were fortunate; we got some relocation assistance and could move back.

DePue: Was there any talk at the time about the Vietnam War being an unpopular thing?

McDonald: We were aware of a developing resistance—or I don’t know what you would call it—but kind of people demonstrating and stuff like that, but not a lot. It was not something that was in my consciousness. You just knew that this was what you had. You get an order; this is what you do.

DePue: You went there in spring of 1965, you said?

McDonald: Yeah.

DePue: At this time you’re going with a unit, so you already know everybody in the unit. That’s quite different from a lot of people’s experience.

McDonald: Yeah. On this troop ship, I think they attached to us a Signals Corps unit, a MASH [Mobile Army Surgical Hospital] unit that came under our purview, an Ordnance Company, and Graves Registration. There was a duty company that was assigned to us on the way over, and they worked the docks in Nha Trang. So we went up to Qui Nhon, but they stayed in Nha Trang to work on the docks, to unload. It seemed to me that we were kind of organizing, just

helping get capacity up. I really wasn't certain of the strategy since I didn't have anything to say about it.

DePue: Were you going as part of a division or a combat brigade?

McDonald: If we did, I really wasn't aware of it. It's really interesting, because when you're doing what I'm doing, when you're doing like most of the people do, you're mostly aware of who's sleeping on the bunk atop of you and the bunk below you and next to you, and that's about as far as it goes.

DePue: At the time you were deployed, what exactly were you doing in this Headquarters Company?

McDonald: Pretty much just processing papers, orders for personnel and whatever else came our way. That seemed to be it.

DePue: Tell me about the trip overseas. If you went in a troop ship, that's normally memorable.

McDonald: Yeah, it actually was. The one thing they'll tell you—I mean, if they're friendly to you, the sailors around there will tell you—one, eat as much as you can because it will help you avoid getting seasick, and it was going to be rough waters after Hawaii. The second thing is, when you go to the john, stand in the middle. They're long troughs. **Don't get on either end.** And for obvious reasons, I think. You can appreciate that.

DePue: (laughs) You—

McDonald: Now, those are two valuable lessons.

DePue: You get images that would come to mind here when you're listening to this, huh?

McDonald: Yeah, you know, the practical lessons of life. The other thing about it is, you'd see all kinds of people, and everyone's living in extremely close quarters. You would see a lot of just really crazy things happen to people, or just individuals that would do crazy things. And you don't know many of these people very well, because beyond the Headquarters Company, you don't really know a lot of the others.

DePue: Were you on the old-fashioned, World War II vintage troop ships?

McDonald: I suspect it was.

DePue: The Liberty ship?

McDonald: It didn't have a health club. (DePue laughs) What was interesting about it, though: once we got out of Yokohama heading south, we got into the South

China Sea, and it was fantastic. It was just like glass, and the sky's just... Now I can see why people go on cruises. I don't think this is what they would have in mind if they were renting a cruise, but it actually calmed everyone down. Then once we got there, everyone got to work on whatever we were supposed to be doing.

DePue: Tell me about your first memories of stepping foot in Vietnam. Where were you, first of all?

McDonald: We came in at Nha Trang because it was a harbor, and then we went up the coast to...

DePue: Nha Trang right here? We have a map of Vietnam we're looking at.

McDonald: Yeah, here we go. Right there. And then we went up to Qui Nhon, which is up there.

DePue: Qui Nhon?

McDonald: Yeah, and that's where I was stationed when I was there.

DePue: Was that the—well, you may not know this—was that I Corps area?

McDonald: No, it wasn't. I Corps, I think, was far north.

DePue: II Corps, maybe, then?

McDonald: Yeah, probably, but I don't know.⁵

DePue: Again, that's probably not where your focus was.

McDonald: No.

DePue: What did you do there?

McDonald: We ended up processing paper on people coming and going. There were replacements on a regular basis. One of the things that struck me about this and the differences between what we've seen in current wars is that people now go over with a unit and come back with the unit for the most part. There was a revolving door in these units. There were people that were over there one month and were shipping back, and someone would come in. People were circulating in and out, and (laughs) the people would come in and not know anybody, but then they'd leave. I assume that's the way it's always been, not having—that's my only wartime experience. Based on the movies, it would appear that's the way it happens. I do know, just from returning, coming back, is that you come back by yourself for the most part. At some point, you're by

⁵ Qui Nhon, the capital of Binh Dinh, was part of the II Corps Tactical Zone.

yourself, and no one is aware of the fact—depending on your family—no one's aware you were even gone in many respects. There isn't a sense of the whole unit's coming home or anything like that; it's just you're on your lonesome.

DePue: I want to get some more impressions from you, though, about your experiences in Vietnam. Let's start with your impressions when you first set foot in the country, and paint us a picture. Involve all of your senses if you can.

McDonald: Wow. My daughter, after graduating from Northwestern, took six months to a year and went down to Australia and New Zealand and Southeast Asia, and spent a month in Vietnam, including North Vietnam, and then Cambodia. She asked me, similarly, "So, Dad, what were your impressions of Vietnam?" I said, "My impressions were colored by why I was there—the fact that this was a war and I had no idea what this meant; the fact that I had a family back in the States; and at that point, you don't know if you're going to see them again." It doesn't matter what kind of duty you have, you just don't know what the future holds for you. It's not about questioning why you're there, you're just uncertain about... The strategic issues of the war aren't your concern; you're just doing your job. I think my impressions going in were not so much about the country initially but about the experience of being in another part of the world, not as a tourist, but just being there in a time of war and conflict. You're there with folks that all seem to have the same kind of general concerns about, What does this mean for our—and I don't want to say future—but just everyone thinking about, Okay, we got today, what about tomorrow, and so on.

The one thing I noticed about it is initially less about the country—I'll come to that, because I gained some impressions about the country that really were very powerful to me later—you start with your own anxiety and fears about what does this mean for your mortality. Maybe that's the reason young people fight wars, because they have no sense of mortality, and we count on that. Then you discover it. You come in touch, and it's, Oh, my God, maybe a lot of this isn't—will there be—what kind of a future, and what's promised here? That starts to enter into it. Then you start to meet people that have had some really horrible experiences

I didn't have horrible experiences in Vietnam; in fact, I had some very positive experiences. In Qui Nhon there was a Franciscan—I believe it was a Franciscan—school. It was a boarding school, and I think orphanage because of the conflict, and it was close by, so a number of us would spend time there. We would contribute money, and we got to know the folks there a little bit. Somewhere at home I have some pictures of us with them, and I'll share them with you if you like. But what I was struck by was just how positive the Vietnamese people were, not so much about the conflict, but about life. These are kids who had lost family, and these monks did everything they could, as

far as we could tell, to help these kids have as normal a life as was going to be possible. Then you start thinking about it. I said, “Gee, I have a son. He doesn’t have to live with any of this.” At some level, for some of us, we got in touch with what these things do, what a conflict does to communities, to families, to kids, and so on. Any time I was able to spend there was time that kept me sane.

DePue: Qui Nhon is right on the ocean, is it not?

McDonald: It is.

DePue: You stayed in the QM Headquarters?

McDonald: Yeah.

DePue: Does that mean that you didn’t go out on patrols, you didn’t get into combat?

McDonald: Not really, no. There wasn’t a lot of conflict right around where we were at. The conflict was up in—An Khe is where the Marines moved in. Pleiku might be one you might have heard about—Plei Me, Pleiku, which was northwest of An Khe—up in this area, there was some... But they’re up in that area further inland.

DePue: You’re talking about what would have been the highlands area.

McDonald: Highlands, yeah. And up by Da Nang, near the demilitarized zone, which I didn’t know a whole lot about at the time. Since then, I have some friends who served there, and they had—

DePue: Were there not that many enemy troops around the area of Qui Nhon?

McDonald: At that time, the war did not involve—I don’t believe—the North Vietnamese regulars; it was largely the guerilla forces, the Viet Cong, and I think they were largely in other areas. I think their fighting was done, or their interest was somewhere else. But people would talk about something had happened nearby or in town or something like that. That was the thing that was fortunate about... Sure, I was in Vietnam, but did I experience what other folks experienced there? Not by a long shot.

DePue: Not even in an indirect sense, of casualties coming through the area?

McDonald: Oh, well, yeah, we had a MASH unit in there. So yeah, that we did. But remember, in this period of time it’s still building up, and it wasn’t quite as contentious.

DePue: Did you or your buddies have a sense of—you’ve already kind of touched on this a little bit—What’s the war really all about? Are we fighting

communism? Was there any discussion or consciousness that you guys were really thinking about that?

McDonald: I don't recall there being those conversations, and I think it's—I don't know, I think it wasn't exactly... No one got metaphysical. It was, you get through the day, and then you get through the night; then you get through the day, you wait for mail call, you know, whatever. The idea was: I'm going to do my tour, and then I'm going to go home.

DePue: Well, 1968, 1969, '70, it's a very different kind of war from what you're expressing.

McDonald: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

DePue: In those years, you hear a lot about morale problems of the units—discipline problems, drug and alcohol abuse, racial problems. Did you see any of that?

McDonald: No, we did not. We did not. I don't want to be embarrassed about my service, (laughs) but when the biggest problem you had is that the PX ran out of cigarettes... I mean, we did not suffer anything near what people did later. I have friends who were there later, and the way they describe what they live with, I'm thankful that that was not the time and place where I was.

DePue: One of the things you mentioned when we first sat down and chatted was a labor unit.

McDonald: Yeah.

DePue: Can you tell us about that?

McDonald: We used to joke about it when it was being formed because we were absolutely certain that almost everyone in the unit had court martial convictions for one violent assault or another.

DePue: These are U.S. Army soldiers.

McDonald: Yeah. You didn't know for sure it was exactly that bad, but it was a version of the Dirty Dozen, only it was a full company of them. The company clerk (laughs) used to be in Headquarters Company, and he was assigned out to be their company clerk. He said the first sergeant for that company slept with his .45 under his pillow, and there was only one thing he was worried about, and it's the people who were in his command. This guy would come in, and I just remember him saying, (laughs) "You guys have got to get me out of there. It's crazy. We eat well." To the extent there was anything on the boats that was intended for an officers' club, if they could get their hands on it, they did, and that included—believe it or not, there'd be ice cream that would be shipped in, and they'd get it.

DePue: So this was a stevedore unit?

McDonald: It was. That's what they ended up doing. They unloaded boats. Let's see, Cam Ranh Bay is down there, too, and they might have been—

DePue: That was a much larger facility, I think.

McDonald: And I'm trying to figure out—I don't see it—oh, Cam Ranh Bay is right down here, so Nha Trang is up here, and that actually is where I think we came in to Nha Trang. Yeah. Qui Nhon was just too shallow to have a port.

DePue: But it sounds like once you got there, you pretty much stayed there.

McDonald: Yeah, I did.

DePue: Did you get a mid-tour leave, R&R?

McDonald: I went to Taiwan for four days.

DePue: Anything memorable about that?

McDonald: I had a good friend who was an officer at Fort Polk, and he was stationed there. He invited me to go to the officers' club with him, and he said, "I'll introduce you as left-tenant," It was good to see him; he was a nice guy. Then it was just the architecture of the island. I did a kind of whirlwind tour of it. At that time, there weren't many places you could go. I did get the opportunity about two or three times to go to Saigon, just as a courier, and got to stay down there for several days. I will tell you, Saigon—now Ho Chi Minh City—was just absolutely a gorgeous, gorgeous city. Now, admittedly, you got a chance to stay—I stayed at a hotel downtown that was a French hotel. I mean, it really was nice; I wish I really could have appreciated it.

DePue: Any other impressions about the Vietnamese people?

McDonald: Yes. I always thought the Vietnamese people, our contact—like in the city of Qui Nhon—I thought they were really neat people. I just found them to be—

DePue: Neat as in likeable and friendly?

McDonald: Very likeable, yeah. Just given everything they were facing and everything that was going on, I don't know, I just liked them. We didn't really learn their language. They did speak French a little bit, but for the most part they would speak English, or you'd make do with gestures. But if you were respectful of them—and there were so many that weren't, so many GIs were not. We would go around that town of Qui Nhon and eat at different places on the market, and it just seemed everyone was—I always came away with a very positive impression.

- DePue: Did you like the Vietnamese cuisine?
- McDonald: I did, yeah.
- DePue: It's different.
- McDonald: Yeah. I didn't really experiment a whole lot, but I enjoyed it. I kept wondering where they got all that fresh meat.
- DePue: (laughs) Didn't ask what it was that you're eating, necessarily?
- McDonald: Until I saw the movie *King Rat*, and then I started to understand, I think I know where they got it. (laughter)
- DePue: Were you the type who counted the days down till when you ship back home?
- McDonald: I didn't obsessively do it. I knew it was coming, but I actually didn't know, I was not expecting. I went home maybe thirteen days prior to my expected—what do they call that? ETS?
- DePue: Your DEROS date?⁶
- McDonald: I think it was about the twelfth or thirteenth of February. I was looking at my DD214 just to check it out. That experience of leaving was one of the most memorable, and the reason was, I got to know a gentleman who was in Special Forces and had worked in the highlands with the Hmongs. He was from Pennsylvania. I don't recall his name now. He had a number of souvenirs with him that he was taking back, and he had already purchased his new—with money he had made selling souvenirs and stuff like that... He said there were a lot of people in Saigon, in the service, that wanted souvenirs, so they would have people make Viet Cong flags, then they would kill chickens and put blood on them and make them dirty, and then they would sell them. He swears to God this is what they were doing. He had his Austin Healey waiting for him when he got back; he already paid for it. He was going to go back and go to school. But he was quite the character. I was just taken by his stories about being in the Special Forces unit that was essentially advising the Hmong forces.
- DePue: I take it you didn't come back in a troop ship?
- McDonald: Flew back.
- DePue: Civilian or military aircraft?
- McDonald: Civilian. I think it was World Airways or something like that.

⁶ Estimated Time of Separation (ETS); Date of Expected Return from Overseas (DEROS).

DePue: So you went over on the standard troop ships where you're told that you need to stand in the center of the latrine, and then you come back with stewardesses and...

McDonald: Well, kind of stewardesses, yeah. I mean, you did. Now, what was interesting about it is less that, but getting off in Oakland. We land in Oakland and then we're on buses going to the Oakland Army Terminal, where they process you out. This is the first time I realized there was a lot of conflict (laughs) going on. And that conflict was: our bus was pelted with rocks and stones and tomatoes and eggs and stuff like that, and apparently it was a daily occurrence there. They were just "Baby killers!" and so on and so forth.

DePue: Describe what you were seeing outside the window. Who are these people?

McDonald: Young people. My age, younger.

DePue: This is at the beginning of the—well, it might be even a little early for the hippie movement, I don't know.

McDonald: I suspect it was part of the early anti-war movement. But that was kind of a shocker, because I think as much as you—we read a little bit about it in *Stars and Stripes*, but not much, and then it just kind of was a shock. That didn't last long, because you're right by them, but that was more or less an initial greeting.

DePue: Did that cause you to think about what you had been doing over there or what the United States was doing over there?

McDonald: You know, I think I was so taken back by the reaction, I didn't get to thinking at that level that quickly. It was questioning—well, I didn't have an angry reaction.

DePue: You weren't angry at the protestors.

McDonald: I wasn't angry about it; I was puzzled by it. It seemed like a very strange way to greet people coming back. And I was pretty sure I hadn't done anything wrong while I was there. (laughter) Most of the people—I didn't know that many people on the bus—but there were some that were just yelling back and screaming and stuff, and I was just kind of stunned by it.

DePue: Cursing and swearing at them?

McDonald: Yeah, they would just yell back at people out there. They didn't open any windows, but they still were... I just thought, Boy, this is bizarre. That was my first dose of coming back to the stuff.

DePue: You came back. Did you spend some more time in the military?

McDonald: No, that was it.

DePue: You were discharged in Oakland?

McDonald: I was.

DePue: How do you think that whole experience changed you, or did it change you?

McDonald: Yeah, it did, there is no question in my mind about that. The time I spent, the exposure I had to the monks and the children at that boarding school, was real powerful in what happened in my thinking about things. I mean, it was very clear to me: here were people who, in the middle of all this, choose to help and make life better. That wasn't just a religious order; there were people there who were not part of the religious order. I thought, You know, that seems to make so much sense. And that really had an impact on me.

DePue: Have you ever had cause to reflect back on those people and what might have happened to them since?

McDonald: I'm sure I did. Early on, I continued on occasion to send some money when I had it, but after a while I kind of fell away from that. I had kept up with that, and then when I was struggling and going back to school again and trying to raise a family, I just got focused here.

DePue: We've got a lot of years between the mid- to late 1960s and today. Have your views about the Vietnam War evolved, crystallized, now?

McDonald: Oh, didn't we just decide that the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution probably was based on some erroneous information?

DePue: That's been out there for quite a while, but yeah.

McDonald: So if you think about it, you think, How is it that we stumble into some of these things? I think that one of the things I took away from my experience there: if you're called to duty, you go and you do it, and you do it faithfully. But I am amazed that when you look at history—someone pointed out to me—how old white men start wars, and young black men fight them and die in them. If you look at the casualties in Vietnam, you'll probably find a disproportionate number of the casualties were young African American men.⁷

DePue: Did you have a lot of blacks serving in your unit?

McDonald: We did not have a lot—it was a small number—but we did have many.

⁷ Blacks suffered 12.5 percent of U.S. deaths in Vietnam, compared to their composing 11 percent of the U.S. population; however, this figure is based on the entire duration of the war. From 1965 to 1967, over 20 percent of American soldiers killed in Vietnam were black. Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 17-22.

DePue: But you already said that you didn't feel any real racial tension.

McDonald: I didn't. I didn't. It's in the retrospective view. It's looking back at the experience in a more collective way; not just my experience, but what I had learned, what I had read about, what I'd learned from other people. Now, it's kind of interesting because you start looking back at it and say, Is this how we decide we're going to intervene somewhere, and is this what you... And I'd never really given any thought to that.

DePue: Well, you'd mentioned yourself, most kids who are seventeen- or eighteen-year-olds, that's not the kind of thing they're reflecting on much.

McDonald: Right, yeah. Yeah, they're not thinking about it.

DePue: Let's get you back to the United States and to Illinois. I assume you came back to Illinois at that time.

McDonald: Came back to Illinois, Danville. My father-in-law passed away, I think the day after I returned. He had pancreatic cancer. At the time, we thought he had hepatitis. I worked in Danville, stayed in Danville, and lived with my mother-in-law. We stayed there for a while, and I worked over there in a factory and decided, You know, this is not a future, and went back to school.

DePue: When did you return from Vietnam?

McDonald: In '66, February.

DePue: When did you get back into school?

McDonald: That fall.

DePue: So you didn't waste too much time.

McDonald: No. I went back to ISU. I was going to consider commuting from Danville to U of I. I went over to U of I. It was larger than I could manage, just too large of a setting, so I went back to ISU, moved back there, and struggled going through college raising a family, working.

DePue: I don't know much about what the atmosphere at ISU was in 1967-68. It was certainly getting a little bit dicier at the University of Illinois and Southern [Illinois University] at that time.

McDonald: Yeah, there were some groups—the SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, were kind of active. I don't know that it was huge. I was not that aware of it. There would be some campus demonstrations from that, but...

DePue: Did folks know that you were a veteran?

McDonald: I think some did, although usually when attending classes, I was also working, so I would have a tie on, something like that, going from class to work and back and forth. But later, in '68, Andrea and I separated and were divorced shortly afterwards. I continued to work and go to school.

DePue: Did you give up on the notion of being a lawyer?

McDonald: It's interesting, because I did not have being a lawyer anywhere in my consciousness when I came back. It was not something I thought of as a reason to go to school.

DePue: What happened?

McDonald: I'm not exactly sure. I enjoyed meeting with people and doing stuff like sales, which is where I was working. I enjoyed retailing, and I thought I would try and make business and sales my profession, but that actually... I kind of drifted from one major to another. But I settled on sociology, and if I could figure out what epiphany I had that got me to that... I don't know that I can. I think it was sort of a collection of life experiences and stuff like that.

DePue: Did being in 'Nam and seeing the orphanage have anything to do with it?

McDonald: Oh, yeah, that was part of it. That was part of it. My own experiences coming back... It's kind of like you wrap everything up and say, Does it tell you anything?

DePue: So it sounds like you were still trying to figure some of that out.

McDonald: Oh, yeah. So I ended up with a major in psychology and sociology.

DePue: Did you have any particular professors who got you into it?

McDonald: I had a couple who were really fantastic. I had one that helped me over a huge hump in statistics. It's like when you've been away from academia and you come back to it, it kind of is a shocker, so I was struggling with this. He must have been in the service or something like that. I took this intro to statistics course, and then I dropped out of it. I went to explain to him that I was dropping out. It was a huge course, and I didn't need to explain it to him. He said, "I want you to stick it out a little bit." So he worked with me on that, and I actually did quite well. He kind of made me feel a lot more at ease, and I ended up taking other courses in it. Here was a professor who took an interest and helped make a difference in terms of me dealing with stuff.

Then there were several others. Actually, I took a course in community, which I just found absolutely intriguing. A guy named John Kinneman was the professor. He was from Ohio State, and he was teaching this course, and I thought was very demanding. So I was aware... It was amazing. Now, I got an A in the course, but I got B's and C's on papers and

tests, so I went in to see him, to ask him. I said, “I think this is a mistake.” And he said, “No, it’s not a mistake. You asked the best questions.” I said, “I value questions.” What I learned from that, actually, is that in my work I have found oftentimes the best way to advance issues is to ask the right questions. I think he crystallized that for me.

Mildred Pratt was a professor of social work, and I took the course. She was from Pittsburgh and worked in the Hill section of Pittsburgh, which is a community always under a lot of stress, and brought those experiences from the community. She had such a spark to her that she absolutely got me turned on to social work as a way—shall we say applied sociology. It’s a way in which you can actually take the things you learn about social systems and individual—like in psychology, individual development issues—and apply it in real-life situations. And that appealed to me. So that’s when I got the spark for it.

DePue: What year did you graduate?

McDonald: 1970.

DePue: And what happens after that?

McDonald: My landlady at the time in Bloomington was the head of the 4-E training program at DCFS, and she had said to me that—

DePue: The what training program?

McDonald: Four-E. It’s a federal program. It was Title 4-E of some Social Security Act provision for child welfare.⁸ She said I’d be a good social worker, and good child welfare worker in particular, and she wanted to encourage me to apply to go to graduate school. I hadn’t even thought about it. So I applied for the stipend program and then also applied to the University of Chicago, School of Social Service Administration, never just social work. I got accepted there, and I got the stipend, which made going to school very affordable. It was a very generous stipend.

DePue: Did you also have the GI Bill?

McDonald: I did, which I had not really been using a whole lot. So I actually did better in grad school. I deferred going to grad school. I said, “If this is what I’m going to do, I want to actually try this work before I commit to it.” So I became a caseworker for a year and just absolutely loved it.

DePue: What about being a caseworker appealed to you?

⁸ The Federal Foster Care Program, authorized by Title IV–Part E of the Social Security Act.

McDonald: I think the idea that you could actually help children and families in a very concrete way. The public agency at that time was just developing. DCFS was new in 1964.

DePue: DCFS?

McDonald: Department of Children and Family Services was a new agency as of 1964. I became a caseworker in '70, working in Bloomington, Illinois. I worked in Bloomington and McLean County and Livingston County. I did investigations of abuse and neglect. I carried cases, I worked with families. You did a little bit of everything at the time. You get a chance to see children who were in absolute need of protection from parents who were not able to take care of them or, in some cases, just had so many demons they could not keep their kid safe. You'd have those experiences. I can remember the families where good things and horrible things happened to the family, but I can remember the families that we were able to keep together just by working with them and helping them with some breaks here and there—just using your role as a facilitator in a community to get them something. There were families that were on the edge with public housing in Livingston County, and if they didn't have public housing, they didn't have anything. So a lot of times what you're doing is working with public housing and saying, "Look, I'll keep them in line; I'll do what I can, here. What do we have to do to have them keep their housing?" You do that. That's part of the job.

Kids were getting in trouble. They had no place to go, so they would just ramble around. This little housing project had a nice community center, but they had nothing that the kids could do. So I said, "Can I run a youth program up here? We'll do something during the day and we'll have stuff for them at night." The public housing folks said, "We're not going to do it." I said, "No, no, I'll do it. Can I use the facility?" The kids helped. We'd just play music and they'd get together, and they stayed out of trouble. It's the little things, the ordinary things that kind of make a difference, and I realized how, just by just engaging with people on their behalf and with a community or with them and their family, you can make a difference for people.

DePue: You're describing the work of being the caseworker. This is in-the-trenches work as far as the DCFS system is concerned. Maybe this is my own prejudice or lack of understanding, but there are tons of horror stories out there, and you also hear all the stories about the burnout of the caseworkers and the massive load and things like that. I'm sure that you experienced lots of disappointments as well as successes in this. Can you talk about some of that from the perspective of being on the ground as a caseworker at that time?

McDonald: Everyone I met that worked in this field at the time, the one thing that impressed me the most was just how **motivated everyone** was. No one was just showing up. Everyone had a drive about them. They expressed it in their own ways, but they all had a drive to help make things better. Whether they

were doing adoptions, whether they were recruiting foster parents, it didn't matter; they **all** were committed to making a difference. I just thought, How wonderful is this, that you can actually work in a place where everyone comes to work for one basic purpose, and you may have some differences with them about one thing or the other or how you do it, but you never doubted anyone's motivation. And that, I found to be just really exciting, that people were all feeling this way. People worked together well in solving problems. So the work setting was kind of neat. The people in the community—and I worked a lot in Pontiac—you didn't ever share names, but all you had to do was talk about a family in a way in which everyone would say, "Oh, yeah, I'm working with them, too, here. What do you need?" And there was a way that everyone would work together. It's small-town, but it's fantastic.

This judge, John Erlenborn, wanted me to be in the court more often. I said, "I could be up there, but I really need a place to sit." He said, "Well, we've got an extra office. Let me call Claire." So he called up someone, and then we had an office. They had an empty office, so it became our first office in Pontiac. The department paid for a phone, so I had a phone and an office. The other worker in Livingston County could use it too, so we had a presence there. That makes a difference; you're part of the community for the first time. That was pretty exciting. You remember Bill Harris, senator, former senator?

DePue: Um-hm.

McDonald: I got to know him because his sister was the head of the local public aid office, Jane Harris. Apparently she liked the work we did, and she would mention it to him. I didn't get to really know him until much later when I was in different roles in state government, and we would talk frequently. He was on the board of the Cradle, up in Evanston, and he also got to know me through that when I was director of DCFS.

DePue: The Cradle being?

McDonald: It's just one of the best adoption agencies in the country.

DePue: Did you have some regrets when you stepped back into the academic world?

McDonald: I knew I was going to be going back to get a Master's. I figured that I had a little bit of a drive, figuring if I had a Master's I might be able to be more effective as a supervisor eventually or something else, but I could probably do a better job of helping. So that's what kept me interested in going back to school. I was a little anxious about it, not being the best student in the world, but nonetheless, I thought it was all in all a good thing to do.

But the thing you remember to this day, and this is what everyone shared: we started talking about these tragedies and stuff like that. There are families you work with and children you work with, where, no matter what you do, no matter how hard they try, it doesn't seem to go right. But the fact

that you try and the fact that they try—and even if they fail, you hope that something happens and they can come back to it. Oftentimes at that day and that time, alcohol was the huge issue that made the difference in these families. So how do you work with kids so that they understand, You're in foster care because your father—well, in this case, the father's dead—but the mother's an alcoholic, and she can't safely take care of you, and she just disappears. Does she love you? Yeah, she does. But helping them understand that.

I had a crude understanding of that issue as my supervisor would help me try, and I said, "How do you explain this dynamic to these kids?" I said, "Geez, you just need to be smarter, because this dynamic is really important. How do you explain a parent's ambivalence to kind of straightening out their own life, to giving up alcohol and then assuming responsibility for being a good parent?" Everyone that has a problem with addictions struggles with that. In DCFS today and in the last twenty years, probably 70 percent of the cases that we saw involved families that had serious problems with alcohol and drugs.

DePue: **And** drugs?

McDonald: And drugs. There were major studies that have compared case loads in DCFS in Cook County and case loads in Los Angeles County, where they looked at kids that had been in foster care for a year or more. Seventy percent of the families had serious problems with alcohol and drugs, had failed in treatment at very high rates, and had a high rate of refusal to go into treatment. And all these things, these struggles that these families had, they leave their kids out there in the system.

I am probably moving too... I'm going to talk about this.

I remember being at a community meeting, later when I was director at DCFS in the South Side of Chicago, and a legislator, Lou [Lovana] Jones, had asked me to meet with this family. It was actually a group of mothers. All of these mothers had one thing in common: they had all found out that their parental rights to their children had been terminated, and their kids were being adopted, some by relatives and some by others. They had recently—all of them said—completed drug treatment. They all acknowledged that they had spent their child's lives with addiction, and just kind of relapsing all the time and not being a parent, but now they were ready. They were seemingly unaware of the fact that they had been through legal action that terminated their rights, and now that they felt like they were getting their life together for the first time, they were being told by others, "I'm sorry, you no longer have any legal rights to your children. Your parental rights have been terminated and your children are being..." It was just devastating listening to them, but here they are, four or five years into their addiction and treatment—going in and out, in and out, which is the usual pattern—and finally getting to a point

where they're in recovery, doing okay, and ready to start parenting, only to find, Whoops, I don't have children to parent anymore; they're gone.

That's the other side of what you see in these tragedies. They're real human beings who have suffered, who have enormous pain in their lives, and we've always been—in the political realm—quick to judge them as being bad parents, evil people, and worse. “How could you do that to that child? What kind of a human being would do this to that child?” Unless you take the time to try and understand or know from your own personal experiences what it's like to be under stress like they've been under stress, what it's like to have these demons in your life, it's a little hard to then figure out, how do you begin to work with something? How do you help someone if your first instinct is to hate them? Over time I learned this from being a case worker and just being amazed at what I saw in people—the positives, and sometimes the disappointments—the resilience that people have, and children especially. And how tied children are to their parents; they aren't asking to be rescued from their parents, they're asking you to rescue their parents from their demons. That's what we're supposed to do.

DePue: All of this is to say that this year you spent as a caseworker was incredibly important.

McDonald: Oh, yeah, yeah.

DePue: And changed everything, I would guess, in terms of how you approached going back to graduate school.

McDonald: It did. It absolutely did. It gave me a sense of purpose, or clarity to purpose, and it absolutely committed me to several directions. One is child welfare in Illinois, not larger public welfare interests or anything else. What was interesting is that University of Chicago's program had people from all over the country and other countries that were in the Master's program. They tended to direct people, from a career perspective, either to clinical practice in some private practice or clinical practice in really good agencies. But on the policy side, people were directed to the federal government. At that time, the feds were the big actors in human services. The dean at the time, Harold Richman, was a former White House Fellow and was very influential in his early career in advancing the University of Chicago's position with regard to grants from the federal government. He was a brilliant man in this field. Actually, his father was a social worker in the clinical side in Cleveland, and Harold was a policy guy. He was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. I worked with him. We had differences of opinions in grad school and we had differences of opinions later, but we had some interesting experiences. The school itself tended not to encourage people to work in the public sector in Illinois.

DePue: Not to.

McDonald: Not to. I mean, I felt discouraged by it. For instance, in the second year I had a placement opportunity to work for a legislative staff. It was a block placement in Springfield, and I was working for the House Democratic staff as part of the policy sequence. They [University of Chicago] thought that, You know, you really want to work for a big consulting firm, or you want to do it at HHS [Health and Human Services] or in the regional office at the federal government or something like that. There were not many placements in state agencies at the time. I was very clear: I wanted to go back to DCFS, because what I found at that place, at that agency and in that field, was one continuing connection to Illinois. I feel basically corn bred, you know, kind of meatloaf and corn on the cob. So. (laughs) But Illinois. Then the idea that the agency itself represented this unique commitment to really helping kids and families. A person in Illinois that I got to know but had heard about, was Naomi Hiatt. Naomi Hiatt was the head of the first Commission on Children, and the Commission on Children was first put together I think by Kerner.

DePue: [Governor] Otto Kerner.

McDonald: Yeah. And the idea was to develop a plan for child welfare. This woman was actually quite unique. But anyway, you get to have a sense that Illinois is rich in people that have commitments to improving the lives of children in very concrete ways. The Edgars are examples, but they aren't the only ones; the Ryans were just like that.

DePue: There's a long tradition, if you're looking in Chicago, that goes all the way back to Jane Addams and the...

McDonald: Absolutely, absolutely. First juvenile court, 1898, was in Chicago, Cook County. One of the first agencies to help children was the Juvenile Protective Association—one of my favorite agencies in Chicago—and she [Addams] was instrumental in its being created as a way to help actually provide services.

DePue: Before you get too much farther, I wanted to pursue this issue you brought up about federal versus state, because I've always thought that child services was primarily a state role, and you've suggested it wasn't at that time.

McDonald: You're exactly right. Everyone thought that if you wanted to be a mover and shaker, if you will—if you had an ambition in policy—you would go to the federal level because the federal government was designing all the federal policies that supported state programs. What oftentimes I think people would get confused about is, child welfare actually has to do with the nature of our republic. There's a federal program, and then there are state programs. There is not a national program. It is not Social Security; it is not Medicare. Child welfare is a state program; it operates under state laws and state policies, and in some instances, in order to accept federal monies, those laws have been,

shall we say, crafted to comply with federal responsibility. But the federal role is not the same as Social Security.

I think of child welfare as you would think of mental health and other human services. Eleven states have counties running many services. They think of them as very personal, just like juvenile court judges. If you've ever talked to a juvenile court judge, they know what abuse and neglect is. If you ask them to define it, they'll say, "It's kind of like Potter Stewart and pornography: I'll know it when I see it."⁹ It's the same way. You go to juvenile court judges throughout the state, in every jurisdiction, and even when you have a number of judges sitting on the bench, they view these issues through their own eyes and their hearts, and that's their lens. That's the thing that's so different about these programs. Although a lot of folks believe that the federal role would be significant—it was significant, and it remains significant—the real difference in whether programs are good or bad is at the state level. It's as close as possible to where you actually do the work; that's what makes a difference.

DePue: And I guess what I'm hearing from you about your experience at University of Chicago in the graduate program there, though, was that there was kind of an institutional bias, shall we say, towards federal work instead of state?

McDonald: Right, towards a larger, macro policy world as opposed to the very specific administrative and leadership responsibilities at a state level.

DePue: I think you were obviously pretty busy, and this was an exciting time going back to graduate school, but didn't you get married in that timeframe as well?

McDonald: I met Jayne, my wife. We met in the first year at graduate school. Actually, we met in the first week. She was in case work; she was a case work person, and still is; she's a family therapist here in town.

DePue: What was her maiden name?

McDonald: Brickley. We actually married the following June. We worked in Bloomington. She worked as a homemaker, and I worked in the local office doing some work on just helping people with some cases. I also ended up helping be a homemaker, which was a very interesting experience. I did not realize there were that many cockroaches in the world. (DePue laughs) So, I met her there. It was an interesting experience, being in grad school, because you did meet a lot of people who still are friends, and professional friends. Some I didn't know at the time but have connected with them, and we're very close friends.

⁹ Stewart's concurring opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* 378 U.S. 184 (1964) stated, "...criminal laws in this area are constitutionally limited to hard core pornography. I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description, and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that."

DePue: Let's get you back to your professional career, then. What happened after you got your degree?

McDonald: After my Master's?

DePue: Yes.

McDonald: After the Master's, I was offered a job at the House Democratic staff, on the appropriations staff.

DePue: Well, that doesn't just happen; how did that occur?

McDonald: I had a field placement there. That was the block placement, and I kind of connected with the work.

DePue: What is a field placement? I'm trying to grapple with the notion of a field placement in social work, working on the House Democratic staff.

McDonald: In the policy sequence at graduate school, they had all kinds of settings for externships, and one of them was with the Illinois legislature. So you had an opportunity to work, and you could interview. They had set it up so that you could interview with the Republican and Democratic staffs of both the House and the Senate. If there was a good match, then that would be acceptable as a placement, and that was a quarter's worth of work.

DePue: Was that something you sought out, or just one of many opportunities?

McDonald: That's the one I was interested in.

DePue: Because?

McDonald: When I came into grad school—this just shows you about how naïve you can be about how the world is—I said, “Okay, look, I was a caseworker: you work with one family at a time, there's so much to do. Boy, if I could do group work and community work, I could be much more effective at helping more people.” So I started in community organization but still took courses in casework occasionally when I could get them in. Then there was a second year concentration on social policy. I started to think, If you could actually be influential in how people construct policies, now you could really talk about changing things. This is when you start drinking the Kool-Aid. So I went into the policy sequence, and that was interesting because that wasn't the fit I thought it was going to be. It worked out.

I'm not going to actually go into some of those stories, but we had—well, I will. In '72 at the Munich Olympics, the Israeli athletes were massacred. The school had these Olympic posters on display. I was in my freshman year, and somehow or another I got myself into this mess of being co-chair of the student body; there was a second-year student, and I was the

first-year student. So we got that. One other small thing that happened is they did evaluations of professors, and the school administration, the dean—that was Harold Richman—and others had agreed to permit the student association to conduct this evaluation of courses and professors. We would do the work and it would be—at that point in time it was mimeographed—they would run it off in the print shop and make it available to us; we'd just pay for it. Well, there's a convergence of bad things here. An associate dean decided that they should not allow this student evaluation to be released. Now, we're not quite sure why he did that. So he locked it up in a safe.

A bunch of the students that were responsible for this came to me, and they said, "You're the head of the association; you have to go in and you have to get them to release this." At the same time, there were some Jewish students that were very concerned about why the school continued to honor the Olympics in Germany. So I don't know how the two came to play exactly together, but there was this just kind of a—and by the way, Kent State had played out several years before, and the University of Chicago used to think of itself as above these frays. I figure, Okay, I guess I agreed to do this. So we go in to meet with the dean with several other people. In my best student rebel leader role—which was not well-honed—I said, "We're here to see the dean." They said, "Well, he's busy." We said, "Tell him we want to see him right now." And they said, "Well, he's busy." "Tell him there will be a student strike tomorrow if he doesn't come out right now." Now, I don't know how that ever came out of my mouth, but it did. And other people told me—

DePue: Had there been some talk before then?

McDonald: No. He came out, and I said, "Here's what happened." The dean said, "We can talk peacefully." I said, "Here's the thing. All we need to know is that you're going to release, as agreed, the evaluation; get it back so we can get it printed and get it to people so they can review it before they sign up for the next set of courses. That's what you agreed to do, and that's what we need, we want you to do." He said, "Can we just talk about this?" I said, "There's nothing to talk about. You had already previously agreed to do this. Do this, and we need to know it's released today, or there will be a student strike tomorrow." He said, "Well, I have to talk to the faculty." They had the faculty advisor. So he went to the stud—now this, I did not know. You could say it's hearsay, except it was reported by faculty to me years later: in this meeting, the dean was embarrassed by a former dean who did not like the current dean, because of the politics, who said, "Harold, that's one of the dumbest things I've ever heard of anyone doing. We're not here to teach; they're here to learn." (laughs) Now, I know that sounds—it's a nugget, though. It was a nugget when I heard that many years later. But anyway, they released it [the student evaluations].

Now, this is my freshman year. What I didn't realize is I signed up for the policy sequence. This guy was in charge of it; he was the head of the

policy sequence. My second year was the most miserable year of my life, almost.

DePue: This guy is the one who spoke up against—

McDonald: Harold Richman. Yeah, he was the dean. Just every class I had with him, he would start by saying, “Well, Mr. McDonald, tell us what you think about...” And he was just kind of a... Everyone knew he was just getting even with me about this. We sat down, on the heels of some comments he had on a paper of mine. He agreed with me, but it was the first and only time he had ever made grammatical corrections on a paper, because he couldn’t care less about it. We sat down and had a conversation about it. He ended up being a professional friend, because when I left, I went into state government work and got to know him in many different roles. I gained a very high regard for him and still hold it, and I think he became accepting of what he thought were—he said, “Oh, you do have some good attributes after all.” (laughter)

But it was an experience. When we talk later about some of the stuff that happened in the campaign, like with Pate Philip, this was not who I was. I did not think of myself as someone who was going to lead a cause like that. I thought of myself as, I do my job and I follow the rules, and in this I found myself in a different role. But I found that when you accept responsibilities as you move through life and different roles, what comes with that is sometimes the requirement that you step up and act outside of what is your comfort level.

DePue: Generally you have no idea of the challenges that might be facing you.

McDonald: That’s right. You don’t know what’s coming down the road. But that policy sequence was incredibly influential. They had a guy named Bowman Cutter¹⁰ who would not know me from Adam, but he was a brilliant guy around money issues and budgeting and stuff like that. Harold had known him when he was in the White House, and he flew in and did a course in economics and social welfare. It was a faculty that was rich in these experiences, and I’ll have to admit I was in almost total awe all the time about just how smart these people were. Of course, they’d let you know how unworthy you are, but that’s—

DePue: Is this one of the premier programs in the country at the time?

McDonald: Yeah, clearly. Clearly was and still is. It still is. I gained an appreciation not just for individual casework, group work, community work, and administration, which was talked about a lot in community organization, but now the policy world. He said, “How can you maximize your opportunities to advance a cause, if you will? Where do you go? What career path do you choose?” What I found in that placement was, one, I knew I wanted to stay in Illinois, and I wanted to have some exposure to the world of, not politics per

¹⁰ Cutter served in the Office of Management and Budget during the Carter presidency (1976-1981) as executive director for budget.

se, but the political process around decision-making. That got me to that field placement. Before that field placement was over, they offered me a job and I took it.

DePue: So we're now in 1973, and you're working at the Illinois House Democratic staff.

McDonald: Democratic staff. On appropriations and human resources, but primarily appropriations.

DePue: Which sounds to me like a pretty good place to observe Illinois politics.

McDonald: Oh, intriguing. Yeah, absolutely.

DePue: Was Clyde Choate the minority leader at the time?

McDonald: He was. He was.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about Clyde Choate.

McDonald: This is a really interesting guy. I didn't get to know Clyde really well, but—

DePue: He's one of those down-staters in a state that's dominated by northerners.

McDonald: Yeah. Medal of Honor winner.

DePue: Tanker, wasn't he, during World War II?

McDonald: Yes. People would refer to him as a good old boy, but after a while I was trying to figure out—I heard that about just about everybody (laughs) in Springfield. I appreciated the opportunity. I worked for Al Marshall, the head of the appropriations staff; Jim Jepsen was the staff director under Clyde Choate. Just having the opportunity to do this work, I learned more about budgeting and politics on that appropriations staff. I mean, the mix of them; it came to life in that setting. It came to life because people actually talked about the stuff; you did an analysis on the budget and there would be conversations about, what does it mean? And you had an opportunity in that to not just do a bottom-line budget analysis. I used to have people refer to it as accounting functions, and I said, "It's far from accounting. This is priority-setting. This is where government decides what it does for its citizens with the money it gets from citizens," and I'd go back to the Hoover Commission, stuff like that. I was always fascinated by Wildavsky and stuff about the politics of the budgetary process and stuff like that.¹¹

¹¹ The Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government was nicknamed the Hoover Commission after its chair, former president Herbert Hoover. It was active from 1947 to 1949, making numerous influential recommendations for reorganizing the federal government. Its success spawned so-called

Then it comes to life, and I think it comes to life more in the general assembly—or at least it did then in the legislative process—than it did anyplace else, because the general assembly, the legislature, has the last word when it comes to budgeting. Now, what’s interesting is that in recent years they’ve said, “We don’t want the last word.” Do you remember Howie Carroll? Sen. Howie [Howard] Carroll was the Senate approp [appropriations] chair, and he would always remind every governor—while he was still in—that we have the last say as to whether or not this budget is a balanced budget, and if this is in fact the statement of the state’s priorities in terms of spending.

DePue: This is shortly after the 1970 constitutional convention, so you’ve got a new constitution. I believe the constitution says that it’s a requirement that it be a balanced budget.¹²

McDonald: Right, and there was always a statement to that effect. They don’t make those statements anymore, apparently.

DePue: (laughs) That’s why I had to qualify that a little bit.

McDonald: Here, in that setting, you would see all this stuff playing out.

DePue: I wanted to ask you: why the Democratic staff and not the Republican staff?

McDonald: I was offered the job on the Democratic staff.

DePue: So it wasn’t a statement of your personal politics at the time?

McDonald: No. You know, my favorite governor was Richard Ogilvie. He made, I think, the hardest decisions about the future. I mean, where would we be if he did not have the courage to insist that there will be an income tax? He was a moderate, and I just... Now I liked other governors too, but quite frankly, I think he was a courageous governor.

DePue: Did you have any interaction with the Republican staff?

McDonald: Oh, yeah. (laughs) That was the interesting time. Dan Walker was governor.

DePue: And he was governor because Ogilvie had made some unpopular decisions, and—

McDonald: Exactly.

DePue: —Walker beat him.

little Hoover commissions in many states. Aaron Wildavsky was a political scientist known for his work on budgets.

¹² Article VIII, Section 2(b). <http://www.ilga.gov/commission/lrb/con8.htm>.

- McDonald: That's right. Neil Hartigan was lieutenant governor, and they didn't see eye-to-eye.
- DePue: They had practically nothing to do with each other.
- McDonald: That's true. That's what I understand, anyway. Tom Hanrahan, from the Rockford area maybe, was the Democratic spokesperson—I'm going to call it that because I'm trying to figure out who was—was Blair the Speaker at the time?
- DePue: Yeah, W. Robert Blair.
- McDonald: So Hanrahan was the Democratic leader on the appropriations committee. I think he might have been. I'm going to be real fuzzy about this because I'm not exactly sure, but I just remember his role was saying, "Let me be clear." He said this to the staffers. He said, "I'll be clear. Here's my governor." He had Neil Hartigan there. "This is our governor." (DePue laughs) The other thing we ended up doing, there was a lot of sharing of analytical work between the House Democratic staff and the House Republican staff when it came to dealing with certain agencies. The Department of Children and Family Services was one of them because they really did not like Jerry Miller. Jerry Miller was, for a short gentleman—short in stature—he was the tallest lightning rod you would ever find in state government. It was the first time ever I had seen TV cameras show up at an appropriations committee hearing in Springfield. I mean, we're back a long time ago.
- DePue: Now, Jerry Miller was Walker's—
- McDonald: Appointment to the director of Children and Family Services.
- DePue: And he'd actually gone out to Massachusetts to find Miller.
- McDonald: Yes. He came to Illinois with the understanding, I am told, that he would have Juvenile Corrections as part of DCFS.
- DePue: That's what he was working on out in Massachusetts.
- McDonald: Yeah, trying to close down all the training schools; that's what he was notorious for doing. And it was probable they were notorious places. Actually—was it Mystic River? —probably a good example of what those places were. I mean, they're crazy places. That plan just never materialized. The guy who was going to be the head of Corrections could not get confirmed. I can't remember his name, but he was a lightning rod as well. So they had a number of things go wrong. But in those days, Jerry Miller was just—he was very smart, there was no question about it, and he knew the field—he just was more interested in juvenile justice than he was in child protection.

- DePue: I want to go back to your one comment about Tom Hanrahan. I think this is what you said. Hanrahan is standing next to Neil Hartigan and says to the Democratic staffers, “This is our governor.”
- McDonald: “This is our governor. This is my governor. This is **my** governor.”
- DePue: At the time when Dan Walker had been elected governor of the state of Illinois.
- McDonald: Right, right.
- DePue: That goes with the story of Dan Walker, that he had made the point of going after the Daley machine in Chicago. That was his main focus on the campaign trail. He had beaten Paul Simon, who was the Democratic designee—he was the guy who was supposed to be running for governor that particular year. He pulled a miracle in beating Simon in the primary election, and then of course he beat Ogilvie in the general election. But as I recall, Walker had a pretty bad relationship with Choate as well, did he not?
- McDonald: I don’t know of it, because I just never observed it, or actually never heard anything about it. My dealings with Clyde Choate were more than arms’-length. Barb Mason was his secretary, and I got to know Barb because we were on the staff. He was running for reelection, and I appreciated being on the staff so I went up and wanted to make a contribution. She said, “Can’t do it.” “What do you mean?” She said, “He will not accept any contributions from the staff.” So I said, “That’s nice. I appreciate that.”
- DePue: Who was Daley’s man in the legislature at that time, in the House? Do you know? I think Madigan was already there, and I think he was pretty influential at the time, but obviously not in the top position.
- McDonald: He was on the appropriations committee at the time. I remember him and Gene Barnes pretty well. Mike Madigan didn’t really care much about the human services parts of the budget. He cared about the other parts.
- DePue: I think I got you off track. I apologize for that.
- McDonald: That’s all right.
- DePue: What were some of the other issues that you were working on while you were in this position?
- McDonald: I did the budget for DCFS. Several of us worked on the budget for Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, but I had the lead on that. So those are two budgets I worked on at the time. What I learned in that setting—I’ll talk about it this way: I talked about how you see everything play out. Not only do you see everything play out, but you also see how the decisions are far more rational than people will give them credit for. People elect local

representatives—they aren't experts in policy or budgeting or anything like that—and then they expect them, when they're down here, to make perfect choices about budgets and programs and stuff like that. Now, this is an intriguing expectation by the general public. They elect people who they probably know—they could be a plumber, they could be a carpenter, they could be a teacher, they could be a businessman, -woman, doesn't matter. But they know what they do know and don't know, so you wonder, Why do they vote for some of these people?

When they come in then, what I found intriguing was that almost everyone I encountered in the general assembly had moments of brilliance as well as everyday flaws. I would be stunned when I thought that someone who had nothing to—I'd say, "Why does this person have this bill in?" which I've got to do some work on. They'd explain their circumstances in their district—and I can't give you a specific, I wish I could—but I just remember this just kind of general thing. They have a problem they want to solve, (laughs) so they say okay, and you try and work on the bills, helping them draft a bill or something like that. At the time, that was one of the expectations: you'd work on helping draft legislation. I did mostly approps; other people would do some of the substantive stuff, but you would also do that. But I was intrigued by just how everyday people had this exposure to power with an expectation that they'd be perfect, and then try and figure out, Why do they disappoint everybody, you know? (laughter) I don't know why—I think about that because part of it's looking back at some of this stuff. You ever see the movie, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*? One of my favorites.

DePue: Frank Capra movie; 1939, I believe.

McDonald: Yeah. So here you are. It's kind of like everyone was a Mr. Smith going to Springfield. I'm sure that when they came down here, almost every single one of them thought they were going to do the people's work. It's intriguing, because the longer people are around, the fight to retain any sense of integrity is probably the biggest struggle everyone has. Now, this is a total aside; it has nothing to do—these are just things you run into and you learn or you get exposed to.

DePue: Maybe another question that's a little bit off the track of what we've been talking about here, but I did want to ask you. If you were to describe your personal politics at the time, how would you describe yourself?

McDonald: Moderate. I always thought of myself as a Percy Republican.¹³ Moderate Republican. Kind of pro-choice to the extent I was. I supported ERA. Yeah, that was a no-brainer. But I always thought of myself as kind of fiscally conservative, a little bit, even though I worked on the Democrats'—in Illinois

¹³ Charles Percy was a moderate Republican who represented Illinois in the U.S. Senate from 1967 to 1985. Carter Hendren, who managed Jim Edgar's 1982 and 1990 campaigns, ran Percy's 1984 campaign. Bob Kustra, Edgar's lieutenant governor was head of Percy's Chicago office staff from 1978 to 1980.

you can't tell the difference between Democrats and moderate Republicans. I mean, it's a conservative Democratic Party.

DePue: At that time?

McDonald: Yeah. I thought in either party there was kind of a far left and a far right, but most everyone was clustered in the middle.

DePue: The aspect about the Democratic Party at that time—and I think probably today as well in the state of Illinois—is you've got that interesting mixture of Chicago Democrats, many of them being controlled by Daley—some weren't at that time—but you also have the southern Democrats, those like Choate himself and Paul Powell.

McDonald: I knew the personalities less then. I just thought it was intriguing that it was a Republican governor that pushed for an income tax increase. This could be my total naïveté, but you would have thought it would have been a Democratic governor that would have said we need to do this in order to advance the cause of education and health care, or whatever. So I guess my politics are largely pragmatic. It didn't matter who I was working for. You know, once you work on one side, people think you're always that. In the Thompson administration, I had the good fortune to go to work in the Bureau of the Budget after working for Mary Lee Leahy; Len Schaeffer recruited me to the Bureau of the Budget, and I transitioned and stayed. But what's so funny is that it didn't matter how long you worked in the Bureau of the Budget under Jim Thompson; they'd all say, "You're a Democrat, aren't you? You started on the House Democratic staff, didn't you?" (DePue laughs) Greg Baise said that to me once. That's just the way it is. Most professional staff don't have any political bona fides until they start working campaigns or doing something like that. I just never did that.

DePue: We're a little bit ahead of the narrative. I know you make a move in 1974, so why don't you tell us where you moved and why?

McDonald: Having worked on the House Democratic staff, I knew the DCFS budget pretty well. Jerry Miller left DCFS. I don't know the exact circumstances—depends what paper you read. Mary Lee Leahy was appointed director, and Dave Caravella, who worked in Walker's legislative shop and was friendly with legislative staff—I knew of Dave, I didn't know him real well—asked me, "Would you be interested in working for the new director?" He talked to the director and we met, so I was offered the job. I talked to Jim Jepsen, and he said, "Once you make a move to the Walker administration, people are going to remember it, so there's probably no coming back." But it was working in DCFS, and that's where I wanted to be.

DePue: Did you have any direct experiences with Jerry Miller, then?

McDonald: Just around budget stuff, and he distanced himself from those discussions. He actually walked out of an appropriations hearing in which he said, “You know, I don’t care what you do to this budget. Why don’t you just eliminate the budget? The kids will be better off anyway.” He walked out and said, “Here, these people will answer your questions,” and he just walked out. I’ve never seen (laughs) a director walk out. He was seriously saying, “If you don’t want to give us any money, don’t give us any money.” He was insolent, I suppose, is what they would have said.

DePue: Let me tell you what Mary Lee Leahy said about him in an interview that we had together.¹⁴ Mary Lee Leahy, as you mentioned already, took over as director. “I don’t think Jerry Miller thought too highly of the private agencies”—the private agencies are a lot of different charities and philanthropic organizations out there who are helping this area—“and DCFS was contracting out with Lutheran Welfare, Catholic Charities, et cetera, so that they would provide foster care, they would provide institutions. I don’t think that Jerry was a very good manager; great on policy, great on ideas. So yes, the department was very troubled when I took it over.” So there were serious issues going on within the department, not just at the director level?

McDonald: I remember attending, as a legislative staffer, a big meeting of private agencies and department staff, the directors, and I think it was held in Lincoln Towers. I didn’t know they had a space that large, but they had a large room. I remember a gentleman—he was the head of Cunningham Children’s Home over in Champaign—after the director made his remarks, he stood up and asked the question that everyone wanted to have asked. He said, “**When are you leaving?**” It’s as simple as that; When are you leaving? It’s like there was open hostility between the private agencies and the public agency. And it was at the leadership level. In the field, first of all, 70 percent of the kids have always been served by private agencies in Cook County. Downstate, depending on the presence, there was always a mix-up.

DePue: Can you flesh out a little bit more that relationship of what the private agencies are bringing to this mix and what the state side is doing?

McDonald: When you go back and look at the history and talk to some people, if they did an oral history on DCFS, it would be intriguing. I guess I’ve been around just long enough to know some of the people that were involved in that decision-making. Naomi Hiatt, for instance, was the head of the commission that was responsible for drafting the legislation that created the department. Clyde Choate actually sat on that commission, and I think he was responsible for helping get that legislation through. They said, “We wanted to see a strong public agency.” This is Naomi Hiatt, and there are probably documents to this effect somewhere, about the desire to have a strong public child welfare

¹⁴ Mary Lee Leahy, interview by Mark DePue, March 25, 2008, Illinois Statecraft Project, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL, 62.

agency throughout the state that would use voluntary agency resources; but where there were none, would provide services.

If you read the statute that creates the department, it does say—and I think it's still there—something to the effect that the department will provide services where the private sector is not available. The assumption was that we have a good thing going here with private agencies, and we need someone to pay the bills. In fact, Monsignor Cassin, who headed up Springfield Catholic Charities, said to Mary Lee and others in a meeting, “You do not understand. The department was created for the purposes of making sure we can pay the bills of the private agencies.” There were very strongly held feelings, especially by Catholic Charities statewide, and at that time, especially in Cook County, where Don Kent was the head of Chicago Catholic Charities. Don was a former partner in Arthur Andersen, [a very large and well-known accounting firm] and he's a CPA. Formidable in terms of personality and politics; in Catholic Charities, obviously very influential. But he was one of those leading the charge that DCFS should provide no services and should only use private agencies for it. He was also instrumental in some of the legislation that evolved and Mary Lee signed. It was a piece of legislation—or she didn't sign it, but she supported it and Walker signed it—that was known as the Grotberg Amendment, which said full-cost reimbursement for services provided by private agencies. It was after John Grotberg, who was a state senator from the Aurora area.

DePue: So essentially DCFS, in their minds, existed to funnel money through grants to these private charities.

McDonald: Right. It was to make sure that, in state government, there was a place that would make sure that the private sector—which was doing God's work in serving these children—would get the attention it needed. Now, that was the narrow view. It was narrow, but it was very influential. Maybe it was more widely held than I believed. But there was a view, as I came to understand the world, of Naomi Hiett and those in the public sector who believed that we really want a very strong public agency, and we'll buy services where we feel it's appropriate, but we also want to provide services. We'll buy them, but we want to provide them. Ed Weaver was a director who believed strongly in that prior to the Walker administration; he was under Ogilvie. Then there was this middle ground of private agency folks that I got to know who said, “You know, we need both. If you turn this over to us, we'd die. We'd die tomorrow. This is a field that needs everyone working together.” You'd hear that from people that played a role as peacemakers, and they were all over the place.

But when you have a Jerry Miller as a lightning rod and then you had some of these other private agency folks that would go after it, it was just amazing. Mary Lee actually had, I think, one of those roles, and she did it really well. She was a peacemaker. You could talk to Mary. She could listen well and understand what people were saying to her. She also was a hands-on

person. I remember she personally signed every travel voucher because so many people weren't paying any attention to them, she decided she had to do it for a while to change the culture of accountability. She was very hands-on. I loved working for her. It was a fantastic opportunity.

DePue: What was your specific title?

McDonald: I came over as a special assistant to the director, and just did whatever she needed done. I had enough general background that I could staff stuff up and make sure she got what she needed, or do whatever. Then I later became what they called executive deputy director. It was actually to better coordinate the work of the deputies, who were a lot of people that would spend a lot of time fighting with each other as much as they would advance issues. So my job was to do that. Those things are always a struggle because people don't want to give up their need to be in control.

DePue: It strikes me that you went from the House Democratic staff, and then you went to be Mary Lee Leahy's personal assistant.

McDonald: Right.

DePue: Both of these are positions where you get to make some pretty important contacts, I would think.

McDonald: Yes.

DePue: Did it occur to you at the time that was something that would set you up to be more successful to do some of those things that you wanted to do when you were going into grad school?

McDonald: Absolutely. I understood that the role, the job with the House Democratic staff, would give me a knowledge bank around the budgetary process that I believed was absolutely **critical** to actually leading an organization like a DCFS. I knew it was important to understand how these decisions got made. One of the things I read somewhere and always incorporated is, there are three parts to every decision—political, fiscal, and programmatic—and that good decisions can account for all of it. And you have to be able to do that. The area I was interested in was the program issues; it's where I found that the weakest contender, the weakest advocate, was the program side. Everyone knows the winners and losers. I mean, the money issues sort themselves out pretty quickly at the broad level. The politics, winners and losers, that's the list. But then there's also the issue of, programmatically, can you create a case that is affordable, that actually saves money by doing the right thing, and can be crafted in a way in which there are no real losers? Part of that has to do with how you actually would say, "Okay, who's going to do the work?"

This is why I came to believe that if you're smart, the only way you do business in this state in child welfare is to do it with both the public and the

private sector. There aren't enough good people, and unless you can have everyone at the same table—Mary Lee was good at getting people to the table; she was the right person at that time for the agency. Unfortunately for her, the rhetoric got unloaded. People knew they could talk to her, and they could talk to her in a very straightforward way and she didn't take offense; she would take it in. She didn't get bowled over by anyone, either. She was the right person at that time for the job because there was a need for some kind of peace, and reason to evolve.

DePue: You had the impression she had the ear of Governor Walker as well, that she had the support and cooperation from the governor?

McDonald: Yeah.

DePue: Because he was himself something of a lightning rod.

McDonald: Yeah, she and Andy were totally devoted to the Walkers—

DePue: Andy is her husband.

McDonald: Right, who died. But I think they were actually—she was as devoted, if not—you know, she was devoted to him, but she was to Roberta, his first wife. She was very much connected to the Walker family. So that was my sense of Mary Lee.

DePue: We're about two and a half hours into this. This is probably long enough, and we're at a point in time where we can make a clean cut, if you will, before we get into the Thompson years. But I wanted to ask you this question before we move on: Did you miss being a caseworker, being in the trenches?

McDonald: Always did, to this day. Absolutely. Best job I ever had.

DePue: Did you have some who were still in that role thinking, Oh, he forgot about us already?

McDonald: (laughs) I had good friends who would remind me of that, but I guess I feel good about this. I made a point of going to the field a lot. Even when I was not director, when I had left in between, I would have foster parents call me at home. I had a short stint under Thompson where I was acting director, and then Sue Suter was appointed. I had caseworkers and folks that would stay in touch with me and tell me what was going on. But also, when I came back to DCFS, I would go out to the field, I would get out to offices, I would sit and talk with people, and I would shadow workers when I could. Everyone knew they could tell me what they were thinking.

I kind of had a rule: if you don't like something, call me and tell me. But the other side of that, people knew if you don't like something, you got to tell me what's the alternative. Also, if you have a concern, you can tell me. It

created some friction for people in the field, like at management levels, because they didn't always want to have subordinates calling the director, but I always knew—and this is probably a good way to kind of conclude—that the most vulnerable people in an agency like DCFS, a child welfare agency, are the directors and the caseworkers. The first thing that happens in a tragedy, someone wants to find out who can you fire to show you're in control. The first one that gets fired: the caseworker. Happens twice: director. The fates of a director and a caseworker are just tied together. Always are, always will be.

DePue: Thank you very much. This has been a fascinating conversation. We took a little more time than I anticipated, talking about those years with the House Democratic staff and working as an assistant to Mary Lee Leahy, but I thought this was wonderful stuff. It's important, and it's going to set the stage to everything that comes, and that's why we take the time to really develop this fully. So I appreciate it. We obviously have a lot more to talk about here, Jess, and we'll do that the next session.

McDonald: Okay.

(end of interview #1 #2 continues)

Interview with Jess McDonald

ISG-A-L-2010-040.02

Interview # 2: September 3, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Friday, September 3, 2010. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is my second session with Jess McDonald. Good morning, Jess.

McDonald: Good morning, Mark. How are you?

DePue: Very good. We are with Jess because of your experiences working in the Edgar administration as the director of the Department of Children and Family Services, but there's so much more about your career that's worth talking about. When we finished off last time, you were telling us about your experiences in the Walker administration, specifically working with Director Mary Lee Leahy in DCFS.

So, we are at 1976. It's an election year, but it's also a year—maybe it was '77—that you made a career change, for obvious political reasons. Not necessarily that yours was political, but there was a change of the governorship in that time. I'll turn it over to you and ask you why and how you ended up at the Illinois Bureau of Budget.

McDonald: It was interesting, Mark. I had previously served on legislative staff in appropriations, and one of the agencies that, if you will, was one of my accounts, was the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities. A gentleman named Leonard Schaeffer was the deputy director for finance and administration, and we had a good working relationship in that role. He's one of the most brilliant men I've run into in state government at the time, around finance and stuff like that, and quite witty. He became the director of the Bureau of the Budget, in probably February or March of '76.

DePue: This is for Gov. Jim Thompson.

McDonald: No, for Walker.

DePue: Oh, okay.

McDonald: He replaced Hal Hovey. So Len moved over to the governor's office. He then recruited me when I was at the Department of Children and Family Services, working for Mary Lee. He recruited me to come over and work as the head of the division that was responsible for human services budgeting, the Department of Public Aid, which had public assistance and health care; and Medicaid; DCFS and Mental Health; and a number of other agencies. Unfortunately, they were in the middle of the primary, and Mary Lee said I could not go until after the primary. So I helped her manage the agency, and at conclusion of the primary, I went over to the Bureau of the Budget and worked for Len Schaeffer.

DePue: The irony there is Walker in '72 had beaten the Democrats' preferred candidate, Paul Simon, in the Democratic primary, and now he gets beat by Michael Howlett in the Democratic primary because of the Daley administration returning the favor, so to speak.

McDonald: Yes. Of course budget times are budget times, but Len Schaeffer was one of the hardest workers I'd run into. I managed the transition. I stayed in that role, and Bob Mandeville came in as director of the Bureau of the Budget for Jim Thompson. Director Mandeville was an interesting guy in his own right. He pretty much retained all the staff in the Bureau of the Budget. We're all at-will employees anyway, but we had an opportunity to earn our positions in the administration, so I stayed on in the Bureau of the Budget working for Bob Mandeville.

DePue: What does the phrase "at will" mean?

McDonald: You're totally exempt from any protection from civil service. They can ask you to just disappear.

DePue: So that's part of what a governor has, an option to remove the old team and put in his—

McDonald: Bring in his own—his new team.

DePue: —own team.

McDonald: They can do that with directors, and there are a number of positions throughout government, but the Bureau of the Budget was one of those shops that reported directly to the governor. In many other states, that is not the case; it's in a department of central administration or it's someplace else, and you have less flexibility, shall we say.

DePue: What percentage of the state budget did you have responsibility over?

McDonald: About 30 percent. When you talk about human services, the biggest part at the time was public aid because of AFDC rolls and Medicaid—which included general health care but also long-term care, nursing home care—as well as some of the other human service agencies. As a size, it was substantial. Once you look at AFDC, that’s a huge program. At that time, it was a huge program; it was one program representing just an incredible amount of money.

DePue: You said AFDC?

McDonald: Yeah, Aid to Families with Dependent Children. It became TANF, but it’s essentially what the general public would know as the public welfare programs.

DePue: These acronyms get to evolve over time, I know. Talk about your specific duties during this assignment.

McDonald: The biggest responsibility was obviously the supervision of the development of the executive budget, which was essentially working with the budget staff that worked for me and just looking at all the options that the governor’s going to have in putting a budget together. And monitoring the spending, just the fairly usual activities of watching where the money is in state government and working on what the next set of choices will be for the governor.

DePue: Part of this, of course, is once the budget is put together it has to be taken before the legislature, because they’re the ones that get to approve this.

McDonald: Exactly. In those days, the general assembly was very clear. Sen. Howie Carroll is the one who made it most clear. He was the chairman of the Senate finance committee, our appropriations committee, and he would be the one who would declare that the budget was balanced, and he would remind any sitting governor that the general assembly under the Illinois constitution has the final say with regard to the budget.

DePue: Sitting here in 2010 with a 13.5-billion-dollar budget deficit, some of what you just said requires some explanation, I think.

McDonald: Well, and imagination. My colleagues and I will sometimes muse about this, that here we are: in a time when the general assembly has this long history and the constitutional responsibility to balance the budget, they’ve decided that they’re going to cede that responsibility to the governor, and they’re going to let the governor decide how to make the final budget decisions. They’ve said, “Here’s the amount of money,” but they clearly don’t have a balanced budget, nor are they—apparently—ready to step up to resolve that problem.

DePue: So every year that we go on with this problem today of having a gross imbalance in the budget, it’s unconstitutional?

McDonald: Well, I'm not a constitutional lawyer, so I'm not going to say that. I would say it is not what the framers intended.

DePue: And the framers are 1970 officials.

McDonald: Seventy, exactly, exactly.

DePue: Tell me a little bit more, then, about the relationship that your budget office had with the legislature.

McDonald: In the governor's office you had someone who represented all the key issues in government. I think I mentioned the last time we talked that I learned very quickly that there are three parts of every decision: the political, the fiscal, and the programmatic. The Bureau of the Budget represented, within the governor's office, the fiscal component of the budget. It had to take into consideration the programmatic, because that had to do with policy and it had to be compliant with policy; oftentimes the bureau was responsible for putting forward some probably new ways of looking at problem solving. The political side was dealt with by folks in the governor's office. For a period of time, Jim Edgar, later Governor Edgar, was Governor Thompson's legislative director. So the Bureau of the Budget would come to the—it would be Bob Mandeville, Dick Kohlhauser—some of the top people would be involved in some major decisions, discussions. But the discussions around the budget and revenue with legislative leadership were pretty much handled by the governor and the deputy governor—Jim Fletcher at the time—and others. So we would be involved on an as-needed basis. When you'd get down to the staff level within the bureau, we'd be involved with legislative staff if that were appropriate. But the one thing you didn't do was mess around with someone else's territory, and you didn't step into the legislative arena inappropriately. And that was true—should have been true—for agency directors; it was for me. You left to the different Caesars what was theirs.

DePue: (laughs) Were you involved at all in working with the legislature, appearing before the legislature?

McDonald: Not at the Bureau of the Budget. There were some substantive committees in which there were some hearings around mental health issues, and we provided some background information, but primarily we would work through agencies. The appropriate representatives around these issues are going to be the agencies or someone else. And it was seldom that someone from the governor's office would testify, except Bob Mandeville when it was before the Economic and Fiscal Commission or something else where they were talking about revenue and spending.

DePue: In that position, was there any interaction between the Bureau of the Budget and the other two constitutional officers, the comptroller and the treasurer?

McDonald: I think there was. I was not involved in those, but I know there was because they had to have conversations about what you spend and so on. Now, one thing that we were involved in on a pretty regular basis was around the budget presentations; we would answer questions at press conferences, we would brief the governor—in that case it was Governor Thompson—and so on. We would be at budget meetings in which there would be dialogue about choices.

DePue: What was your impression of Bob Mandeville as a budget director?

McDonald: One of the most amazing people I've known. Very low-key, very religious, and—

DePue: What was his religious background?

McDonald: He was Roman Catholic. But he and his family just kind of lived the faith. It's really interesting how he would do it. He was a genteel person in terms of dealing with people; he didn't have to use his authority as a club. He would try and reduce it to logic. He would also listen to people and end up saying no to a lot of things, but he was saying yes to a lot more. One rainy night, he was coming home from the office, and he and his wife—or I guess Alma was with him—and they saw someone walking the streets who was clearly drenched, unkempt, and appeared to be a homeless person. They brought the person home and got the person comfortable and warm and fed with a meal, and the person spent the night. Then they helped find a more permanent arrangement for services for the person the next day. They lived their faith that way. I mean, he could have just called somebody, but he didn't. He didn't turn away from the person.

DePue: Not too many wives would be happy to find themselves in that situation, I would think.

McDonald: I think Alma and Bob both were like that. That was just who they were. If you were to ask him about it, he wouldn't tell you about it. He was just an ordinary guy. We took him to Dixon State Hospital. It was a developmental center up at Dixon for developmentally disabled and others. It was considered at the time one of the worst in the country in terms of care of clients and patients. I wanted Bob to see the place, because he had to understand why there was a lot of conversation about closing it. Any time you start talking about closing a facility, there's a lot of political consequences and there's a lot of alternative budgeting and program building you have to do. And they were being sued at the time. It was on *Sixty Minutes*. Matter of fact, one guy on *Sixty Minutes* said, "We're farmers. Our cattle get better care than our daughter does at Dixon State School." He was very clearly disturbed but without any options. So we asked Bob to come up there and visit the place with us. I took a budget examiner with me and Bob and Dick Kohlhauser; we went up there together. I wanted him to see—they had some smaller, newer facilities, and then they had the larger things that are out of the movies and out of the past.

DePue: That's a mental health facility, then?

McDonald: It was mostly for the developmentally disabled, but there were people there that were mentally ill as well, because at the time, and going further in the past, it was just a place to send someone the families couldn't take care of. So you'd have a mix. It was about as horrible as you can imagine in the larger units. It was literally like you would have people caged—a very large number of people, fifty to eighty—in a relatively small space, just milling around. Anyone new walks into their arena—and they're behind a fence inside a building—the stimulation of seeing new people would just have all the residents going crazy. They had very few staff to help them. We observed in one ward, in the morning they had toilet people, the residents that they'd line up, and they're all nude except for being bound, so they would be sitting on the floor waiting for their turn.

DePue: Bound as in—

McDonald: So they wouldn't gag themselves or injure themselves, they had gloves, and then their arms would be secured behind them.

DePue: Almost like a straightjacket.

McDonald: Almost, but not entirely like a straightjacket. It was not a straightjacket. Here you'd have twenty and thirty, and you'd have two or three attendants trying to take care of all of these people. If you look at it, on its face, just seeing what you see, this was clearly an inhumane way to deal with human beings. But when Bob walked into these rooms—residents would come up to all of us because they're curious—he had such an ease about him with these folks. He could talk with them and communicate; he wasn't put off, he wasn't terrified. A young woman who was there was just terrified because she had never seen anything like this in her life, but she had to do the budgets on the agency, and I had enough experience to know that if you do not understand what you're making a decision about, you will not do the work that folks intend government to do. It doesn't matter where you sit, whether you're in the Bureau of the Budget, whether anyplace else, so we just needed to have folks understand that. He was very receptive. I'll leave it at that. That was how he was willing to experience stuff beyond his desk, and he brought his faith—he didn't proselytize, he just lived it. Actually, that's how I feel about the Edgars as well; I think they did the same thing.

DePue: How about—you might have been a couple levels removed from this—but your impressions of Jim Thompson as a governor, as a manager.

McDonald: I think Jim Thompson as a chief executive—and this is my impression—made the decisions at the high level. He listened to all points of view, and he **invited** points of view. He'd hear everyone's point of view from these different perspectives, and then he would make a decision. The hearing of everyone's

point of view was, I think, an important one. One issue came up, and it was on the issue of choice. Bob Mandeville had a very clear opinion about choice—he was a devout Catholic, and he was opposed to abortion—and Jim Thompson was very liberal and had supported a woman’s right to choose. So a bill came up that involved choice, and I remember Bob Mandeville coming down and saying, “The governor is going to be personally reviewing all the bill comments on this legislation.”

DePue: This is just a few years after *Roe v. Wade*.

McDonald: Well, *Roe v. Wade*—

DePue: ‘73, I think.

McDonald: I thought it was further back, but I may be wrong. I don’t know. Thompson gave instructions to his key staff, “If anybody has an opinion about this and would like to put that opinion in writing, I want them free to share it.” So Bob Mandeville came back and said, “You know how I feel about this bill and stuff like that, but the governor has asked the following,” and we were free, if we had strong feelings about it, to offer an opinion about the legislation. But when offering an opinion, they weren’t just saying I’m for or against; it means: Do you have an argument for; is this good public policy; or so on. The impression I was left with was, I think this is pretty unique. Here’s a guy who’s making a very difficult decision, and he is going to shape that. He talked to the leading advocates on both sides of the issue, and although everyone kind of knew his leaning on this, or where he was, he listened to everyone’s perspective. So those bills are never quite as straightforward.

Although I don’t remember the details of the legislation, one thing I was struck with was how open he was, first in letting staff know, “Tell me what you think if you have something to say on this issue.” If you look at it in the context of my job, this was not a bill of any fiscal consequence. It was a substantive bill that was not related to the budget. But still, Mandeville came back and told us that should anyone feel that they needed to say something, the governor would accept any written comments.

DePue: One of the reasons you’re saying that, perhaps, is because that wasn’t necessarily the governor’s persona? He had a larger-than-life persona, big guy...

McDonald: Right. I think the importance for me on this one is that his openness to bringing in information from all sides of an issue and not having his mind made up before. This is an unusual issue. But even in the difficult issues: Do you close a Kankakee State Hospital, a Manteno—actually, he had to make hard decisions about that because it was in a district that was George Ryan’s district. Those are difficult decisions because those are decisions about jobs. Those things are part of the years there, that they had these difficult decisions.

Different chiefs of staff or deputy governors—whether it was Jim Reilly or whether it was Art Quern or whether it was Jim Fletcher—had different styles, but the one thing that they all demanded was a full set of information from each of the perspectives: the political, the programmatic, and the fiscal. I always had the sense that the decisions were complete with regard to that.

DePue: You stayed in this position, as far as I understand at least, for a long time, nearly ten years.

McDonald: Yeah, till '85.

DePue: This is quite a bit different kind of work than you were doing when you were with DCFS.

McDonald: That's true. The opportunity was absolutely fantastic, to learn about the budget process, and to see the budget process as not about saying no to everything but also how much you say yes to. One of the things that agencies would always forget: They'd think, Oh, we didn't get any more money. We'd remind them, You got 100 percent of what you got last year, plus you may have gotten a little bit more. Now the question is, Can you do anything better with that money than you did before? Are there better ways to spend the money? They didn't use a lot of gimmicks.

Under Walker, Hal Hovey engaged in zero-based budgeting and MBOs, management by objectives; the problem was the technology and information was inadequate to support that kind of a process.¹⁵ Under Thompson, Bob Mandeville's approach was, You're not going to realistically go to zero, but you can go to 90 percent and build a budget back from about 90 percent and find the 10 percent in a budget that's an opportunity to be, if you will, reinvested. So that was pretty much the approach that we would take.

For instance, at DCFS, one of the issues they were always facing in the early Thompson years was they had inadequate staff to manage the field, to manage investigations of abuse and neglect and other things. They were also running a very outdated residential program in Normal, Illinois: Illinois Soldiers' and Sailors' Children's Home. I knew it firsthand because I was a caseworker that had kids there, and I knew people who worked there. Kids were mostly from Chicago, and most of those kids would go in—it was like a revolving door—they'd get in trouble, and they'd either go to jail or they'd go back to Chicago. They couldn't stabilize anyone there, and it was essentially an orphanage. The field was changing. We presented a budget strategy to the department, in part of the budget hearing, to close the facility over eighteen months, redirect the resources to the residential alternatives that some of the kids would need, closer to home; the other savings would go into improving

¹⁵ Hal Hovey was Governor Walker's first budget director.

staffing at the front end so they could actually do a better job of handling investigations.

Greg Coler had just come in, and he's the one that had to make a judgment about, did he agree or disagree. That had its own interesting... Here's a case where the agency director at the time, Greg Coler, was a guy that was a really strong personality. He was coming in following a professional social worker, Margaret Kennedy, who was a good person but wasn't a strong, assertive personality. Everyone thought, Here's a guy who's going to really lead this agency.

One of the first conversations I had with him was when we presented the budget, and he was just laying into us. He was just saying how outrageous this is, you're closing a facility and you're doing this, that, and the other. I mean, he wasn't even going to have the conversation; he was going to be in charge. At that point I just interrupted the meeting and said, "Director Coler, have you had an opportunity to read the budget recommendations? The budget documents were probably 70 pages to 100 pages, but easy enough reading. You can find the recommendations pretty quickly." He said, "No, but I've been told about them." "Oh, I see." And we said, "Well, how about you take a look at it. If you still disagree with it, let us know what you want to do after you read it. And if not, the way the process works, it goes up to the governor."

So he finally went back and looked at it. He called his liaison in the governor's office, Jim Kiley, and said, "I think I made a mistake here." He had trusted someone in the budget shop who just didn't like working with the Bureau of the Budget; he just didn't like the roles and said, "No one tells us what to do." That was that gentleman's perception of it. Well, it turned out to be an interesting thing because Coler then read it, said, "This is a good idea. We're going to do it." That story, although it's a little bit about the dynamics of the process and how you deal with it, is really about the opportunities you have in a budget process to help an organization, help an agency redirect resources and meet new needs by making some decisions and change. And that's what I think a budget process was always intended to do, to try and find better ways to serve the public purpose that the agency has.

Having the opportunity to work for the people I did in the bureau and to learn from them, then being able to take advantage of my own knowledge of the field—we found ways to do that—that made the budget process a real opportunity. That's the one thing I've always taken away from my experience in government—and still to this day work with—is that the budget process is where government finally says, "This is what's important, this is what we stand for, and this is what we're going to actually try and do." That's better than the press release time, because it only goes downhill from the day the governor announces his budget.

DePue: Before, when we had talked, it was very clear that you absolutely loved that work in the field with DCFS. This is very much different from that experience.

McDonald: Yes, it is.

DePue: Did you miss that?

McDonald: I always did. I stayed in touch with my friends who were still in the field, and still do with many of them. Since then, most of them have retired, but we're still in touch with people in the field. It's a different work, but I always viewed it as an important foundation to being better able to help a human service agency. If you don't understand the budget process, you don't understand how to make it work; you're not going to be able to really help negotiate the politics of your programs.

DePue: That's probably a very good point to transition, then, into the next assignment you got in Governor Thompson's administration. As I understand it, that's assistant to the governor for human services. How did that move take place in 1985?

McDonald: I think Jim Kiley was moving on. Jim Kiley worked for Paula Wolff. Jim went up, and his career skyrocketed. Paula was the director of programs and policy for Jim Thompson, a brilliant woman. I don't know if you've had the chance to talk with her.

DePue: She's on our list of people to interview.

McDonald: She's absolutely incredible. One of the smartest people—yeah, one of the smartest people I've ever known. She's smart about politics, and she was just intellectually incredibly smart, but she brought all of that. And she was a good mentor. Very demanding. She asked me if I would be interested. I was asked to interview for this vacancy.

Now, there was always a conflict between the Bureau of the Budget and what they call the program and policy staff. The program and policy staff always wanted to do something, and there was always this battle between Bob Mandeville and Paula Wolff. We used to think of it as—Bob would say, "Paula, that's a very nice idea, but we can't do it," and Paula would say, "There are things the governor must do." It was that tension between what we ought to do for policy and program and then Bob Mandeville, who had a way of asking the question, and just, "Where will the money come from?" and "How are you going to do it?" and "No." So they would constantly be battling. In fact, there used to be jokes about it; they'd say that you go into Governor Thompson's office, and someone would get an answer that said, "Yes, okay, I'm with you, go do it." Then someone else would circle back and say, "Governor, I understand that you authorized this. You know, we really can't afford to do this." "Okay, tell them no, we won't do it." Now, I never

personally observed that, but Bob Mandeville used to talk a little bit about how there was this revolving door and that everyone would try to get to the governor. I think that's true in any administration, and that's why, I guess they would say, no one sees the wizard. I think that's part of it—keep them away from the wizard.

I think that Paula and Bob had this tension in that professional relationship, which reflected the tension between their roles in government. But I always liked the program side as much as the budget side, so Paula offered me the job. I took the job, and it was a totally different view of the world. A lot of it was just saying, "Okay, what have we got going on this week?" It was a really quick—everyone's working off a to-do list of things. You didn't have a long-term plan. The budget process starts with day one and it works its way through to a conclusion, and then you're monitoring the budget. Program staff is, What's going to go wrong today, and what are our opportunities? What things can we do? Every week, there's a to-do list, and have you done it? I had to get accustomed to this pace that she had, and she had an incredible pace to the work. There was no issue or problem that was too small for her attention.

DePue: Does that mean that she was a micromanager?

McDonald: Not really. You know how you talk about the devil being in the details? She knew that if she was going to be successful and if the administration was going to be successful in advancing programs and policies, you had to find the devils; you had to find the things that people would say no to, and you had to address them. At the level we were working at, they weren't small things. You're talking about significant enough that if you didn't pay attention to it, it wasn't going to go someplace.

DePue: This is the kind of area where oftentimes you end up responding to the latest crisis.

McDonald: Oh, absolutely. Salmonella.¹⁶ Do you remember that? That was part of it. There are things that happen in the administration of programs that people just say they wish wouldn't happen. Maybe the real issue is, No surprises, please, or how do you avoid surprises?

DePue: Was that her approach or Governor Thompson's approach?

¹⁶ In March and April of 1985, Jewel-owned Hillfarm Dairy in Melrose Park was the source of a salmonella outbreak that sickened over sixteen thousand people and killed six. Governor Thompson fired the Department of Public Health director in response. Michael Klemens, "Bernard Turnock: Defamer of Illinois Chickens but Defender of Illinois Health," *Illinois Issues* (November 1988), 12, <http://www.lib.niu.edu/1988/ii881112.html>; Chris Lecos, "Of Microbes and Milk: Probing America's Worst Salmonella Outbreak," *FDA Consumer* 20 (February 1986).

McDonald: I think it was both. She reflected very well, I think, Governor Thompson's approach to governing and government. But probably the wisdom in Governor Thompson's approach is he recognized he needed to have all of these parts working. He needed to have a strong fiscal side, and it had to have a voice. He needed a strong policy/program side; it needed to have a strong voice. He needed a strong political perspective; he had several voices there, and Jim Edgar was one of them. And even though he had his key advisers, he valued those contributions and he recognized—beyond valuing—he recognized that you cannot make a decision that is going to actually move ahead without having all those perspectives on the table.

DePue: But my impression of the man, and what I've heard from yourself and others, is that he was not necessarily the guy who was going to get into the details.

McDonald: He didn't have to get into the details if he made sure that the decision coming up... He would ask the question, "Okay, tell me what's going to go wrong." I remember in the early years, when it was about the budget stuff, he would want to know, "Tell me what's going to go wrong." He was learning government early on himself, but he was focused on the higher-level concerns—the budgetary, revenue concerns and stuff like that. His first term, I believe, was a two-year term. So he had to focus on what are we left with, what are our choices, and so on. I guess I saw him over this longer period of time and got to be part of it. I think when you step back from it a bit, you can see how even though you might say, "Why are these people mucking around in our business?"

If you're in the budget process, and someone wants to advance an idea and they're not using the budget process—they're trying to use an end run or something like that—after a while when you sit back and look at it, you say, There's a dynamic to this process, and that's just the way it is. You realize how powerful a budget process is, and then you try and figure out how do you then influence it. Then you look at the policy side and the program side and you start to see a little more closely, how are people making decisions to actually implement programs? Oftentimes you'd see that this doesn't look a whole lot like what people intended it to be. I mean, there were directors who would start a program one year, then the next year they'd kind of cut it back and have a press announcement, and they'd go in another direction, so they didn't consistently build.

This, by the way, is I think a little bit of what happened at DCFS. There are different kinds of addictions, and I think the worst kind is printer's ink. Having your press announce a new initiative makes you feel good; the problem is you got to deliver on it. I think the delivery that people observed about DCFS is that consistently there were disappointments with how kids were being served, the problems that would come up, the relationships with key partners, and so on. I think that was part of what were underlying

frustrations that I think every governor has felt about managing the child welfare responsibility.

DePue: You've started to get into this a little bit already, but what were the specific challenges in the human services field?

McDonald: I'm going to talk about two different fields, but they were the ones that were closest to me. In the field of mental health, there was a concern in the advocacy area that Illinois relied too heavily on large institutions to serve persons with mental illnesses or developmental disabilities. The fact of the matter is, we were the state, on a per-capita basis, that did use large institutions more than any other state; we had not begun the development of small residential alternatives like group homes, maybe integrated living arrangements, smaller private sector residential treatment. They were all fairly large.

DePue: Before you get into this too far, one of the things—as I understand, and I'm very much an outsider in this—that has revolutionized mental health, was all of the different medications. Where are we as a country in terms of how that process has changed mental health?

McDonald: I have a friend who's a psychiatrist—and he's psychoanalytic oriented—who said his ability to do verbal therapies improved dramatically with the advent of some of the psychopharmacological medications; that he could get people to stabilize so that you could then start to work with them. That's for the mentally ill. For the developmentally disabled, where they have a lifelong condition—both of these are lifelong conditions, but some can be stabilized more easily with medication. With the developmentally disabled, you're dealing with the lifelong challenges of how do they deal with the activities of daily living. How do you just get through the day? You get up and care for yourself. It's the self-care issues, it's trying to find the activities that give meaning to their life and keep them going. The parents have been the advocates for them for their entire life because they were providing this care until special education and then until community resources.

With the mentally ill, the psychotropics were able to stabilize people as long as they stayed on their medication. You had someone that was seriously mentally ill, and they needed to take a medication. If they stayed on their medication, they would be stable, and you can keep them in a job, you can keep them in housing in the community. But oftentimes the side effects of some of those psychotropics would be such that people would just feel uncomfortable physically, stop taking them, and medicate with alcohol. It was very common to have adults with serious mental illnesses, schizophrenia and others, where they would find that when they go off, they go into a crisis; that's when they lose their house, and that's when they lose their jobs and their supports and stuff like that.

DePue: But by this time in the mid-‘80s, all of those drug therapies had been in place for a while? Or is this in the process of developing?

McDonald: They were advancing. But you still had people that had been in the system for a very long time, so you’ve got the populations. You’d have fewer younger people coming into the system; you had people who’d been in the system for a long time and they’re cycling through. We had people at Madden Mental Health Center, which is in Maywood, that would have as many as twenty to thirty readmissions a year. They’d come in, in a crisis; they’d be stabilized medically, they’d go through a battery of tests, they’d be in there for a week, and then they’d be discharged. They’re discharged with a bus token—being only slightly facetious—but it was hardly a connection.

It wasn’t until the development of programs like at Thresholds; they ran a program with people at Madden that we were aware of when I was director of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities for a while for Jim Edgar. One of the things we invested heavily in is, What does the research tell us about the best way to do this work? One of the things that was very clear: in Illinois we had models that would stabilize people and **keep** them stable in the community. The most expensive day in a state hospital is the first day, because everyone gets the same battery of tests; it doesn’t matter if you were there three days ago, you get the same tests all over again—all the medical evaluations and everything else. So we said, “How do you cut down on this revolving door, people going in and out?” Thresholds ran a program that was carefully researched; their folks had two thirds to a half fewer readmissions than the folks that were just treated in the normal method in the mental health facilities. What we knew, if we could connect these people, one, they didn’t lose their housing. Major issue with the mentally ill—they lose their housing, then they’re on the street. If they’re on the street, they’re at risk and they’re back in. Cops pick them up, take them right to Chicago Reed or Madden or Tinley Park, especially up there.

The other is, to the extent they have employment or activities, they lose those jobs, those opportunities, so their whole life just falls apart. Thresholds had what they called assertive community treatment. I take a little time on this because this was to become the major initiative that we brought to Mental Health when I came into the department. We made assertive community treatment, and the community connections with folks that were using state hospitals, really tight. We wanted to make sure that no one lost their clients. If you’re the director of a community mental health agency in Edgewater and Uptown, Chicago Reed was the major state hospital you would use. Edgewater and Uptown was one of the largest communities where mentally ill lived. Your clients would be spread throughout this fifteen-hundred-bed facility on Harlem and Irving Park on the northwest side of Chicago, so you could never find people. If you had to try and locate your clients or if you had a new client showing up there that you were going to get discharged to your community, no one would know how to do it. The state

hospitals refused to align their services in a way that would make it easy for community agencies, because community agencies didn't want to align according to geography. They had no sense of alignment. It was kind of like assigning...

So one of the first things we said is, "We have to make sense of the relationship between the communities we serve and these in-patient settings." Now, in doing that, we created this opportunity to right-size facilities, and you could begin to do two things—and this happened under the Edgar administration. I apologize for jumping ahead, but we're free associating a little bit here. As you're more effective in controlling the first day, as you're more effective in keeping people stabilized in their community, as you build these community partnerships so that there is a true partnership between the state institutions and the community agencies, you'll reduce the cost in institutions; not necessarily by reducing staffing, but you reduce the cost of associated costs—medications, emergency room costs and stuff like that. You can actually begin to shift some costs, slowly but surely, to increasing staffing levels in your institution. Almost all of the institutions in Illinois were understaffed for the populations they had, and you had to figure out a way to do that. It was not likely you were going to get money to just add a whole bunch of staff; you were going to have to find it within your savings, and if you were blessed enough in the budget process to be able to keep your savings, if you were better off, if you could program better, you could do that.

Those were the strategies we pursued at Mental Health and DD. In both these institutions, the building of community settings—with the support of Medicaid on the DD side, and the building of stronger connections between your community system and the mental health side and your state institutions—led to just better operations and actually smaller facilities.

DePue: "DD" standing for?

McDonald: Developmental Disabilities.

DePue: Okay, that's what I thought.

McDonald: The old generic name is mental retardation, but it actually incorporates far more disabilities than just that.

DePue: It sounds like localizing a lot of these services would allow the families and the other relationships to continue and really help out the process as well.

McDonald: Yes, exactly, exactly. It's actually not as easy as that, because a lot of the families are **very** invested in the decision they made to place their child in a state-operated facility. I remember it well, families at Lincoln and stuff like that. These families did not want to believe that anything bad could happen to their kids. They have to believe that, and unfortunately, we could not live up to their hopes and our promises in these state-operated facilities. They were

too large, and they always escaped accountability and oversight. It was incredibly difficult.

DePue: For the mental health side of that equation, was the percentage of overall population needing institutions, was that decreasing?

McDonald: Yes. And part of that was because, one, we knew we had more beds per capita in state institutions than any of the industrial states. East of the Mississippi has a different history in these things than west of the Mississippi. West of the Mississippi didn't have hundreds of years of development of institutions and almshouses, if you will; east of the Mississippi has Massachusetts and New York and Pennsylvania, and even Illinois. Jacksonville, the school for the deaf, I believe, was a tradeoff for—they got that instead of the land grant university; that's over in Champaign.

DePue: So that goes back to mid-nineteenth century.

McDonald: Yeah. Some of these facilities are very, very old, very, very old; whole communities have been built around them, so the decision to make change in them is oftentimes less about whether or not it can be done programmatically and more, can it be done politically?

DePue: You've been talking about that political, programmatic, financial—the triad—all the way through here. It strikes me that this move to the programmatic side would be one that you really welcomed.

McDonald: Oh, yes. Absolutely. The other thing about it, working for Paula in that role, I gained insights about the possibilities and the dark side, if you will, of what you can do and what people try and do—I mean, it's not just myself, it was all the people around me and the people in the administration—what would happen when everyone said, “We're going to try and solve a problem” and everyone figures out how do they work together on it. And the other times, (laughs) when people think there's a problem to be solved and other people say, “You know, you can try and solve it if you want, but don't count on us to help.” And the winners and losers discussion—good ideas that die because of the winners and losers; it's too powerful—

DePue: That's a political equation.

McDonald: It's a political equation, but there's always a calculation about that because you got to do it. The union: classic example, when we get to my day briefly at Mental Health. We had major problems in Mental Health. We had a very aggressive inspector general who used to be head of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill in Illinois. AFSCME protected the institutions just unbelievably.¹⁷ I mentioned Lincoln. We had a local union president who would literally torture residents, and we had discharged him for physical

¹⁷ American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

abuse; the belief being here that you have to have zero tolerance for physical abuse of people in a facility. They're totally dependent on your care. On a routine basis we were losing disciplinary actions when it got to arbitration. The arbitrators said, "Well, they haven't done it before, so you should just let them back in." They go back and do it again. AFSCME actually was very concerned about the fact that we were taking an aggressive position on discipline related to abuse of clients in the agency by staff, and we were taking a zero-tolerance approach to it.

Mike Lawrence had just wonderful—and I'm sure the governor has talked to you about Mike Lawrence. No greater advocate for the mentally ill than Mike Lawrence. He backed our play on everything. But Mike made me aware that on more than one occasion AFSCME went in to see the governor about getting me removed from Mental Health and DD because of this—at least that's what I was told by Mike. They just really resented—well, not resented—they needed to protect that base, and they thought either the downsizing of those facilities, which was the right thing to do, or the aggressive zero-tolerance approach on discipline related to abuse of clients were things that threatened their employee base, their member base. So they weren't real enthusiastic about my role at Mental Health in the first couple years.

To go back, I learned a little bit about working on the policy side, working under Thompson for Paula. You get it very quickly, and you get a really interesting exposure to all of those issues. I mean, you're staffing things for Jim Reilly, who is then deputy governor. You're staffing issues for the governor. For me, face time was never as important as having the information in front of someone, so I didn't really have to be in a meeting; I didn't care. There are more effective spokespeople, and I think the most influential person armed with the best information is the right person to be in the room. I never felt the need to be there.

DePue: That's a good opportunity for me to ask you how much face time you had directly with the governor at that period. Was it more than in the budget office?

McDonald: Probably had more than in the budget office. Early on in the budget process—

DePue: More than in the budget office?

McDonald: I was going to say, early on in the budget process, the early years of the Thompson administration—and, of course, there were fourteen of them—we would have sit-down meetings at the mansion or in his office, and we'd be going through the budgets. I mean, we had a lot of time. As he moved further into his administration, there was less and less of that because he got more and more comfortable with it. But there would be a lot of face time there. Depending on the issues. When I moved to the program staff, there were times

when you would be brought in on issues, and it's like, Something happened; now what are we going to do about it? You may be involved, but it's not like you count on it. You don't show up regularly, routinely, at the governor's office when you're in the program staff. You do your job. Paula Wolff would represent the issues in their meetings with the governor. But, unlike the budget process, you wouldn't be sitting down and saying, "Okay, now we're going to staff up all of the policy issues in government.

For instance, we had a hepatitis outbreak at a state facility. Mike Belletire was the director of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities at the time. We were over at the mansion for (laughs) a Christmas party or something like that, and we were pulled into an office at the mansion, where we had to talk about how we were going to deal with this particular issue. The things happen, shall we say, on the fly.

Probably I had opportunities to staff the governor in a personal way that I didn't have as much in the years when I was in the Bureau of the Budget. Let me give you an example. For Thompson, every time they'd do speeches, someone had to do some background, then Mike Lawrence would do something. So I wrote a briefing memo for the governor about the Child Care Association board meeting he was going to be addressing. Child Care Association represented the private child welfare providers in the state; he had agreed to go to their conference and address the board and members, so he asked for a background. I did a page and a half and said, "Here's what they care about; here's how they feel about the relationship between government; and so on. I gave it to Mike Lawrence, and that was the routine way. It turned out that the governor actually went over (laughs)—this is one of those unusual things that happens. Mike Lawrence gave it to the governor, the governor read it and said, "I'm just going to read this," so he went in and he read my briefing memo. He said, "This is what I want," and he actually told people that. And that was strange. Lawrence said that's the only time he recalled him ever doing something like that, but he said he agreed with this, that it was said well, and he just wanted to do it.

So that was very unusual, but it was the kind of staffing you do. You try and contextualize the policy work. You say, "Here's who the people are that are in the room" if he doesn't know them; these were people he would not know, necessarily. He might know their board members and board presidents, who are influential businessmen, but he might not know the people that were running the programs, and they tended not to know these folks. So it's trying to express who they are in the context of the partnership that government has with people that fulfill our mission. And I think that became more important. For instance, I think the lobbyists actually do a lot of that, but in child welfare and mental health, the community providers are smaller fish. They're not influential; they don't have a lot of money. They're not like, frankly, nursing home operators, who have very powerful friends and lobbyists.

DePue: How much interaction did you have with Jim Reilly? You've mentioned his name a couple times.

McDonald: Yeah, actually, Jim as deputy governor was very demanding. If he needed something, he needed it now. He didn't need it in five minutes; he wanted to know right then. And if he couldn't reach you right away, he said, "Where are you?" So he was very demanding, but on mental health issues, depending on the issue of the day, he would just call down and say, "I need this." He didn't really go through anybody; he'd do a straight line to where he thought he could get the information. And at the time—I noticed this more than anything else—we had an issue around mental health issues, and there was a lawsuit threatened. The director at the time, Mike Belletire, said that he was going to handle it. He and Mike were kind of at odds on this particular issue. This is not uncommon, for a director of an agency to have a different point of view than the deputy governor or someone in the governor's office, but I think they were at odds on this one and how to handle it. I was put in the position of both staffing up Jim, making sure he had what he needed, and kind of being a messenger around some of these issues. It's part of the role, but it's really interesting. It's really interesting. (laughs)

DePue: Maybe one of the more interesting time periods while you were working in that position was 1988 when—I don't think this was unique, certainly—ACLU filed a class-action law suit against the state on behalf of abused and neglected children.

McDonald: Right. B.H.

DePue: B.H.?

McDonald: B.H. is the initials of the plaintiff, of the lead plaintiff, yeah. Gordon Johnson was the director. The allegations were about kids who were abused while in care. The issue here, the claim was, because you took physical custody of these kids and had legal guardianship, you had a legal responsibility as a parent to keep them safe from abuse and neglect. That was your obligation because you were the child protection agency, and under federal law, they had some of these same protections. There were both constitutional and federal law issues that were alleged in that. It all had to do pretty much with safety, not being kept safe, kids that were abused while in foster care. Actually, all the lawsuits in the country are pretty much about that. One set of facts in every jurisdiction, but pretty much the same facts: kids that were put in foster homes, and the foster parents, for whatever reason, do not care for them well or abuse them and worse, and the state agency was neglectful in managing their side of the responsibilities.

DePue: Now, I don't want you to get too far ahead on this one. To focus on the mid- and late '80s, were there some very highly visible cases or incidents that were part of this?

McDonald: Not always related to the lawsuit. There have always been landmark cases—I call them landmark cases—in child welfare. In the seventies, the Johnny Lindquist case. This was a child in a Catholic Charities foster home—

DePue: This is in Illinois.

McDonald: Illinois, in Chicago, and Margaret Kennedy I believe was the director at the time. He was beaten to death by the foster parent. It was like a ten-year-old child. So everyone asked the question, Why? How? How could this happen? Move ahead a little bit, and in the mid-'80s, '85, you've got the Madden case. I think it was Charlie Madden, a five-year-old boy who moved from Galesburg to Quincy and was severely beaten and tortured, in ways that I don't even want to describe, by a paramour, mother's boyfriend. He went to SIU's family practice clinic in Quincy with two black eyes, nothing wrong with his nose. The mother says he fell on a monkey bar. Any physician in the world would know you don't get two black eyes and not have damage to the bridge of your nose, with that kind of a description. They accepted it. The kid goes home and later that day is—you know, essentially is killed.

Now those cases aren't necessarily the cases that B.H. was about. The first one was, the Lindquist case, but they had those other cases. They had cases like that in—a case, Patrick Murphy, that later [DCFS was] sued on for damages. A worker and a supervisor. Two kids were in foster care, they were left alone, and they died in a house fire. The workers reported seeing the kids two days after they died and filed false documents with the court, and that came out later as people were starting to look at the stuff. You'd have these tragedies that were related to malfeasance or misfeasance, and they would happen. There were some tragedies you could probably say were just plain old tragedies; it happened, but there was no fault. But the ones that people remember: the Joseph Wallace case where the mother hangs this little boy. She's a mentally-ill parent, and she hangs this boy because she thinks he's full of demons; that's early in the Edgar administration. The Keystone case.

DePue: I didn't want to get into there, but go ahead.

McDonald: Okay, but what you can do is you can track over time. There are tragedies that happen in the child welfare system, and the one thing that makes it different from anyplace else is that people are going to say, "How could this happen when you were supposed to be keeping these kids safe?" That's the question that everyone asks. "You had a responsibility" —"you" being government.

DePue: And what strikes me about that is these are things that the news media absolutely feast on—

McDonald: Absolutely.

DePue: —and galvanizes public attention. So you get the impression you go from crisis to crisis, and much of the job is crisis management as well.

McDonald: Right, right. And you're trying to figure out, How is it that this could happen? Having done the work, I understand that there are only so many hours in the day. There are recent studies where we've looked at workload—I've done some of this myself—and workers can only have twelve to fifteen cases and do everything that's expected of them, like seeing kids regularly. Well, that B.H. lawsuit we're talking about? Ben Wolf was quoted as saying, "If the agency had followed its rules and regulations, there wouldn't be a lawsuit."

DePue: This is a journalist?

McDonald: No, he's the lawyer from the ACLU who sued the department. At that time, people were saying, "You need more regulations to govern this." He said, "No, if they just followed the ones they had..."

DePue: That's my next question on this particular lawsuit, then. From your impressions of what was going on, is this primarily a managerial, budgetary, or programmatic problem, or what?

McDonald: All three, including political. I'm going to start with the political side. The government did not fully accept its responsibility to act as parent. I may be wrong, but it's my belief that every governor goes through their term, and at the end they say, "You know, the thing I didn't quite connect with was the child welfare responsibility."

DePue: I'll be blunt here. That's a fairly damning statement on Jim Thompson.

McDonald: It might seem that way, but I think this is a condition that every governor—when I talked to my colleagues at the time around the country, they all had the same experiences. They got into the jobs not thinking they were going to be the parents of over twenty- to fifty thousand kids. They're dividing up limited resources saying, Okay, the expectation is the people they hire are going to do the job, and so on. And they hope that sense of accountability is going to roll down to the agency, that everyone's going to feel that sense of accountability.

The failure to understand what it takes to do the job, though, becomes part of why the budget process sometimes fails, because how can it predict a tragedy? If you do predict a tragedy, your people are going to say, "Oh, you're just trying to get more money." I had the budget director, who now I think of as a friend, Joan Walters. I tried very hard as director under Edgar—and I'll just make this one statement and go back—not to ever use the lawsuit and the settlement as a reason for a budgetary issue. I did say in one meeting that, "The ACLU is watching the budget, and I'm going to have to account to them as to how the budget I have will address the issues that we face." Joan Walters just turned to me and said, "I was wondering how long it would take for you to use the damn B.H. lawsuit as an excuse to get more money." Now, it isn't that Joan didn't care; Joan absolutely cared about this, there was no question about it. If you look at her history, you know; she absolutely cared. The

problem is she's sitting there in a different role. Where you stand on issues depends a lot on where you sit. I'm sitting as the director of the agency, the program guy.

DePue: The state's chief advocate.

McDonald: She's sitting over there guarding the fisc—she's in charge of the purse strings. She gives money to me; first, how do I know that's going to solve the problem, and who doesn't get money? And she's representing the governor on that. Of course, the folks on the political side are probably saying, "Why would we waste money on this agency when we could build some bridges, we can pave another mile of highway"—all the other things, the good things in government. I guess I would say—how do I be fair about this? I don't think directors ever did a good job—and I'm going to put myself in this, too—it's very hard to be the director that stands up and says, "Hey, jokers, you're about to get yourself in trouble." You can't say it quite that way. But there are so many people around, and they don't want to believe that they're responsible.

Gordon Johnson fought and opposed the ACLU lawsuit, hired a lawyer who opposed the ACLU lawsuit, Susan Getzendanner, who was a former federal court judge and a partner at Skadden, Arps. I was on the program staff, and I, by the way, was very clear with Paula and others that I frankly thought that this case was a loser and that we needed to settle it. I'm kind of a softy in those things; I figure if there's a good case being made and you have this responsibility, you're either going to spend your money on the lawyers or you're going to spend it on the programs.

DePue: Wasn't part of the lawsuit that there was a certain number of clients that a caseworker could deal with, and that was grossly over that number?

McDonald: Yes. DCFS caseworkers were carrying, at the time, anywhere between thirty-five and seventy-five child cases. The ACLU eventually wanted no more than twenty-five. Twenty-five is actually what the private agencies had by contract, so that was where they got the standard, I suspect. But you're exactly right. The issues of: Is there any capacity in the system to do the work better? And that's only the beginning, so you have enough people—do they know what they're doing? Are they trained? It just begins. All the things about managing a competent system. So that was part of it. But the energy went into opposing the lawsuit. Not that the director, Gordon Johnson, was not trying to pay attention to the agency, but the facts didn't get better, and it got to the point where I was told by Paula that Gordon Johnson had complained to the governor about my excessive involvement in the agency; that I was excessive in that I was questioning his role as director and how he was managing the agency. I'm kind of paraphrasing a whole bunch of conversations. So I was pretty much kind of off to the side there.

DePue: You were told to back off?

McDonald: I was told to back off. But actually, back off not in a huff—yeah, I was told to back off. But not too long after that, Gordon left. He got a job with Hull House. I think that's where he went. I became acting director of DCFS. One of the first things that I discovered from the lawyers—and I'm going to say this for the history because I think it's important—they had found in the many, many boxes, over a hundred thousand pages of discovery, some really horrible findings.

DePue: Whose lawyers are we talking about?

McDonald: DCFS lawyers.

DePue: Okay.

McDonald: One of the things they found was that because the agency did not have sufficient staff to do investigations of abuse and neglect, they engaged in a practice that they legitimized, and they involved everybody in this illegal practice: administratively “**unfounding**” reports of abuse, meaning, a report—it could be from a doctor, from a policeman, from anyone else—of a child being abused. Because they didn't have enough staff and they had a huge backlog of reports, they decided to just read those reports and make the decision in Springfield around a table—“Eh, unfounded”—without seeing the child. The law specifically required DCFS to initiate an investigation and make face-to-face contact to determine whether or not a child was the victim of abuse or neglect. They set up this administrative process, and lawyers were quite concerned that had the ACLU actually gotten to this part of the discovery, it would have had a very adverse effect on the litigation. It was said to me that they thought the judge might actually go right to summary judgment against the department, and you could have had a receiver appointed to run the agency, because in our lawyers' belief, there were several cases where children died as a result of that activity. They believe that it was connected.

DePue: This particular administrative board did it in some cases—

McDonald: It wasn't a board. It was the administrative staff and other staff at the Department of Children and Family Services.

DePue: In this particular process, did they in some cases find that the allegations were true?

McDonald: Oh, absolutely. Well, I assume they found some to be true. I don't know that they did; all I know is that what we found were the ones where it didn't happen. As it was recounted to me by the young woman who became the counsel for DCFS in the lawsuit, Christina Tchen, the associates and other lawyers who were reviewing this were in tears with the stuff they found, and

they were just absolutely convinced that this would mean that the state would lose in the face of it.¹⁸

At that point Bill Ghesquiere was chief counsel for Thompson—and what a wonderful person to work with. Anyway, we just said that we really need to move to resolve this litigation, and we also need to take some... I was told “You really need to fire the people that are involved.” And I said, “You can’t fire that many people.” Chief counsel was involved, authorizing an administrative practice that clearly contravened the law; deputy directors—just everybody. Only one person—(laughs) one person, a QA person, raised an objection, and that’s how we found out about it. The QA person came up and said, “You can’t do this, because we don’t know how to count them because there wasn’t an investigation.”

DePue: “QA” standing for...?

McDonald: Quality assurance. So I came over in June, and we began the process of moving to a settlement; set up a process with the plaintiffs, with the agreement of the court, to have some panels authorized to look at the facts and to come up with a solution that would lead to a settlement.

DePue: And this is at the tail end of the Thompson administration.

McDonald: Right.

DePue: The senior staff and Governor Thompson himself, what were their reactions when you guys approached them with the suggestion to settle?

McDonald: Communication went through Bill Ghesquiere, and because of the facts, they said, “Go ahead.”

DePue: Thompson’s a lawyer; he’s an old U.S. attorney.

McDonald: Yeah, I don’t know his... I’m sure that with what Bill Ghesquiere shared with him—but I was not in that meeting, which was (laughs) just as well. It was important that the lawyers handle it because it was a legal issue, and that was it. So we began the process of working **with** the ACLU towards a settlement and actually came up with a process for doing it that the judge liked, that all the parties liked, involving people from the field, involving experts from around the country and a lot of people from the agency and from private agencies and advocates. The result of that was a proposal for settlement, which Sue Suter, who became Edgar’s choice for DCFS, brought to the governor, and I guess others—Bill Ghesquiere was still there. Governor Edgar said, “Settle the lawsuit,” in what I consider to be one of the most courageous acts, because that is not a popular thing to do.

¹⁸ At the time of this interview, Christina Tchen was Michelle Obama’s chief of staff.

I explain this to my colleagues around the country when they talk about these lawsuits. They spend a lot of time getting out of stuff they know they're going to lose. They say, "Why would you settle a lawsuit?" I said, "The quintessential act of reforming something is to acknowledge the facts about the problem and to agree to any strategy that can change and improve the system that has such responsibilities. It was a classic case of a governor saying, "I may not know everything about this agency, but the one thing I know is that it needs to be reformed, and if this is what it takes, we start here." And that's what he did.

DePue: But as I understand where you started in this story, Governor Thompson had already made the decision to settle.

McDonald: He made the decision to move in that direction. What happened is that we're at the transition here. New director. These series of panels are putting stuff together. They could have talked for years. But they gave enough to the parties—again, I wasn't party to this part of the detail because I was gone, I was out of government at that point. As I understand from the history, which people caught me up on pretty quickly, they decided, "Let's put together an agreement; we have enough understanding of the issues and opportunities from these panels that we can put together an agreement." And that conversation could have gone on for years. You can talk these things to death. But to their credit, the Edgar administration then decided, Let's move to resolve it.

DePue: When you say he's making that decision to move to resolve, here's my understanding of what that means: there is a dramatic increase in funding levels for DCFS because they have to hire a lot more caseworkers.

McDonald: That was part of it, yeah. There had to be a plan for increasing staffing. I don't know the exact budget initiatives, but the other thing that was happening at the very same time was the case loads were just going like that. This is where these tragedies come into play very directly. Every tragedy in child welfare is followed by an interesting phenomenon. For seven days following it, you have more cases that are brought into the system and fewer cases that leave the system, and it has to do with the reactions that everyone in the field has. First of all, reporters start reporting more cases because they feel like, Oh, I saw a case like that; I need to report it. So reports go up. Second, investigators for the department say, "I'm not going to be the person that makes the decision that leads to a death, so I'm going to bring this case in." State's attorneys and judges are going to be far more cautious about saying, "Ah, that's okay; we'll let that kid stay at home." They bring the kids in. And judges and state's attorneys and the department, child welfare community, are much more reluctant to return a child home. The net of that is that you have more kids going and staying—the more kids stay in care, the more kids come into care, the cost to the system balloons from probably twenty-five thousand cases in '88 to over fifty-two thousand in '97. I mean, it's incredible. That growth,

and much of it unnecessary. Had the agency been programmed appropriately all the way along... I have said and I believe that the poor programming, the poor decisions, the consequences of everything that happened here, just cost Illinois taxpayers—and taxpayers around the country because of federal aid—one billion dollars of unnecessary expenses, in addition to the pain and suffering of families.

DePue: One billion per year or for the—

McDonald: One billion for this roughly ten years.

DePue: We're going to get into much more detail on this when we get you into the position of actually being the director of DCFS. But I do want to ask you: at this point in time, with this huge increase that you see in the need for the state to step in and assume responsibility for children, how much of that increase has to do with what's happening with the American family, with the skyrocketing rates of illegitimate births, with these hybrid families—that whole equation?

McDonald: I suspect that has a great deal to do with all of those; those are the consequences of social conditions. We used to track DCFS case loads very closely to AFDC caseloads. That is, AFDC caseloads went up, it would lag six months—there would be an increase in foster care caseloads, which suggested that the economy matters, as families would have a lot of stress in that. And again, the people that would look at it say interesting phenomenon, because if you look at it right now, there have been changes in federal law around TANF—there's five years of eligibility, so it's not like it's endless eligibility. The other thing that's happened is in spite of the economy, there's only been a slight uptick in child welfare populations in the country. It is going up a little bit, but you would think that you would see a greater uptick in that. But I think the economics of the time—and crack cocaine just exploded things.

You had whole family systems that were engaged in the use of cocaine, drugs, and the kids would be found in the middle of that. In the '80s, that was probably the single greatest influencing factor in the growth of foster care. The fact that no one really had successful treatment programs that deal with that issue was just a huge problem. There have been studies done on this issue in Cook County and in Los Angeles. There was a big one done by the Government Accountability Office, done quite a while ago, '97, but it still looked at old populations, kids who had been in foster care for a year or more. Seventy percent of those cases, the parents were involved with drugs and alcohol, and in 75 percent of those cases, the families refused to enter treatment or failed in the first thirty days. Less than half of those that went into treatment completed treatment. So there's the success rate around the availability of treatment; the willingness to go into treatment just wasn't there. That meant the kids were going to stay in care longer. That explosion due to

crack cocaine just brought those caseloads up. Money's part of it—all those other things.

Everything else you talked about—you could talk about single-parent families, absolutely a contributing factor, but not every single-parent family found their kids in foster care. A lot of single-parent families had their kids going to the U.S. Military Academy or to major colleges and doing well. So the problem with generalizations around this is that it's very individual, but it also may be related to other conditions. There were sixteen community areas in the city of Chicago in the '80s that contributed over half of the intake into the Department of Children and Family Services. Sixteen community areas. Now, we're talking, like, Englewood. We're not talking all of Chicago, we're talking **parts** of the inner city, and then there are a few downstate places. East St. Louis. East St. Louis is smaller than the DCFS case load, I think; it's down to next to nothing. It was East St. Louis, and then the rest were in Chicago, inner city. And they had all of the crime, violence, poverty indicators that you can imagine.

DePue: How long was your tenure, then, as acting director?

McDonald: Six months. When Governor Edgar came in, he appointed Sue Suter as director.

DePue: I'll put it to you bluntly in this case, too: Did you enjoy that six months?

McDonald: Loved it.

DePue: But you had these huge challenges you were dealing with.

McDonald: You know, when you say you love—it's a mission. For some reason in my life, this is what I wanted to do; I wanted to be able to serve children and families in communities. And this agency, having been a caseworker, having been around it, having seen it from the budgetary side, from the policy side, getting to know more about it, knowing people in it—this is what I would like to do professionally more than anything else.

DePue: Was it essentially your initiative, then, that took this issue to Thompson and said, "We need to settle this"?

McDonald: Actually the lawyers said, "We are taking this..." I mean, we consulted, but they had an obligation, a duty, to inform chief counsel of this, and they said, "This is what we need to do." I agreed. That was part of the element, you know, "Do you agree?" And yeah, absolutely.

DePue: To give it a little bit more context and background, let me do one piece of housecleaning first.

McDonald: Sure.

DePue: TANF stands for?

McDonald: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. It is the replacement program for AFDC. [Aid for Families with Dependent Children] And it has a five-year limit on benefits for a household.

DePue: TANF, okay.

McDonald: Right, you got it.

DePue: To give a little bit of context to what's going on in the state of Illinois, you've got this ACLU lawsuit that's going to be presented to Governor Edgar at the very early stages of his administration. At the same time—you talked about Joan Walters, his budget director—they're wrestling with a one-billion-dollar budget deficit, trying to fill this hole. That's one of the reasons I asked the question, "This has got to mean a lot more money has to go to DCFS." So that puts all of that into context, I think, in terms of your comment about the courage that it took Governor Edgar to make that decision.

McDonald: Right, and I don't think he ever really got credit for that, that ownership of the responsibility to reform the system by agreeing to move. I don't know how he would view it, but I always thought the most important step in reforming the child welfare system was saying, We are going to bring the litigation under control. It doesn't mean we're going to control it, it means we are going to be engaged in a partnership to change the system. I think the expectation was it would have changed faster than it did, but the conditions that existed, some of the stuff just outstripped anyone's ability to even calculate the cost. Again, this is moving ahead a little bit.

When I came in a little later to DCFS, the caseloads were exploding still, and there were agencies that were providing services for over a year that didn't have a written contract. They would present themselves at the end of the year with a bill for one year's worth of services, "And by the way, I don't have a contract." How that ever happened is... The governor stands in total opposition to that. He says, "You run stuff right." That's the thing about it that I always knew. You run it right, and you do the right thing, and you get it done the right way. He never said it that way, but that's what he said and meant as far as I was concerned.

DePue: Let's get to the point that the Thompson administration ends. Now we're at the end of 1990, into 1991. Where do you go from here?

McDonald: I became the executive director of the Illinois Association of Community Mental Health Agencies.

DePue: That's a mouthful.

McDonald: Yeah, I know. We used to call it IACMHA for short, (DePue laughs) but that oftentimes didn't help either. We represented community mental health agencies and also substance abuse treatment agencies.

DePue: Represented in what way? Were you lobbying?

McDonald: We educated, because we were not registered lobbyists. We had a registered lobbyist.

DePue: So who were you educating?

McDonald: Government officials, member agencies. A big part of it was how do you help raise the bar in practice by sharing technology and information? That's part of what the associations do. I learned a lot about what association execs do and what you try and do when you have a large state and thousands of providers. How do you make sure that every provider does as well as they can? They're, of course, all over the place.

DePue: Was that a job that came to you, or did you go looking for this position?

McDonald: It actually came to me. A gentleman who was on the board of directors knew me. They were looking for an executive director and called me up and asked me if I would be interested. It was in a field that I was interested in, so I said, "I'll try this." I would learn a lot about the community side. And frankly, I needed a job, so... (laughter)

DePue: Who are your clients, then?

McDonald: Community mental health agencies, substance abuse treatment agencies.

DePue: Are these public, or are these private agencies?

McDonald: They're private not-for-profits. They're community-based.

DePue: So this is a completely different perspective for you, is it not?

McDonald: It is. It's the other side of the world, other side of the public-private partnership, which in many ways was another one of those very important experiences.

DePue: So what are the lessons you learned from that time period?

McDonald: Which time period are we talking about here?

DePue: When you're the executive director of...

McDonald: Ah, okay. One of the things that I don't think I appreciated as much—I kind of understood this. I have always been kind of a government person. I believe that working in government and government-based programs was good and

that they could do good things. I knew from my experiences in the Bureau of the Budget there were private agencies out there. My wife actually worked in a family service agency here in town for a while, so I understood that, and I knew a lot of providers. You don't quite understand your reliance on them. The other thing you don't quite understand—because I was always inside the governor's office, the Bureau of the Budget program staff, and we did work with them, with their representatives a lot—is how little government actually communicates well with its partners. We're asking partners to do stuff, we're asking them to fulfill our responsibilities, but we don't listen much to what they have to say about what it takes to do it or what are the obstacles they're running into. We say, "You've got a contract; go do it," and no one pays much attention to that. We don't understand how we can learn lessons from them about how to do the work better. It's an arrogance oftentimes in government—could be shared elsewhere—that leads to incredible ignorance that has just outrageous outcomes. If you are just too smug to not pay attention to the ideas that other people have about how to do the work better, because of where the idea comes from, you are destined to just fail at what you're doing. The work in human services is so complex that it is the rare agency that has a lot of successes, just because of the nature of, if you will, the beast or the demons.

Mental illness, for instance. I mentioned Thresholds. I learned an incredible amount from Thresholds because they chose to challenge the traditional ways of doing the work, not just of the public agency, but of challenging the way that the **private** agencies did the work. And there were other agencies as well that were like that, that offered incredible examples. So you have these pockets of excellence, and what you really want to try and do... I got to know them better because I represented them. I got to go out in their programs, spend time with them, meet their staffs, just really get a sense of what drives them and what are the ingredients of a successful program, and it had a lot to do with leadership. It had an awful lot to do with leadership. Then to see what it would take to engage them in helping as part of the association; could we raise the bar here a little bit in terms of practice, and then take some of those very ideas into government, to the people, the deputy directors and others who had responsibility—in this case in DMHDD; Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities—to try and encourage them to look at other ways to do business and say, What about what they're doing? They would know about some of these programs.

But at that time, I found the Department of Mental Health to be threatened by any movement that would challenge the primacy of a state institution. So even the deputy directors of divisions that had responsibilities for the institutions would look the other way. They would say nice things about them, they would go to conferences, they would fund them, but they never really solved the leverage that existed in effective programs. So they would accept effective programs, honor them in their own way, but they wouldn't then take the next step and say, "Gee, why can't we have all

community-based programs we fund be effective in a similar fashion so that you would then create this huge effective force in the community,” and then say, “Now, if they’re really effective, we should have less demand for our services in the state institution,” and try and begin to make that connection. One of the key principles in every human service is something as simple as continuity of care. Every time you change something, you lose something. Every time someone moves from one setting to the next. You go to a physician, and you tell the physician everything, and they say, “You need to see a specialist.” You go to a specialist. You start all over. Sometimes your files go with you, sometimes they don’t.

I had that happen to me. My physician at the medical school said, “You need to...” I was contemplating surgery on my nose, as I was having a hard time breathing. This is a teaching institution. So I go to the other part of the teaching institution. It took two months to get in there, but I get in there. They have the first half of my medical records. They had nothing in the last ten years at that time, so they had no information about what my doctor said. They said, “Who’s your doctor?” I explained who my doctor is. They said, “It doesn’t matter. Let’s take a look.” It’s kind of like, okay, you know nothing about me, so you start all over again.

In human services, in every one of these areas, it’s a relationship business: the caseworker working with—and it could be a mental health worker, it could be a child welfare worker—but you’re working with families and you’re trying to help people manage their life and improve it, and that’s not easy for someone to accept. It’s not easy to do, and it’s certainly not a science; it is an art form, and it’s built around one primary thing—trust in that relationship. The minute the person trusts you, they’ll listen to you. And you know this in basic friendships. If you trust someone, you can share with them at some point, and if you trust them, you can ask them, “What am I going to do?” If it’s something as fundamental as your relationship with your children or stuff like that, that’s not something people are comfortable talking about, because they’re supposed to nail it. Everyone’s supposed to be good at that. Few of us really are as good as we want to be or think we should be. So the minute you change—this gets back to that continuity of care—the minute someone gains trust, now all the sudden you’re someplace else, you’re starting all over.

In Milwaukee, they did a survey and they surveyed kids. They were trying to find out, What do people think about the system? They were talking about worker turnover as an issue. That’s a huge issue. They had more than half their workforce turn over every year. Well, that’s like going nowhere. That’s like going backwards, actually. They interviewed some kids and they interviewed some workers. This one worker said he went up and introduced himself to this teenager, and the teenager just looked at him and said, “Don’t tell me your name. You’re number ten.” He was the tenth worker he had had

in a few years, whatever it was, and he said, “I don’t even want to know your name. You’re number ten.”

Human service systems are about having continuity in those relationships, so that the trust that exists between the therapist and the client is going to be a foundation for them building some change in their life. All right, so if you’re in the private sector and you can control those conditions—you can control the number of clients, you can actually see them, you can build that trust, you’re there when they need you—that’s one thing. If you’re in the public sector and you’ve got ten times what you ought to have to do the work, you have to pick and choose who you have a relationship with, if anything. If you’re leaving in a year, you process the bills, and you may not even see kids on your caseload, depending on the size. This gap between what ought to exist and what exists to get the work done is really enormous in human services. So part of the role in the association was to try—can we make people aware of that? Can we help people acknowledge that, one, you need to have better practice skills, you need to have the right workforce, you need to have the right number of them, but also can everybody in the field take a look at what they’re doing? That was part of the association job that I really enjoyed, because we would spend a lot of time trying to figure out, How do you get pockets of excellence to exist everywhere in the state?

DePue: Are you talking that part of your job was—you’ve got some private agencies that are doing a superb job and some that are struggling—to teach the ones that are struggling how to do it better?

McDonald: Exactly, and how do you do that? We viewed that as an opportunity of the association through its conferences and through other things that we would try and do. But within the state agency, we thought this is something they should do. Of course, when I’d look at it, I’d say there seemed to be less than enthusiastic interest in doing that.

DePue: From the state side?

McDonald: From the state side.

DePue: What did you see from that perspective as the proper balance between public and private; who should do what and how much of each?

McDonald: I’m going to talk about child welfare. Illinois has a mix of public and private resources. Since ’64 we’ve had a public agency engaged in child welfare, probably before that in some ways, in terms of locally. But the law actually creating the department acknowledged the role of the voluntary agencies; they anticipated that there would be a partnership between the two. From a practical point of view, we’ve always depended on the private sector. The private sector, if you really think about it, is where the good ideas and practice came from and still do, because they can create the conditions to experiment

and learn and teach and mentor. What the public sector has to do is figure out how to take advantage of it. It is having a partnership that is not based on primacy, but it's based in authority, a partnership that's built around accountability and excellence.

DePue: Did you find a lot of these people you're dealing with on the private side had the attitude that they could do it better than the state?

McDonald: Oh, absolutely. No question about it. Not so much in mental health, by the way. On the mental health side, people are more pragmatic. On the child welfare side, there were those that thought—Don Kent, for instance, who was the executive director of Catholic Charities of Chicago at that time, absolutely believed there was no need for the Department of Children and Family Services except to pay the bills; that Catholic Charities should be serving all the kids, and [DCFS] should just pay their bills. He was quite explicit about that, no question about it. Most of his colleagues didn't share that perspective, because they thought if they had all of that responsibility, they would suffer the same outcomes that DCFS did, and they would struggle just as mightily.

What's intriguing is that in the last five years, Catholic Charities of Chicago closed down its child welfare system and got out of the business entirely. One of the finest child welfare agencies in the country, bar none, closed down because of a lawsuit and a judgment against them that was twelve million dollars. The archdiocese paid it. They could not get board of directors liability insurance any longer, so they closed down their program. Now, there's a loss, but it's the other side of that coin. Twenty-five years earlier they have an executive director calling for "Give me everything because we should have it and we're better." Then without everything, but with an excellent program and a lot of support, they suffer a tragedy, eventually lose a lawsuit, and have to make the hard decision to close down the program.

DePue: We started this conversation quite a bit ago with the ACLU lawsuit, and now we've got this particular piece of litigation. Do you find litigation sometimes to be helpful and sometimes to be counterproductive and harmful?

McDonald: The latter one we were discussing was a tort suit for damages against Catholic Charities, brought by Patrick Murphy, who was the public guardian at the time, and it was about a death of a child. Catholic Charities had a judgment entered against them for twelve million dollars. Now, that was not a system-wide lawsuit, but that lawsuit had its own tragedy and horrible implications for the child welfare system, because we no longer have Catholic Charities in Cook County—and I believe Lake County as well, since they are one organization. We no longer have them providing services, and that's a huge loss to what is a strong partnership between the two. I'm not going to second-guess Patrick Murphy. I spent a whole career, it seemed, at DCFS doing that. Patrick sued for just about any reason. I often thought his mantra was, You

need, as a lawyer, to rise above principle. And sometimes bringing lawsuits in the way he did or sharing confidential information with reporters was way out of line, and I think he crossed the line a lot. But that was my personal opinion.

The B.H. lawsuit, on the other hand, and many other—there were other federal lawsuits—were about essential protections of children and families in the system. We have a very active legal assistance bar, in Cook County especially, and they brought a number of these lawsuits that actually helped change federal law. Do I think that they are without merit? Not at all. I think they were with merit in every case. I only wish that there had been no reason for them to have filed those lawsuits, but they have. I mean, there were some that I fought, and there were others where I just said, “You know what? They make a lot of sense.” Some of those lawsuits—including some of Patrick Murphy’s—became central policies in federal policy, like placing siblings together, the right of siblings to have an association with their brothers and sisters if they’re in foster care instead of splitting them apart. At the time, when you’re facing all kinds of problems on we don’t have enough placements, that’s not a thought. I think workers try and do it, but the practical matter is they couldn’t always do it. So this required more attention to making sure it happened. Those are all important lawsuits, but more importantly, they’re important rights that children have and should have. It tells you, you can’t just say, “This is the best I can do; you’re going to have to live with it.” Because when you act as parent, that’s not sufficient.

DePue: In this particular role, was there any development of an understanding, on your part, of the balance between getting grant money from the state to what are in many cases religious organizations, that separation of church and state equation? Was that an issue at all?

McDonald: It came up in one area only, absolutely in one area, and that had to do with the right of a teenager to have access to medical procedures—an abortion, and birth control—that Catholic Charities was opposed to. But they were obligated under federal law, if they had a contract, to permit these wards to have access to those services. So we had to arrange them for Catholic Charities.

DePue: This is probably a good opportunity for us to stop today and to pick up what’s the next step, and that’s moving into government service again in the Edgar administration. We’ll spend quite a bit of time talking about that because you’ve had experiences in both Mental Health and obviously DCFS. So any closing words for today?

McDonald: No, it’s been a lot.

DePue: It was very thorough.

McDonald: Thank you. (End of session #2)

Interview with Jess McDonald

ISG-A-L-2010-040.03

Interview # 3: October 4, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, October 4, 2010. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. This afternoon I'm with Jess McDonald. How are you, Jess?

McDonald: I am fine. Thank you, Mark.

DePue: This, I believe, is our third session, and I think it will be our last session. We've covered an awful lot of territory, but the reason we wanted to do this interview in the first place is because you served as the director of DCFS for Governor Jim Edgar. We haven't gotten there yet, so that's what we'll be talking about today, even though there's a little bit of territory we need to cover before that time. But last time we did get up into the beginning of the Edgar administration, when you were on the private side, if you will. What I'd like to ask you to start with today—and you might have talked about this a little bit already—but tell us about your first experience with Jim Edgar.

McDonald: I knew Jim Edgar when he worked for Jim Thompson. I worked in the Bureau of the Budget at the time he was head of legislative affairs, until he was appointed secretary of state by the governor. But I did not work closely with him except on occasion; I worked mostly with his staff. I got to know him a little bit better through Kirk Dillard and others in his campaign. When he was elected, I was serving as the director of DCFS for a six-month stint at the end of the Thompson administration, so I did have occasion to talk with folks there. A little later, after the changes in government, I was not appointed at DCFS, Sue Suter was. By the way, I want to be clear: I actually supported Sue Suter's appointment. I believe that the governor appoints his cabinet and has to be free to do that. I've known Sue for a long time, so I offered whatever assistance I could provide, which was modest at the time, I'm sure.

Several years later I became the director of Illinois Association of Community Mental Health Agencies, and in that role, we, if you will, educated public officials, legislators, and others, as to the needs of issues in mental health. Two years into the administration there was a change at the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, and the governor asked me to assume responsibility as the director of that department. In that role, I had an opportunity to get to know him much better and know him, frankly, as my boss, as the governor, and me as a cabinet official there. In June of '94, Sue Suter had left; [Sterling] Mac Ryder, who had replaced her, had left DCFS, so they had two quick and short tenures at the Department of Children and Family Services. The governor's office and the governor asked if I would be willing to go back to DCFS, and I said, "Absolutely, without hesitation."

DePue: We're getting a little bit ahead of the story here, so—

McDonald: But that's how I got to know him, in that context.

DePue: Okay.

McDonald: Let me breathe. (laughter) Okay.

DePue: One of the things I wanted to ask you is, from the outside perspective you're kind of a lobbyist; you have this period in your life when you're on the private side of this equation, but you're watching what's going on, I'm sure, in the Edgar administration. What was your impression of the first couple years of his tenure as governor?

McDonald: One of the things they were wrestling with right off the bat was how to actually afford all the initiatives that had, shall we say, accrued in government. One of the things that was very clear about the governor—there were several things. I can give you impressions, and they represent some of the impressions that the people I represented held, too. One, he was viewed as having very high integrity, and that was important even then.

DePue: Did you buy in on that?

McDonald: Oh, yeah, absolutely. One of the things that you just felt when you were dealing with him or his staff in the administration, you would be heard, and if there was a commitment made, it would be honored. If there was an inability to afford doing something, which is more often the case than not, you could still present your case. And on a few occasions, you might prevail, but at least you would get an opportunity, a hearing, on what the needs would be. I think everyone especially liked the fact that he was very principled and a moderate Republican. I think of him as a moderate Republican—fiscally conservative but kind of moderate on social justice issues and balanced. For the people I represented, that was a big deal. They wanted someone that had a connection,

or at least had an openness and a willingness to look seriously at human services issues. There are times when that's just not the case.

DePue: Before you ended up at DCFS, you were the director of the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities. Why did Edgar select you for that position?

McDonald: I'm not certain why he made that particular choice. I can tell you probably some of his staffers recommended me. I had had pretty good experiences in the executive branch on the budget side, a little legislative experience in terms of the legislative staffer. I had some experience in representing community mental health groups. I think they felt that would probably be a good match for the challenge that they were facing, which was trying to get community mental health organizations and other groups that represented people in the community—whether there's developmental disabilities or mental illness issues—to feel like they had someone in the position who understood their specific concerns. So I think that was probably one of the considerations.

DePue: Were you happy to step into the public arena?

McDonald: Oh, absolutely. My career has been built around public service for a number of reasons. One is, I happen to believe that public service is a good career. I think it's an honorable thing to do, it's a necessary thing to do, and I've been fortunate to have worked for, and with, a lot of people that just absolutely exemplify the best of a service, whether it's public service or private sector service.

DePue: Do you remember that first meeting with Edgar where he laid out his expectations for the job?

McDonald: It could be age, but I'm going to tell you, I vaguely remember this. It was a very easy meeting; it was more conversation about, Are you willing to do this? He didn't explain any specific mission or objectives that he had for the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities. He was very concerned at the time that there was a lot of attention in the media about poor quality care in state institutions, and he did say he wanted that addressed. That became kind of the charge from him, to improve the quality of care.

If I might go on just a little bit, one of the things that I explained to the leadership at the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities when I came in. I had a meeting with him, with the superintendents of the state institutions and with the key staff, and they viewed me with trepidation because I didn't come out of the agency. They viewed me as probably being anti-institution and pro-community. That was too hard of a definition. But one of the things I made clear to them is that the governor has one standard of care, and it's the one that I am committed to and you're committed to. I asked folks that ran these institutions, "How many of you would have a loved one,

your loved one, served in the institutions that you or your colleagues run?” None of them would raise their hand. And I said, “That is the standard of care the governor expects: Would we have someone we cared for be served in our own institutions? If we cannot do that, if we would not have our family served there, then how is it we would be satisfied with offering that level of service to others?” We were only going to go for the highest level of care possible. That was generally the message. That was the theme I understood. Mike Lawrence as press secretary was an extraordinary advocate for the issues surrounding community mental health and mental health generally and actually supported the approach we took in setting a high standard.

DePue: What was the situation you found when you went into the directorship?

McDonald: First of all, the institutions operated autonomously. That even gives “autonomous” a bad meaning. They were like fiefdoms. It was incredible. There was no sense of accountability to a state policy about consistent, high-level, high-quality care. That, I believe, is the nature of large institutions like these. Many of these institutions have been around for well over a century, and they had their own history. They supported the economy of small towns throughout the state. The folks who lived there had family, had their parents and their parents before them, who worked in maybe even the same kind of jobs in these communities: in Jacksonville; in Anna, Kankakee, Elgin—just go throughout the state—Galesburg. Illinois had a large number of institutions.

They were all being challenged on the issue of quality of patient care. At Dixon, which primarily served the developmentally disabled but also served some mentally ill clients, there were threats to bring lawsuits against the program. I remember one parent who was interviewed on *Sixty Minutes* saying that his daughter lived there, and he’s a farmer, and he believed that the cattle and the hogs that he raised received better care than his daughter did at the state institution. That was going back to the ‘70s, ‘80s, and it continued into the ‘90s. These large institutions struggled. I think they were some of the most challenging parts of an administration, in that the alternatives to them were few and far between.

DePue: Why do you think the institutions were falling short of their mission?

McDonald: Why?

DePue: Yeah.

McDonald: First of all, they were really understaffed. Staff-to-patient ratios are critical because in many cases you’re having to provide direct-care activities: bathing, toileting, feeding the people that basically are not capable of it, developmental training. For instance, individuals who are developmentally disabled, the mentally ill who are very heavily medicated and don’t receive regular activity on their own, have to have structured activities. You needed staff that were

trained and could actually provide that kind of care and attention. Without it, their conditions would continue to worsen. So that was one of the major issues—they were understaffed. The other is that the settings were so large. You would have eighty people in a—I'll call it a ward for want of anything else. I remember at Dixon, we went up there once when I was at the Bureau of the Budget, and it was just incredible. I think we talked about this in the context of Bob Mandeville—that it was hard for people to even come to terms with just how almost inhumane those settings were. It was almost like locking people up in cages and letting them just feed off the anxiety of each other, without structured activities. There are federal lawsuits that years ago declared you could not do that, and it just takes a while for them to move from state to state to state, but they start the movement, and Illinois was a state that has always been heavily invested in institutions. Making the change to community-based care, residential, and other things, has always been very difficult to do.

DePue: Were you involved in that process? We talked about this quite a bit before in your previous tenure in mental health. Was that trend continuing under your watch?

McDonald: Yes. And we did it a little differently. Early on, in the early '70s and '80s, there were attempts, and they were largely successful, to actually just go in and outright close down a facility. Kankakee State Hospital closed, but what happened? Well, most of the resident went into either the north side of Chicago into nursing homes, or they went into other state institutions like Elgin, and there was not really any strong program for discharge planning, for helping them make the transition to the community. There used to be stories of people given bus tokens and put on their way. Now, I don't know that that exactly happened that way, but there were always tragic stories.

One of the things we tried to do to make the change more incremental was to improve the connection between the community programs, which actually served the same people, and the state institutional programs. So if you're served by a community mental health agency and you have a need to be hospitalized, which does happen very frequently with someone with schizophrenia or depression, the people working with you in the community would be available to help when you go into the state hospital. What we found is that just the opposite was the case. For instance, at Chicago Reed on the northwest side of Chicago, one of the largest state institutions in terms of volume-of-care, we'd have folks coming in and they'd have twenty to thirty repeat admissions in a year. The community mental health agencies that provided services to them would sometimes know they were in the hospital and sometimes not; it would take a while for them to track them down. But even when they would find them in the hospital, all of their clients from this one community would be spread throughout all the major wards; it wouldn't be located in an efficient way of serving.

The other thing that happened was, folks' lives were interrupted. Someone that was mentally ill—had a job, had a job coach, had subsidized housing and was being sustained there—when they were readmitted for going off medication, or something would happen, they'd lose their job, and they'd lose all their supports; which meant that the move back to the community was hard again, and even harder because finding another job or some activity was going to be just not that easy. So the challenge was to try and stabilize these folks, to help them to be able to sustain themselves in the community for a longer period of time before they're readmitted, and then if readmitted, to have a very planful readmission and hospitalization without them losing any of their community connections.

One of the things we were able to do in those years under Governor Edgar in working with some mental health task forces that I convened and with Boris Astrachan, who was the head of psychiatry at the University of Illinois in Chicago—actually just one of the finest psychiatrists in the country at the time; he since has passed away—we were able to get parties to agree on how you might alter the way that children and families were forced to use the mental health system. By that we meant that we needed to make the system just much more efficient: if someone comes in the front door, people would know if this person lived in a certain area, call that community mental health agency and alert them that the police had just dropped somebody off, and make it easier for the people in the community to actually do work in the state institutions as kind of co-therapists—something that the hospital staff objected to initially because they did not want other people looking into the work they were doing. There were just separate worlds.

We had to make the worlds essentially one. We had to integrate those helping systems so there was not this interruption in care. And we had to get people working as a team. We found that by doing that we could do a couple very simple things. One is readmissions into state hospitals dropped dramatically. When you drop the readmissions, you will ultimately end up reducing the total number of people in care, because when someone is readmitted, it makes it more difficult for them to actually leave, so your numbers just keep getting bigger. The other is, you save money because the most expensive day of care is the first day of care when all kinds of tests are run. By building stronger relationships with the community and the state institutions, having them work as partners, we were able to stabilize that population.

At the same time, in saving some of those dollars, we were able to improve the staff-to-patient ratio within the resources that were allocated to us. By being more efficient, by getting better outcomes, we had fewer people that were in the hospital, but we were then able to actually allow the staff-to-patient ratio to be enriched. If you've got a hundred people serving five hundred people, and the next year there's only four hundred people to serve and you still have those same hundred people, you've got a better working set

of conditions. That's what we were after: how to use current resources and get better outcomes. And we got support for that approach.

DePue: What month did you take over as director in 1992?

McDonald: I believe it was March.

DePue: So early in 1992.

McDonald: Right.

DePue: You got started, then, during some really tough times for the budget process for the governor and his team. Knowing the need, was there any more money, or was it flat-lined when you first took over?

McDonald: I think the increases we got were kind of those inflationary increases for utilities or something like that. We made a point from the get-go; we knew there wasn't going to be a lot to work with. Matter of fact, when I came in, the budget was already put to bed. I was working with what was already on the books, or I was testifying on the budget that was already proposed, and we were going to make that work. I just happen to believe—and I believe there are other people in the governor's office who believe—that there is a better way to use the money, and that doing some things like getting better outcomes out of the existing programs was a way to actually improve overall conditions.

DePue: Oftentimes, though, you find yourself in a position where you don't have much control over making those kinds of decisions. Did you have some autonomy? Did you have the power to make some changes, to move money from one line to another, that kind of thing?

McDonald: You do have a limited ability to move money from one line to the other, but the most important thing is to redirect the way that people do business with the 100 percent of the money they get. There were grants that went to community mental health agencies and developmental disability agencies. There were budgets that went to our state institutions. The key was: How were we going to make that money more effective in its use? For instance, having an expectation that community mental health agencies, with the money they receive, will follow their clients, will make sure that they're at the state institutions when one of their clients goes in, to immediately start working with them to stabilize them. And for the state institution, saying, "Here's what we intend to do. We intend that you will make it easy for your colleagues from the community to work with their clients that come into your hospital." We made a lot of practice changes within the system to change the culture. So that instead of it being viewed as an institution and a bunch of agencies, it was viewed as a community system in which the hospital was part of it and the community agencies were part of it. And that redefinition in the business itself is not unusual. In practice, though, it is much more difficult. Trying to change

the culture of the community system and the culture of the state hospital system was probably the biggest challenge to that.

DePue: You anticipated my next question, because institutions don't readily change their culture. You talked before about many of these institutions being fiefdoms of their own. How did you convince people that there was a different way, a better way?

McDonald: Well, the community mental health agencies, in this case, were **anxious** to demonstrate their efficacy. If we could point to larger authorities—the governor and the general assembly and even to the leadership of state-operated facilities—if we community agencies are able to serve these folks well in partnership with you, then doesn't it make sense that we work together? Now, they all knew each other in kind of a professional social way; what they didn't have was a good working relationship. The rules of the road for a state hospital and the community agencies that served their clients there were established by the state hospital administrator. So it's like having the prince making his own rules in each of these institutions. They would make their own rules. We changed that and said, "One set of rules," and we dealt with those one set of rules.

The one thing that I know—knew then, know now—to be an absolute truth, is there's always the belief that this too will pass; this director will soon be gone, and we can outlive these changes. What a lot of people in the state institutions never really got to understand was that there were mounting pressures, even in Illinois, to challenge their primacy legally and clinically. There was also an increased sense of ownership by community agencies of their clientele. When we started to demonstrate that you actually could control the admissions and readmissions into state hospitals, what we were able to demonstrate is that you could actually provide better care for those that really could benefit from it in state institutions, clarify their role, and serve the overall population much better with this partnership. A few of the institutional administrators came to appreciate that. There are some pretty smart folks that were running these places—I'm not trying to minimize that—it's just that they operated within that culture. The culture of the state hospital dominates, and that was a hard culture to break through.

It was supported, strangely enough, by a very strong union workforce. AFSCME organized all of the unions, and they were very threatened by the thought that you would have smaller state institutions. On the developmental disability side we had a number of institutions where we had this rule: **You can't beat clients**. I know it sounds silly to even say it that way, but we had people, who were working for the state, who had physically assaulted and pretty seriously beat up residents of state institutions. When we would go to fire them, we had arbitrators that would say, "No, you've got to reinstate them into the workplace. You've got to use progressive discipline." Our rule was: If you beat a client once, if you do anything like that, that's not permissible, and

that's grounds for dismissal. It was very clear, and our standards were very clear about that. It just could never be done. So the union pretty much understood that you just object to these things and you'll get away with it.

We had a very aggressive inspector general who came in with me, C.J. Dombrowski, who was the former head of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill in Illinois. C.J. used to go with Dr. Ron Davidson, who is still doing work in mental health, and they would do middle-of-the-night visits to institutions. I even did some of them. It's amazing what they would find. We were trying to make these institutions accountable for a higher-level care. There was a lot of resistance to that, and that resistance came from folks who were not going to be challenged about their job. The union was a problem here; the union was a big problem initially. I'm aware of a number of times in which the president of the union went in to approach the governor about having me moved, if not just—they just wanted me off their case. Mike Lawrence told me about that. So they were not happy with our persisting in proceeding with discharge on anyone who abused a client. That was our standard, and we just said, "We're not going to negotiate this one away."

I had problems with that, even with my own staff inside that ran the personnel shop, because they said, "That's not how we do it here." And I said, "Well, we have to do it that way." It got so bad in the case of one institution, the stuff that was happening and continued to happen, and the resistance I was getting from the Department of Central Management Services over this issue; they were pushing back all the time when we would go to discipline on patient abuse issues.

DePue: So CMS handled personnel issues for you?

McDonald: Yes, they did. They actually were responsible for—stuff would go up through them; they would have to approve it, and they also managed a lot of other things. We had just basic disagreements here. It got to the point where I had a friend who was working a lawsuit, who was an advocate, a monitor in another lawsuit and had friends at the Department of Justice; I told them, "I would like the Department of Justice to get involved, to get interested in this, because I don't think I will ever be successful, nor will the state be successful, in controlling patient abuse issues unless there is some intervention."

DePue: Abusing a patient is against the law, I would think.

McDonald: It is.

DePue: Was that not pursued?

McDonald: You'd have to go to a local state's attorney to file the charges. These are institutions that live in communities. They're the bread and butter of community, so it'd be like going to the Logan County—and I'm not saying they wouldn't. I know it had never been pursued. You'd have to file a police

report, you'd have to have someone investigate, and that would go on. When we took personnel actions, we could at least control for the person being there while we're going through this. We could suspend them pending discharge, and at least they wouldn't be in the workplace.

DePue: Was part of the challenge trying to have enough evidence to prove the abuse?

McDonald: For us, we believed we had sufficient evidence to prove it. Actually, on the patient abuse issues, that was not the case. What we ran into was when we'd lose them, we'd lose them at arbitration because of the way arbitrators are selected. They're a panel that's selected: one by the state, one by the union, and then one by both. So if you want to be an arbitrator in the future, you don't tick off people; you try and mediate more than arbitrate. In this case, we were having these come back to us saying, "You didn't use progressive discipline." And progressive discipline would be what? When you've beat a client? You're not supposed to do it, period. So there may be honest disagreements between the union and others about this issue except that these were such vulnerable populations that you just could not ignore it and say, "That's all right; just don't do it the next time."

DePue: Your tenure was pretty short, so in essence, those who were saying, "We'll just wait this guy out and we'll get somebody else we can deal with better" might have been absolutely correct, because they've been around for a long time. The question, though, is: Did you see some improvements?

McDonald: I believe there was movement towards an improvement. I've actually had some people suggest that was a bright spot in mental health reform in Illinois. If so, I think it was more like a strobe light than it was anything else. It's a **flash** in a **moment**. But what it did do is start—and it wasn't me. One of the things I've always benefited from was the wisdom of others. I found I was able to bring together all kinds of people in large working groups to say, "Let's chart a path for the future of these systems—one for the developmental disabilities, one for mental illness—and let's start shaping how we ought to talk about the future," knowing that that's going to transcend any political administration. But enough was done, enough progress was made in a couple of years—thanks to the support of the governor, too. We made some difficult choices, and he went with them. We didn't close any institutions, but we changed their focus, we changed their nature, and we gave them futures that they didn't have before. We made them more relevant to what was going on, and we improved the partnerships between the community and a sense of mutual accountability. The institutions needed to have the community accountable to them and vice versa, and that was not something that existed before. And the parties all agreed. That's an easy give, if you will, if you're sitting at the table; it's just harder when you go back home. But we made everyone agree, That's where we're going.

DePue: What I want to do now is change directions a little bit, because we're at the point in time when we can get to a discussion about DCFS, which is where this has been leading to all along. But let me set the stage a little bit here. We've talked about some of this already. Edgar comes in, and there's a massive budget deficit, but a couple years before that time, in 1988, there had been this ACLU lawsuit against DCFS where, again, it was a matter of the numbers just weren't adding up; there were way too many cases for those caseworkers to work with, so a severe problem that was going to be faced. You talked about the courage that Governor Edgar had shown initially, of settling that lawsuit and beginning, even in a budget crisis, to make some improvements there. But DCFS was one of those areas where you have very high-profile cases that capture everybody's attention, and there was a string of them back in the early '90s. We don't need to dwell on it too much, but just get your reaction to a couple of these.

April 19, 1993, news comes out that there's a three-year-old by the name of Joseph Wallace who is hung by his mother after being returned to her from Joseph's foster home. It puts a bull's-eye right on DCFS because the question is, How could DCFS have ever allowed this young boy to go back to the mother when they knew how troubled she was? Any response to that one?

McDonald: Yes. First, absolutely a tragedy. A number of things happened there. One is the mother had an extensive mental health history which the courts were not aware of or were not made aware of. Two, the case was served by a private agency, not by DCFS caseworkers, but DCFS, appropriately so, was held accountable.

DePue: When you say "served," what does that mean?

McDonald: DCFS's caseload in Cook County is serviced by private agencies for the most part. The kids in foster care: 70 percent of those kids, are served by private foster care agencies like Lutheran Social Services and other agencies—at the time, Catholic Charities of Chicago, which has since gone out of business in terms of child welfare. So they were served by private agencies that DCFS had contracts with, but DCFS did not actually provide the service. So in this case, rather than [DCFS] making an error, an agency that had some experience with persons with a disability was actually providing the service. What this highlighted, though, is if you are an agency that provides these services, if you choose to provide the services through subcontractors, you are as **accountable** in the public's eye as if this were your own caseworker. But it was a case about very complex issues that were overlooked, mental health issues.

DePue: The next one that really caught the public's attention, and I think most of this was (laughs) because of the *Chicago Tribune*, understanding here's an important story but also a story that sells newspapers for them. This is 1994, in February, when the paper reports on the police finding a building in the Chicago area, where there were nineteen children living in a cold and filthy

apartment with six different mothers in there. And, as sometimes happens, this particular case got a name of its own; these were the Keystone Kids.

McDonald: The Keystone Kids, absolutely. I was at Mental Health when this case came up, and I remember talking to Mac Ryder about this. He was the director at the time. A DCFS investigator went out to this setting but could not gain entrance. The Chicago police then went out, but they were accompanied by, I think, news cameras from most of the major stations and print media as well, and they found the kids in full view. I mean, the public had just an amazing view of this. Now, that's the first part of this story. The second part of the story is that the next morning, the governor's in—and he may want to correct this, but here's what I am told. He was in Washington, DC, for an NGA [National Governors' Association] meeting, and former Arkansas governor, now President Clinton, addressed the group, I think by television or something. He referred to Illinois as the Calcutta of child welfare when talking about domestic issues, and he referenced this case. For whatever weird reason, the state department, DCFS, had failed to tell the governor, alert them with a morning report or whatever, and say, "Guess what? You've got something brewing here." I don't know how it is that they didn't do that. I don't know if it was because of the time and the time zones. He's in DC. Oh, we'll get it to him right away.

But there was a mentality at DCFS—this case exemplifies this—having a series of lesser tragedies, all substantial but not in numbers, DCFS could circle wagons faster and tighter than **anybody**. Custer would have survived. Custer would have survived if he could have circled this fast. They would get defensive. Unfortunately, they wouldn't get the information, so they couldn't actually offer explanations, provide facts that might respond to it. But that was an example here. They did go out. Eventually there were twenty-six cases of kids in this when they tracked down the rest of the kids in the family system. That case was kind of a centerfold case in *Newsweek*, *TIME Magazine*, and it was that way until the year I left, in '03. We would get annual requests from *Newsweek*: What has happened to these kids? Everywhere I would go, when you'd ask about cases, people would say, "Oh, yeah, we know that case." The Wallace case, the Keystone case, everybody knew them, nationally. And it wasn't just them; there were others that came along.

DePue: I can tell you that Governor Edgar very well remembers that meeting out in Washington, DC, where President Clinton embarrassed him in a very deep way.¹⁹

¹⁹ Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, May 28, 2010, 3. Unless otherwise indicated, all interviews cited in the notes were conducted as part of the Jim Edgar Oral History Project, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL.

McDonald: Yeah. We've never shared a word about that, never shared a word about that meeting. I wasn't his director of DCFS at the time, and I would expect that I would have been gone that next day for just the failure to have told him about this. Which actually is a tribute to his patience that he endured embarrassment. He should have had the opportunity to have known about it.

DePue: 1994 is an election year for the governor. It's also the year when one of the issues that was garnering lots of attention, yet another child welfare issue, was the Baby Richard case. A little bit different in the nature of it, but it was a huge public issue. It was something that, as the governor himself explained, people cared about. Why don't you lay out for us what was going on in the Baby Richard case?

McDonald: The Baby Richard case was one of those very strange cases that involved adoption law, termination of parental rights, and so on, but did not involve DCFS except on the back end when we'd get calls about this. This was about a young woman who signed away her rights to her child, Baby Richard. It was adopted by a family, and I apologize, I don't recall their name, but they were a really wonderful couple, and they were totally committed to this child. Then the biological father reentered the case. He was never appropriately noticed, meaning that the biological father retained legal rights, but they never really terminated his rights because he was not noticed. So when it went to court, all the way up the chain—and I believe this went to the U.S. Supreme Court—the court declared that he was not afforded his rights-to-notice as a biological parent. He was unaware of the child's birth, I believe.

DePue: Um-hm.

McDonald: So in the end, the courts ruled that Baby Richard had to be returned to him.

DePue: I think this is the state court.

McDonald: The state court, okay. In the meantime, though, he had reconciled with the baby's biological mother, who was no longer the legal mother. We would, on a fairly regular basis, receive calls at the hotline. Bob Greene was a reporter who was tracking this, among many others, and he would urge people to call the hotline and say, "This has got to be neglect." Of course, they weren't neglecting. At that point in time it wasn't what you would call neglect. But what it did raise was all of the issues about best interest of the child versus the parent, all of the issues about how do you make sure that when you do an adoption, it is not reversed, because the pain, the anguish of reversing it is irreparable. So it led to significant legislative activity that I think the governor and Mrs. Edgar supported actively and in appropriate ways.²⁰ But I think they clearly encouraged advocates, "Let's straighten this out so we don't have to deal with this again." It did not actually involve DCFS, but it highlighted in

²⁰ See Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, June 18, 2010, 738-746, and Brenda Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, September 14, 2010, 63-65, for their discussion of the Baby Richard case.

the public's mind just how complicated the adoption process is, when they could get rational. But it **incited** so many people early on in terms of just the passions about, How could the child's best interests be trumped by a father who's never known the child?

DePue: So you've got the Keystone Kids, which is [gaining] national attention throughout the United States; the Baby Richard case, which Governor Edgar said no issue that he dealt with during his entire administration captured the public's attention and emotions like the Baby Richard case. 1994 you've got the election year, and somewhere in this process, the governor decides to call on you to take over DCFS. How did that happen?

McDonald: After the Keystone case—Mac Ryder was the director—I'm not exactly sure what was going on. A couple of things happened, because I did talk to Mac the day he resigned. We happened to share a cab ride into downtown. The governor—

DePue: What month would that be?

McDonald: I'm going to say it had to be May. I think it was May of that year. Jim Reilly and Jim Montana, two close advisors to the governor, had—

DePue: Reilly was the chief of staff at the time.

McDonald: Yes, he was. They had persuaded Anne Burke, currently Justice Burke, a very talented attorney and just an extraordinary human being, to come on the governor's staff as special counsel for children. I think they viewed it as an opportunity to bring more positive—kind of highlight some opportunities for DCFS rather than seeing it totally as a liability, and she had a lot of visibility in the community, she knew the courts. There were a lot of problems with the juvenile court, and one of the first things Anne Burke was involved in was trying to improve the relationship between the juvenile court and DCFS. Now, this had just been announced. Mac Ryder had told me he did not think it was such a good idea and he was going to talk to Reilly. I won't share all of the conversation, but the bottom line is that I think as a result of that meeting, he offered his resignation and it was accepted.

So then they began the search for someone to replace him. I'm not privy to all the people they talked to; I know they talked to a number of people, and I've run into some of them in Washington who say, "Oh, yeah. They asked me to take that job. I wasn't going to take it." It was really interesting. One guy who had a high-level job at HHS [Health and Human Services] said that. But Memorial Day weekend, actually the Thursday before, I was asked by the governor's office staff, one of his top assistants, would I be willing to do this? I said, "Give me the weekend," as I just had to process this with my wife because we both knew what it would take in terms of time. Being the head of Mental Health at the time was a saner job in some respects.

DePue: A saner job?

McDonald: A saner job because it did not have the attention and the demands of DCFS. DCFS was going to be a twenty-hour-a-day, 365-a-year, and more. There was going to be no personal life at DCFS. I knew that from a previous stint there, I knew it from what they were facing and what was going to be faced coming up, and so my wife and I had to reach an understanding about, Is this good for us and our family?

DePue: I'm going to read you a quote here from the *Chicago Tribune*. This was 1993, so a year before, but this is before all the controversy they face in 1994. The *Tribune* described it as "the poster child of government indifference and incompetence."

McDonald: Yeah.

DePue: Is that what you found when you got there?

McDonald: I'm not sure I'd say it exactly that way. The short answer is yes, but it's much more complicated. I think people struggled with leading the organization because they weren't quite sure where they were going. I think leadership struggled with a direction and what were the choices. They were struggling with burgeoning case loads that went back to the late '80s and the advent and explosion of crack cocaine in the streets. So caseloads were just exploding out of their control, but folks were not—I say "folks," but I think leadership, even the field leadership and Sue and Mac, were struggling with even understanding, Where's it coming from and why? Are there alternative ways—is there anything we can do, any kind of a direction that can be set here?

DePue: What do you mean, "Where is it coming from?"

McDonald: Why do we have such a huge increase in this? When you have increases in your budget to the extent that DCFS was having increases in their budget—I mean, they were enormous. One year, a 32 percent increase in their general fund budget—**32 percent**. This is when the state's general revenue fund was increasing between 3 and 5 percent, so it was sucking the oxygen out of the air and the money out of the budget to a lot of people's way of thinking. When I came in I found that we had people delivering contracts that had not been signed, where organizations had been in business for a year and had been providing service, had been paid for a year's worth of foster care services. We had two supplemental appropriations when I first went over in '94, and there were only three weeks before the end of the fiscal year. But I was greeted with a supplemental request of over a hundred million dollars at that time, and it was for these we-can't-count-the-kids problems, and there were more kids out there than we thought. So you have this explosion in the field, and you've got

a system that the hurrier it went, the behinder it got. I mean, it could not think clearly about stuff.

It also was a system that managed in the field; this is another one of these organizational culture issues, and I see it in other states. The regions at DCFS had this deal: they were going to try very hard not to give you bad news as the director, and they were going to try to dampen the leadership's enthusiasm for setting high expectations because we just didn't have people to do the work. In turn, within their own organizations, they would dampen enthusiasm that relief is on the way. There is no cavalry coming to caseworkers. They would make that point and say, "It's not me, it's just that it's not there," so that their job was to kind of moderate demands from the top and demands from the bottom. If the top wanted better performance, caseworkers would tell you, "You better give me something to work with." The people in the middle couldn't deliver anything satisfactory in terms of messages or production to either side. They couldn't help caseworkers, and they couldn't help leadership. All the regents then said, "Then we're in this on our own. We're going to have to stick this out and figure out what we're doing," very much like the state institution leaders, the person in charge or the superintendent of a state hospital. They didn't view themselves as having any friends, so what they would try and do was control their own kingdom and keep everyone out.

The private agencies viewed DCFS as an opportunity. The opportunity was, If we got all the cases, we get all the money, we get rich, and we can do it better. There were some smart private agencies that said, "Wait a minute, you don't want to jump into that; that's like jumping into a briar pit, because you are not prepared to deliver to the extent that it's going to be expected." But there was a very large group of private agency execs and associations that said, "DCFS, you should be out of this business; give it to us." So there just was seemingly nothing going right for DCFS. Inside, I found no one responsible for anything. Everyone agreed there was a problem, but no one was accountable for anything; it was always somebody else's fault. The other thing is that no one had a solution, and I think they grew tired of offering solutions because they felt like they just got shouted down.

I've got to tell you, I only brought a couple of people over when I went over there, so I used all the same people that were there, got them in places where I thought they would do best, and we set in place very clear expectations that there would be accountability from top to bottom.

DePue: Before you go any further, I wanted to ask you, did you have a meeting with Governor Edgar when you took over this job? What were your marching orders from the governor, assuming you did?

McDonald: There was a meeting with the governor, and I had several meetings with Felicia Norwood, who was his assistant for human services, and then

obviously I talked to the attorneys. My wife and I—the governor requested that we both meet. So Jayne came with me, and we had a very nice conversation with him. The governor, I will tell you—there was nothing frenzied about him. My recollection of him is that he was just always calm. But it's not without concern. He's intensely concerned, but he didn't so much as share any marching orders about the agency. No one said, "Here's my plan; I want to get from here to here." The governor pretty much—and this is how I knew him throughout my term with him—is that: There are overall constraints; we need to live within those constraints. I want to see child welfare doing well, just like I want to see mental health do well. He had, I would say, just a higher level concern that we have to do this right. You're the person to do it, and I want you to do that for me.

DePue: Do you recall if he phrased it this way or this message came across, that we have to put the child's welfare above the parents' welfare?

McDonald: He may have said that, but I don't recall it exactly that way. The reason I say that—I know he feels that way, and it was never—I think some of that comes from seeing the tragedies and Baby Richard. At DCFS, I think the concern was, even before I got there, and I think his concern, was that our job is first, we have to keep them safe. If they come to our attention, we've got to keep them safe. Can we at least do that? Keeping a child safe trumps just keeping him with the family. I used to use the expression "rescue fantasy." There were folks who believed, at all costs, keep the child with the family. I agreed with the governor that the first and primary mission of DCFS was to keep a child safe who has been reported to the state as a victim of abuse and neglect. That was our number-one job. If we could return the child home safely, then that was the next order of business, but if you could not do that, then you had to find the child a good, safe home and a permanent home, and that's where the best interest issues really came into being.

DePue: I'm going to set the stage a little bit more here in terms of exactly what you faced when you got to the job. This is right off of a website I found entitled "Jess McDonald and Associates: The Illinois Story." (laughter)

McDonald: Okay.

DePue: So this is something you guys have put together. Here's what was going on in the system at the time you took over: "The number of children in substitute care had doubled in only a few short years. On the average, children came into care more often and stayed longer than any other state. Caseloads were four to six times the recommended national standards. Turnover ranged from 40 to 80 percent in both the public and private sector. Staff and private agencies were scapegoated for system failures. Crisis management directed toward organizational survival replaced concern for performance and quality improvement." So, having put all that together, and then the Chicago

Tribune's indictment of the entire agency, you had your hands full. Where do you start?

McDonald: Sometimes being so far down is an absolute blessing. Everyone agreed that this agency could not continue to go in the same direction, but many thought it could not get any worse than what it currently was. I happened to know a lot of people in the field and was absolutely convinced that the people in the field were good people. And I knew people in the private sector, because many of them were also community mental health agencies.

DePue: Was that kind of a carryover from your early days in DCFS as a caseworker, where you loved that job?

McDonald: Yes, absolutely. No one goes into this work under these circumstances with the intent to not do their job and not keep a kid safe. There are workload studies that have been done in recent years that suggest that you cannot do all that's expected of you as a caseworker if you have more than twelve to thirteen children on your caseload. We had workers with anywhere between fifty- and a hundred-child cases. You don't even get to see them once a month. It's impossible to do the work. Is it surprising that something goes wrong? If the expectation was the caseworker was going to stand in the way but they weren't even able to show up because they had so many cases, then who do you blame for that? Well, the B.H. lawsuit required caseloads of no more than twenty-five child cases, and that is still their standard today.

DePue: The B.H.?

McDonald: B.H. That's the ACLU lawsuit that was filed in '88. It was settled by the governor in '91. But they struggled to meet that standard. We got to it eventually, but even at that, that was a significant, significant problem. One of the things lacking, I thought, was a sense of direction. Where in the world is this agency going? Within a week, I declared that DCFS will become an accredited agency; it will meet the standards of the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children, which was generally an accrediting body for private child welfare agencies that could control their workload and could control the demand for services. I did that because we needed a blueprint for the state that said, here's who we are, and if we aren't that today, that's who we will become, and here's the period of time within which that will happen.

So accreditation became the blueprint for the change of the organization—not just the structure of the organization but the culture of the organization—from an agency that was engaged in malicious compliance to almost noncompliance, to one that was committed to excellence. That called for everybody to play a role in that, including the governor's office and all the management staff and supervisors and so on. It was a significant endeavor, but I just was absolutely convinced we could do it.

So we announced that we were going to do that. This is one of those things where you make an announcement, and you don't shop around for a vote because no one was going to agree we needed some more things to do. But we did need a vision, we needed to know where we were going, and we had no common theme for how we organized. The public and the private agencies in this state had to be operating from the same vision, and that was a high-quality organization that provided high-quality services, especially given the nature of our job. Children should not have to worry, when they come into the system, about whether they're being served by a public agency or a private agency. No matter who serves them, it should be a high-quality organization. Accreditation did that in my judgment, so we pursued that and eventually the entire system became accredited—public and private.

Along the way, I did say things to our own offices like, "If you fail to become accredited, you will not have the work. We will not have children in this system being served by organizational units that cannot meet accreditation standards, national best practice standards. We are giving you the resources." We did, and the governor supported that. We said, "You're going to have to deliver, and you're going to have to be able to demonstrate you can meet this standard of quality."

DePue: Did that apply both to private agencies and some of the public offices in various parts of the state?

McDonald: Every part of the state, everybody, public and private. Every one of DCFS's offices had to be accredited; every one of the private agencies that had a contract for foster care services had to get accredited. We said, "You've got four years to get there." That, by the way, did a number of things. One, the union just hated me for about thirty minutes until they found out—well, no, it was a longer meeting than that. But in this case, we said supervisors are going to have to have Master's degrees; they're going to have to be trained to be supervisors. The most important management position in an organization is that of supervisor. So we said we were going to send them back to college. We're going to send them back to get their Master's degrees if they don't already have them.

DePue: "Send them back" meaning that the public would pay for it?

McDonald: We did. We had federal funding. We managed to figure out a way to pay for it in a very creative manner that took advantage of federal reimbursement plus the indirect match of the universities, and it didn't cost us any state money to do it.

DePue: Did they retain their job as supervisor while they're—

McDonald: They did, and we gave them release time so they could attend school. Everyone participated. Every office had somebody going back. It is amazing

what happened to the organization. The supervisors: there are points in the crisis for them, and, Could I get accepted back into school? Do I really want to be a supervisor? There were some that said, "I don't want to do this. I don't want to have to go back to school." Almost all of them went back to school.

DePue: What happened to the ones that said they didn't?

McDonald: They had other jobs. We had other jobs, and we figured out how to give everybody comparable responsibilities or something that would be a good fit for them, and that worked out really well. Once supervisors got admitted, they felt good. Then they said, "Ooh, now we have to go to school." So after their first quarter or semester, if they did okay, they were feeling good. Then it became the balancing act: How do I balance school, work—because I still had responsibilities there, even if it's a reduced amount—and family." All of them managed to do it. That was one of the most rewarding things to do, to see good people have these opportunities and respond. They went back and they just spread the word. They became the new cheerleaders, if you will, for changing the organization, because they had fought the battle, they had taken on a very tough assignment, and they started leading their own staff in a different way than they were led—and in a different way, perhaps—than they used to lead. But it was actually very rewarding, and you could see it in the progress of the agency.

DePue: But that doesn't solve the problem of the horrendous caseloads.

McDonald: Right. We introduced something called performance contracting. Performance contracting was based on the notion that instead of just giving money to provide a service, we were going to have contracts with people. We did include as part of performance contracting the services provided by the state agency staff, but the expectation is, that as a result of having a contract, we expect that kids will actually have some permanency outcomes, that they don't stay in foster care forever. You don't stack them like firewood and keep them because you just keep making money; the reason that you were working with them is you have a federal and state purpose that says your job is to find them a permanent home. As a result there were some agencies that lost their contracts, because there were sanctions and rewards. There were some DCFS offices that were downsized—mostly by attrition—because they failed to perform. But all in all, I'd say almost all the DCFS offices, save for one region that struggled the most, were very successful in performance contracting, and getting good outcomes. And the private agencies for the most part produced. There were some that did not.

Now, I don't want to spend a lot of time talking about the actual formula and stuff like that, but we actually sat down with the people that led; we had regional administrators and private agency executives and program managers sitting in a room in which we did one simple exercise: We asked them the simple question, "How long do you think kids should stay in foster

care?” You go around the room, you roundtable it and have people say, “Here’s what I think.” Is it one year, two years, four years, five years? They say, “Oh, no, one year at the most, maybe less.” So then we asked them, “How long do you think they do stay in foster care?” That’s when everyone realized the gap between what their ideal was and what the reality was. The reality was that the median length of stay was four years, with some kids staying much longer, some staying shorter, but the median length of stay was four years, and in Chicago, longer.

When we shared with agencies a non-identifying median length of stay for each agency that had a foster care contract, they were amazed to see that there was no way they could identify themselves in that unless they knew themselves. Most people were totally unaware of their own performance. What we decided to do was make people aware of their performance on the most fundamental basis. Can you keep kids safe? Can you get them to a permanent home—adoption, guardianship, or reunification? Most of our permanencies in the early years were adoptions. Adoptions went from—I think the first year I was there it might have been 961 adoptions, and maybe four or five years later we may have had one year where we had close to five thousand adoptions.

DePue: Governor Edgar certainly addressed this issue and described the adoption laws when he became governor as—I don’t know that this was his word, but I think it would be fitting—byzantine.²¹

McDonald: I think the Baby Richard case highlighted the “best interest” challenge. That applied to child welfare cases as well, where judges would act arbitrarily throughout the state, setting the standard of what they thought was best interest. If the judge didn’t believe in adoption, there wouldn’t be an adoption. If a judge believed we weren’t going to terminate the rights of parents even if they had disappeared for years and there was no reason to continue their parental rights, and that freeing them up was a necessary step to finding an adoptive home, there were judges opposed to doing that. So we had to deal with the reluctance in the system, which was in part, I think, influenced by failure to understand, what does “best interest” really mean?

The Baby Richard case in many respects really focused not just the public, but all the actors in the child welfare system—the judges, state’s attorneys, legal advocates, and others—on this issue, Does “best interest” mean anything? And if it does, most judges have a Potter Stewart approach to it: “I’ll know it when I see it.” But nonetheless, they started sharpening their views about best interest, and they actually would pay more attention to this. And we would have to, as a matter of clinical practice, be able to speak more specifically to, what does this child really need, what’s in this child’s best interest, instead of just throwing the words out there. I think that the Baby

²¹ Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, September 9, 2010, 924-927 and 933-934.

Richard case and everything around it really focused child welfare in Illinois on this whole term of “best interest.” It didn’t resolve it. It’s not an easy answer; it’s not cut-and-dry; it’s not one way or the other way. It is something that just assumes that you have to treat the child’s needs as an equal to the parents’ rights, almost property rights, to a child, and there has to be a balance there; you can’t just assume a parent’s rights to a child because biology trumps a right to having real parenting.

DePue: You mentioned before there was one region that did not necessarily respond well, that struggled. What was the region, and what were the reasons why?

McDonald: There was a region in Cook County. It was in the central part of our configuration. They had—

DePue: Did that include Chicago?

McDonald: Oh, it was Chicago. It was primarily the Near West Side of Chicago.

DePue: So the Near West Side in the 1990s is the most crime-ridden gang-infested part of the city at that time.

McDonald: Well, it’s interesting because in this case, this goes out to the western suburbs, too, so it had Westchester, Oak Park. You can take Cook County and you can slice it into half a pie, into three sections, and you’ve got a rough equivalent of our north, our central, and our south region. But a lot of kids, when they came into care, would then go into foster homes; more than half the kids went to live with relatives. Well, the relatives of the families that lived in the central part of the city actually had moved to the southern suburbs, the western suburbs; they’d moved out of the inner city.

Your observation is absolutely right on. Sixteen community areas in the city of Chicago and one downstate accounted for more than half of the intake into the child welfare system forever, and they were the most impoverished of communities. I mean, everything you would expect would influence it—drugs, alcohol, high unemployment. And forget unemployment—there are people there, they haven’t been in an employment statistic ever. Crime rate, poor housing, absence of public services. Those areas were responsible for most of the intake into the system. Kids didn’t always go to live in those communities, and parents were highly transient in that they would pick up and move. They were constantly moving. I mean, “It takes more than a village to take care of a child”—you needed a village that was in Winnebagos if you were going to keep up with a lot of these families.²² I don’t know if I answered your question about this, but those highly—I used to call them endangered communities—that living there was a high-risk

²² McDonald is playing off the phrase “it takes a village to raise a child,” which was popularized by Hillary Rodham Clinton’s 1996 book *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*. Winnebago is a major manufacturer of mobile homes.

proposition for any child or family. Several years ago the *Tribune* would follow these kids that were killed every week in these inner city communities, and it was kind of like drive-by shootings, honor students killed by drive-by shooting. We're not used to that where we live. But that's where most of DCFS's cases came from.

DePue: Some of the changes that you needed to implement, did they require legislative action?

McDonald: Actually, no. We chose an administrative course for the most part, because you can spend a lot of time trying to get a legislative imprimatur for doing something, or you can just do it; if it doesn't require legislation, then you're wasting a whole lot of people's time. The other thing is that sometimes it needs change, and four years later, you might not need to have a legal structure that handicaps continuing change. For instance, accreditation. We made it a contractual obligation; we addressed it that way, and in doing that, we were able to do that through our contract process rather than doing it through a legislative change. No one objected to it. In fact, most people appreciated the clarity around what we expected. There were other things—performance contracting. The biggest legislative piece of that is making sure that the appropriations supported it, making sure you had sufficient resources and you could provide justification for the approach and so on. There were legislative changes we made, for instance, the kinship care, in which we clarified the basis by which you could come into DCFS to get more money than if you were going to go to AFDC or what became TANF. We did that almost immediately, too, to right-size relative care—that's the way we referred to it. That required legislative action, and it was supported. The governor's office, the governor himself, was just incredibly helpful in helping us marshal that through, but it was critical to changing the nature of the agency. You can't just have DCFS become the new check-payer for income maintenance; there is an agency for that.

DePue: Did your job involve going before the legislature and testifying?

McDonald: Oh, yes. Yes.

DePue: What was that experience like?

McDonald: It depends on how you approach it. I felt that the staff that worked for me needed to understand that they were going to feel my pain and that I was going to feel the pain of legislators and the governor's office first, because that's where you go first. The internal budget process is crystal clear about expectations. One of the first things I ran into was when one of the liaisons in the governor's office and the head of Central Management Services at the time—it may have been Steve Schnorf—sent over a summary document about the performance rating of management staff at DCFS. They took the previous year, all the evaluations that were done on staff who were managers, and

here's an agency that by everyone's terms was the poster child for all the bad things that could happen. Well, guess what their evaluations looked like that year? No one needed improvement and no one was unsatisfactory; everyone was a little bit like Lake Wobegon, above average or better. And they were asking me, "Can you explain the absence of a normal distribution of performance in an agency that seems to be doing very poorly with regard to performance?" So I just brought that back and said to the management staff, "Here's our problem, folks." Now, I explained it to the governor's office. I call it combat pay. Everyone feels like it's so bad that the fact we're still here, we should be given something for it, some recognition for it.

When I went back to the staff I said, "Guess what? We can't do this anymore. Until we start performing, we're going to be paying close attention to the performance evaluations. It was really interesting: No one ever looked at that stuff before. I'm not blowing my own horn or whatever, but I really do believe that no one ever looked at budget information as the director because they had budget directors. I was more of a staffer who became a director, and I used information. I just believed that information was powerful, no matter where you went. I used this very information to point out to the staff in the field, who had leadership positions, that they had an obligation to actually get performance from the organization that matched the evaluations they had been giving. My mother would have called it shame-based leadership. (DePue laughs) But in part, when the public believes you're doing such a poor job, when everything that you see suggests it, then unless you have an explanation for it, you probably have to agree that the performance is less than desirable. I believe the public really never understood all the demands the department was facing, and the department couldn't communicate it to the governor. I don't believe the governor ever got a fair explanation from his previous directors as to all the demands they were facing and why they were seeing the kind of things going on they were seeing going on.

This is not about the governor; I think it's about when people get into these jobs, you're asked to just make sure things are done right. Unless you have a governor who likes to micromanage and say, "I'm going to come over and manage your agency today, and let me help you," which is not a good style. Governor Edgar was someone who gave you lots of leeway to manage but had a bottom line: Get good results; live within our resources. That's pretty understandable. You don't decide that, Well, he means get good results, but you can run up the tab. No, you can't do that. So we understood that if we got good results and we could live within the bottom line and we could have a plan for doing it, we'd get support, and we did.

From the savings we got from improved performance—all those kids that left the system meant our budget actually was going down—we were able to reinvest savings into adoption subsidies, reinvest savings into lower case loads. We actually created incentives for our own staff that said instead of bailing, when you do a good job and you get better performance—what used

to happen is we would actually say, "Okay, you don't need as many staff." We would take money from them and give them to the agencies that didn't do the work, our own staff. So we were transferring money from parts of the state to Cook County where they weren't performing. We changed that dynamic right off the bat and said, "You earn your lower caseloads. You get higher performance, you'll cost us less, but I believe that if you can get your caseloads down to this level," whatever that level was, "you've earned it, and you'll keep it. I will not take those resources from you." Then I said to Cook County especially, "If you do not improve your performance, we are not going to bail you out, but you will get smaller, and someone else will get the work that wants the work."

DePue: But here's the question I have. Based on what you'd told me before, the one region you had problems with in terms of success was Cook County. You just said they had this incredible caseload in Cook County, but now you're taking work away from them and giving it to somebody else?

McDonald: Ah. We had a lot of private agencies in Cook County that wanted some more. So in Cook County, we had three regions that were run by DCFS with foster care caseloads. We had probably eighty to a hundred agencies; the high-performing agencies in one year would be the agencies that would earn larger contracts in the subsequent year. Actually, we had one agency that had twelve hundred cases—paid their executive staff quite handsomely, more than the governor—and got no adoptions and no reunifications. No permanencies, they just got more kids. That was prior to performance contracting. In performance contracting—they had twelve hundred cases—they're going to be expected to get no less than three hundred permanencies in the first year. They lost their foster care contract—it was downsized over two or three years—and they eventually chose to get out of it because they said, "That's not the work we want to do." A lot of people thought it was about just getting money. Give us the kids and pay us, and we'll take care of ourselves. I'm being a little cynical here, but when an agency director in the third year of their contract is making more than the governor by twenty thousand, that's substantial.

DePue: What was the ratio between the number of children who were served by private versus public?

McDonald: Seventy percent of the kids were served statewide by private agencies. It was higher in Cook County; as you go downstate it was about 60-40, 60 percent private, 40 percent public. As you go around the Collar Counties around northern Illinois, as you get to central and southern Illinois, it was probably 60-40 state agency versus private.

DePue: Was that similar to other states?

McDonald: The metropolitan area was similar to New York, Los Angeles, and other metropolitan areas, especially east of the Mississippi where private agencies had been around for a very long time.

DePue: Talk to me about your relationship with the press, because you're something of a lightning rod in the administration. I'm sure a lot of people were coming and asking for interviews. Your name appeared in the media quite a bit.

McDonald: I had a just absolutely fantastic public information officer, Martha Allen. She was a former news producer for Mike Flannery and Walter Jacobson. I mean, just outstanding. She was a straight talker. She had the best BS detector ever about stuff that didn't sound right. Now, she was a little hard on people, but she had a lot of wisdom about how to do stuff. My inclination was always, you give people all the information you have, and nine times out of ten, they're going to end up making pretty much the same decision you've made. There's no reason not to be transparent, there's no reason not to be forthcoming. The other thing about the media is that if they have a line they're following on a story, if you can't get to them **right away**, that story runs. The apology never runs. DCFS was famous for "no comment." "No comment" is the same as saying, "I'm guilty." And the other thing is DCFS always said, "Well, confidentiality prohibits me from saying anything that makes any sense here." They didn't say that last part, but in fact, that was the case. It was killing the agency, it was killing staff, it was killing the governor. It made no sense.

Starting with my days at Mental Health, I was just very forthcoming with the media about stuff: "Here's what we're finding." And I knew where to draw the lines. If we're engaged in discipline, I say, "There will be discipline, but, you know what, I can't talk about that because the rules are very clear," and they were fine about that. But would they get facts about a case? They'd get as many facts as we could give them. We said, "We will get you as much as we can get you as quickly as we can get it. When I've got it, you've got it." Names would be withheld to protect the innocent and so on. We went overboard on providing information. If we did not, we would be subjected to the same charges: that we were covering up for the agency's indolence and incompetence. We just said, "No."

A year later, a year after being in there, we had a press conference. We had a lot of them in which we just answered questions. We'd do them sometimes on the fly, and sometimes they were scheduled, but they were mostly scheduled the same day or the day before. We had a case that happened. Father Smith was involved a little bit because the kid had been at the shelter, but he agreed to show up with me at this press conference, which helped. We just had it in our conference room. Andy Shaw was kind of the dean of the media in Cook at the time, in Chicago, and he asked the question, "Is it too soon to determine whether someone will face discipline or be

discharged?” I responded just a little, “We haven’t gotten all the facts, but we’ll be taking action, and you’ll know when that happens.”

That was a watershed moment, when the dean said, “Is it **too soon** to say whether or not there’ll be...” They got the idea that you can’t just say you’re going to fire somebody, because sometimes it’s not called for. Sometimes it is not related to a problem, and we couldn’t keep sacrificing workers to a savage and hungry media to protect the leadership of the agency. The future of the organization was dependent upon a caseworker being able to do their job, the director counting on that, and the caseworkers being able to count on the director helping them do a good job. We used to say about second lieutenants, (laughter) “Expendable as tent pegs?” That’s the way we thought about caseworkers. And they used to joke about it—caseworkers and directors, just like tent pegs in the army. You know, you just throw one out. You just fire somebody. Fire the caseworker first, then someone fires the director. And at DCFS, it had all the appearances of a rapid turnover of directors or under siege all the time, seemingly on the verge of going out of business as director.

So we were going to make sure the media got what they wanted. We were straight with the media. I made it a point: we did not hold press conferences to announce an initiative. I said, “You never announce a promise, you announce the progress.” So when we finally got all the adoptions, we had an adoption press release and we talked about it. When we got accredited in an office, we would have a local press release. But you don’t announce promises, you announce progress. At least you can back it up. The promises, that’s a little hard. It’s kind of like, “So you say next year you’re not going to kill any kids.” I mean, I had a reporter ask—they kind of think that’s what the department was going to do. So you just had to be careful about how you used your relationship with the media.

DePue: In listening to you talk about the environment that you found when you got to DCFS, I’m going to throw something out and see what your reaction is. Here’s the impression I get: the problems you found were not at the caseworker level, it wasn’t as much at the senior leadership level, it was in the middle management level.

McDonald: Yes, I’m going to say that’s true, but middle management responds to leadership. They may be slow to respond to it. Caseworkers know they have tasks, routine tasks, they have to reform. They go to court or they do an investigation—it’s pretty tightly prescribed. Supervisors are expected to make sure that that happens, so you could have some supervisors who don’t perform well, but they’re still your key to it. Then you go up the next couple levels above that, and you’ve got middle managers who aren’t clear about their role in managing the enterprise. Am I supposed to set direction? What am I supposed to do? How do I make this work? A lot of them came into their jobs

without a lot of preparation for it, and some without any qualifications for it, but they're there.

This is not an Illinois problem, it's a national problem. The federal government and the directors of state child welfare programs have recognized that the real challenge is preparing middle management to actually lead and manage in its own right, because there are areas where they should. But they have to make the transition from running their local fiefdom. Yeah, they've got their own relationships, so they know the probation officers, they know everybody. Sometimes you're asking them to change the foundation for those relationships, and that's an uncomfortable thing to do. Some people did it better than others, but all of them came to understand that there was going to be fundamentally one way of doing business.

DePue: We're at a point now where I want to ask you some advice in terms of how we proceed from here. You were in your job from 1994 to 2003. What month did you step out of the job?

McDonald: April 30, 2003.

DePue: So you were there for just a couple months during the Blagojevich administration.

McDonald: Right.

DePue: I've got a stack of slides here that I've discovered on the Internet—and again, I think this is from your website.

McDonald: I think it's still on the DCFS website, too.

DePue: They do a real good job of talking about the changes that occurred over time. I want you to address these slides and talk about the strategy that we're looking at. Of course, the public will then have a chance to look at the slides on the website. But here's the question: Do we first talk about the changes that you were successful [in making], and how DCFS successfully changed to be one of the model programs in the country, or do we talk about the George Ryan administration and a couple months into Blagojevich and then go to this?

McDonald: Let's talk about this.

DePue: Let's go to the slides, then, and I'll turn them over to you.

McDonald: Leadership, governors, find their organizations in their cabinet moving in a direction. Everything is happening while you're running, while you're campaigning; it's happening while you're forming your cabinet; and it's happening even as you're preparing for the next campaign. So nothing stops in the demands. The only question is: Can you recognize early enough in the course of your administration, is there a problem that needs to be addressed? I

think that this is where—at the end of the Thompson administration—the governor recognized it was time to settle the lawsuit, to move in that direction; Governor Edgar’s decision to agree to settle, to sign the agreement, was both risky and courageous, because with a very short timeframe it was going to mark whether or not they could actually achieve the results that were specified in it.

But children continue to come into the system because you don’t change the complexities of these communities overnight. Crack cocaine didn’t disappear. Single parents didn’t cease to be the basic family structure of kids that came into DCFS. All those conditions continued. What **did** happen, though, were a couple things that I think made a huge difference early on. Strategies to reduce infant mortality under Governor Edgar became successful. We started to see a reduction in infant mortality in Illinois and a reduction in teen pregnancies. We saw an increase in the availability of child care, day care. It actually essentially became an entitlement in the Edgar administration. Now, what did that do? That meant families that could never access childcare, that worked second shifts as a waitress, could actually get daycare. I personally believe that had a huge impact on the cases that used to come in as neglect cases, left home alone, because then they didn’t have to leave a seven-year-old in charge of a three-year-old while the mother’s working the second shift at a local diner, and where was she going to get childcare? Usually it was left to the neighbor across the hall or something like that. Now, this is totally anecdotal, but I used to hear this, and I believe that those were the kind of cases we were getting. So the Edgar administration’s expansion of child care was actually a dramatic event. I had testified to the fact that I thought those changes had helped to reduce the demand for child welfare service, especially in Cook County, because we started seeing fewer kids come into care. At DCFS we were also putting more resources at the front end. But that trend took a while to change.

DePue: It doesn’t even happen in months.

McDonald: It doesn’t happen in months; it happens longer. In May of 1997, I think there were like 52,700 kids in the child welfare system; if you went back ten years, there were about 21,000. It’s what I call the mountain. This mountain grows because of the seeming intractability of the problem of crack cocaine, the dissolution of families, or not having family structures or anything that addresses that, and all the kids coming into care as a result of that. So you had all those kids coming into care and staying, But starting early on, the effort was being made to figure out, How are you going to start to impact this? So changes at the front, changes in investigations, changes in kinship care—changes in performance contracting actually began. Even though it went up, the slope started to change, and then we started to see this downward trend. The mountain starts to go down, and you see the other side. It took two years to put a lot of adoption and guardianship work in place and performance contracting in place to support it, and what did we see? We saw adoptions

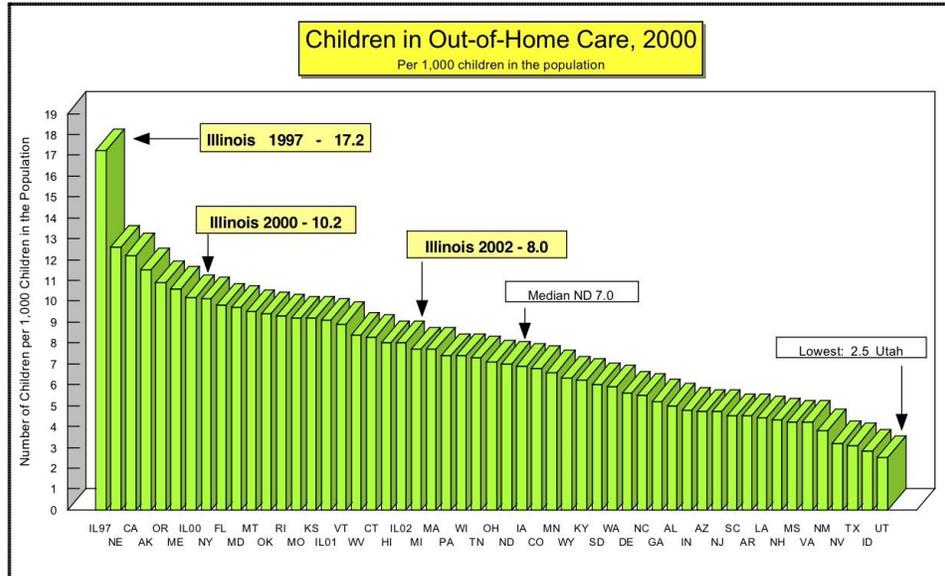
going from nine hundred to over four thousand and five thousand in a year. As you build the infrastructure, over time you start to see the outcomes that have that mountain come down, so the changes happened over time.

The success that followed for DCFS into the Ryan administration was due to the groundwork that was built in the Edgar administration. It wouldn't have happened without him. But that's the nature of governing: As you leave your organization, you leave government better than you found it. If you reduce all of the Edgar administration, he left Illinois state government better than he found it. He left it with a foundation for the future. I'll say that with child welfare—and to this day, the current director of DCFS will say the same thing—the foundation built during the Edgar years, when I was blessed to be director, have made it possible for them to continue to make improvements and changes in child welfare. Do governors matter? Yeah, they do, especially a governor who was able to control the larger fiscal climate and not let things get totally out of control, because then the cutting is done in such an almost barbaric way as to make no sense; you can't sustain any kind of improvements you make. The improvements made at DCFS were sustainable because the foundation was developed over time and thoughtfully and with patience.

They weren't happy to see our early budgets when I was there, because they had large increases, but we could point out to where it was going to go. In fact, we did Senate appropriations early on. Senator Rauschenberger personally shepherded the budget through because he was going to make sure we accounted for stuff. He asked, "How long before you're going to turn this around?" We were talking about going from a request of 32 percent [increase]; we said, "In three years we believe it'll be flat." And that was pretty much the case. I may have overstated that a little bit, but not much. Then we actually had a year where we had a smaller budget request than the prior year, but we stayed below or... The cost of services improved because the services were the right services in the right mix, and that actually cost you less than doing the work poorly.

DePue: I'll ask you to go through these slides, to try to move through them fairly quickly if you can. And let's start with you saying the title of what the slide is so the readers know.

McDonald: One of the first slides on page two is the children in out-of-home care. This was a national comparison: Where did Illinois stack up against, on a per capita basis, other states? Illinois had more kids, in '97, in out-of-home care per capita than any other state, and that's what this demonstrates. We used to talk and joke about Mississippi and Alabama being at the bottom of something. This is the same thing as being at the bottom. This is a characterization of probably the worst performance of a child welfare system in the country at that point in time.



During FY02 the number of children in out-of-home care fell to less than half of the peak in 1997 but remains slightly above the 2000 national median.

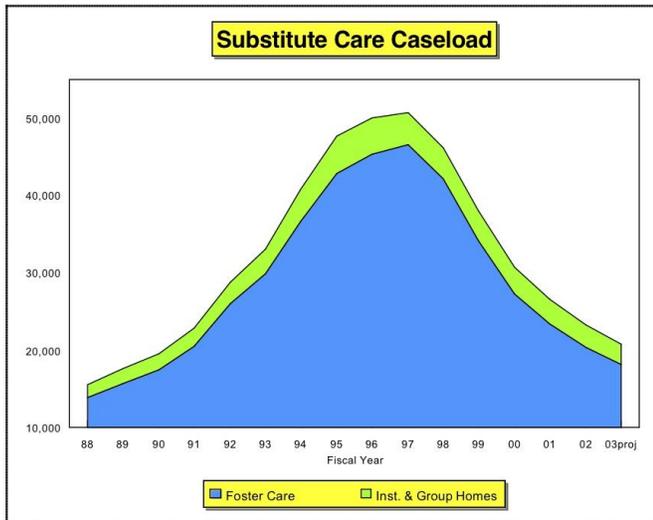
Page 2

Source: Child Welfare League of America, National Data Analysis System

The next slide, on page three, demonstrates just how that growth occurred over time. You go back to '88 where it looks like caseloads were 15,500. In '97, we got up to 50,700 by the end of year, but in May of that year, there actually were 52,000. And then you see how it starts to go down. This growth, this mountain—

DePue: It's almost a perfect bell curve we're looking at here.

Illinois Department of Children & Family Services



Fiscal Year	Foster Care	Inst/Grp Home	Total Csl'd.
88	13,819	1,745	15,564
89	15,711	1,908	17,619
90	17,505	2,072	19,577
91	20,480	2,401	22,881
92	25,961	2,803	28,764
93	29,825	3,263	33,088
94	36,572	4,250	40,822
95	42,819	4,882	47,701
96	45,346	4,698	50,044
97	46,489	4,246	50,735
98	42,165	3,960	46,125
99	34,164	3,781	37,945
00	27,229	3,438	30,667
01	23,394	3,226	26,620
02	20,337	2,897	23,234
03proj.	18,102	2,617	20,719

Inst./Group Homes includes:
Institutions
Group Homes
Independent Living

Changes in the substitute care population due to;

- * increased adoptions
- * the federal guardianship waiver
- * improved front-end protocols

have moved Illinois from the highest user of out of home care to one that is closer to the national median.

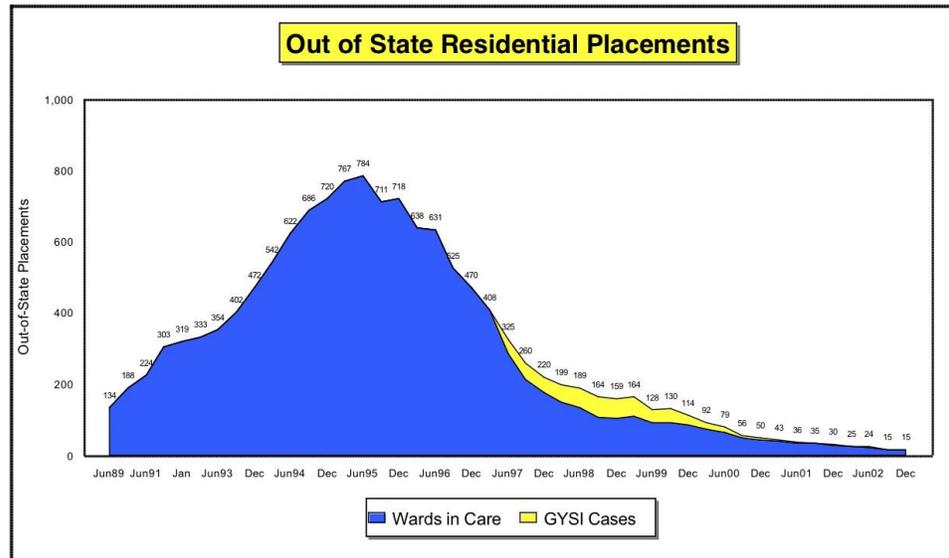
Page 3

McDonald: Yeah, it's a bell curve, but unfortunately, over time, this bell curve, if you had had a straight line of normal growth, Illinois would have spent one billion dollars on its child welfare system over time. That's the cost of doing it poorly. The next two charts just tell you a little bit about where the cases were held, and those aren't as important as—

DePue: Yeah, I don't think we have to address every single slide. We'll let you decide which ones are more relevant here.

McDonald: On page six, this one about out-of-state residential placements. This is one of those things on your dashboard, tells you how hot your car's running.

Department of Children and Family Services



Residential placements outside of Illinois have been reduced by 98% since the peak of 792 in May 1995. Special efforts have brought many children back to Illinois.

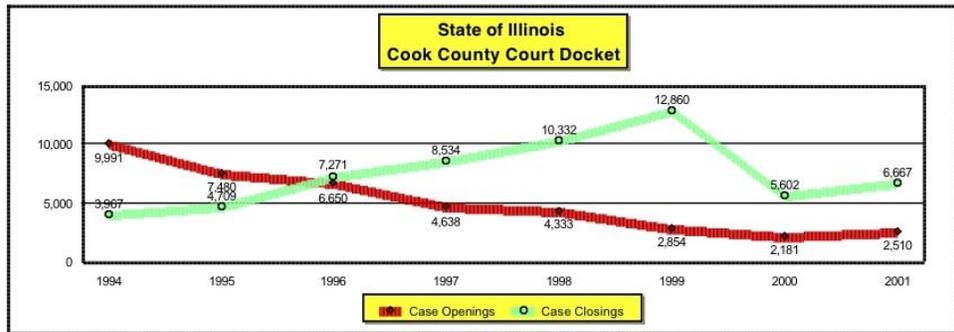
Page 6

If you have a lot of kids out of state, that means no one is paying attention to the problem. When I was a legislative analyst, there were 734 kids that were placed out of state, and some really awful things were happening to them. Teenage girls in Oklahoma were being given hysterectomies routinely; they called them appendectomies, and then people found out. Patrick Murphy was a legal advocate for them. But then they brought them all home. And guess what? Here we are in '89, we have 134 kids out of state; in June of '95, 784, and we are on our way to a thousand kids out of state. Here's the thing: people aren't watching it. Everything's uncontrollable, so one of your worst indicators is how many kids are you shipping out of state because you have no place for them in state? We had to control that, and controlling that meant we had to control how we managed the care in state, because it's about managing kids in residential care, mostly. Over time we got that down to no more than a handful of kids, less than twenty kids, and that remains to be the case today. The system manages it.

On page ten, we have some stuff around Cook County. Now, the Cook County stuff is really interesting. People advised me to try our interventions in downstate Illinois because it was nicer. And I said, “Well, where are all the kids?” “They’re in Cook County.” I said, “Okay, if 70 percent of our kids are in Cook County, we will have no impact whatsoever unless we impact Cook County.” Here is a place that is ripe for intervention, has a lot of good partners, and has a court system willing to work with us. The state’s attorneys would love to work with us; the police weren’t bad. We had hospitals, we had private agencies. There was no reason **not** to try and tackle the biggest problem you had, so we said, “Let’s go out there.” We did performance contracting there; we did accreditation there.

And then we worked in the courts as well. Working in the courts—and this actually is on page eleven—you’ll see that first of all, after all the work we did in investing in the front end, the number of new cases coming into the court dropped from 9,991 in 1994 to about 2,100 in 2000 and 2,500 in 2001.

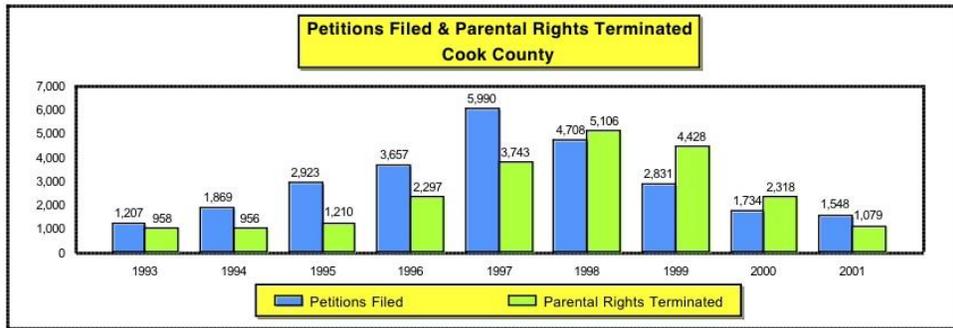
Illinois Department of Children & Family Services



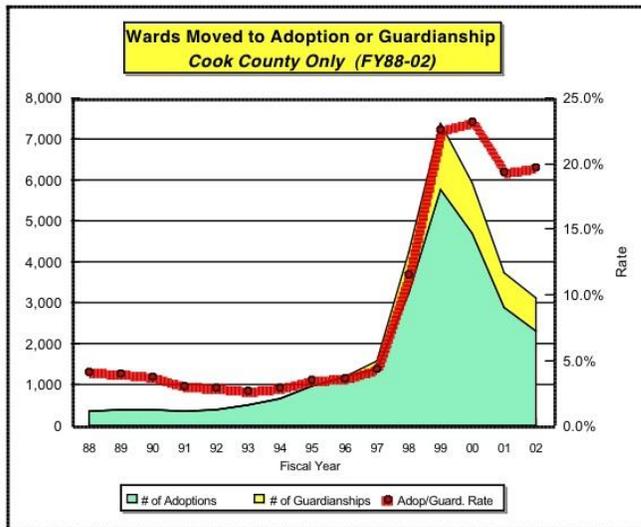
Calendar Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Open Cases	36,744	39,628	39,049	35,163	29,164	19,800	21,875	18,562

Source: Cook Co. Juvenile Court

Home of Relative Reform and better front end decision-making and service delivery sharply reduced new cases. An increased focus on Adoption, the new Guardianship waiver, and Reunifications increased Cook County exits from care. Exits are now falling because intake and the general caseload are both much lower.



Changes in state permanency laws and court and child welfare system innovations increased terminations of Parental Rights for children in our care whose parents remain unable to care for them. Terminations are now falling due to lower caseloads.



Fiscal Year	Rate	Adop.	Guard.	Total
88	4.1%	341		341
89	4.0%	399		399
90	3.7%	416		416
91	3.0%	343		343
92	2.9%	413		413
93	2.7%	510		510
94	3.0%	663		663
95	3.6%	992		992
96	3.6%	1,196		1,196
97	4.4%	1,408	161	1,569
98	11.6%	3,232	1,001	4,233
99	22.7%	5,765	1,635	7,400
00	23.3%	4,708	1,233	5,941
01	19.4%	2,889	846	3,735
02	19.8%	2,307	813	3,120

Rate is % of foster care population moved to Adoption & Guardianship.

Cook % of all Foster Care Cases at beginning of:

- FY98 - 77.5%
- FY99 - 74.7%
- FY00 - 70.6%
- FY01 - 67.5%
- FY02 - 65.3%

Cook % of all Adoption & Guardianship:

- FY98 - 76.2%
- FY99 - 79.5%
- FY00 - 75.2%
- FY01 - 69.9%
- FY02 - 69.7%

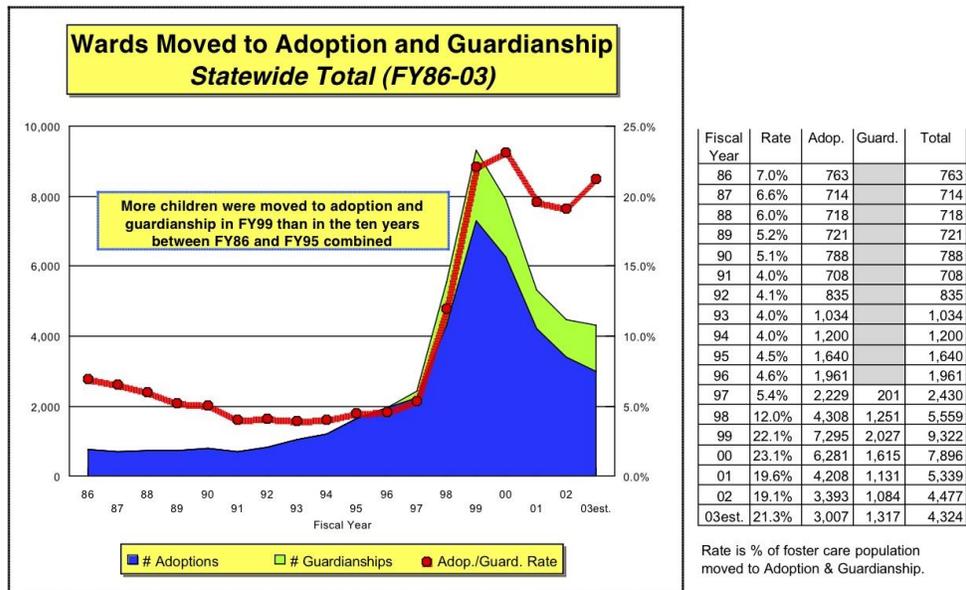
The difficulty of cases remaining in care is challenging the Department's continued ability to maintain record non-reunification permanency rates.

And this is at the same time that this is like, How do you handle investigations? Do you have to take every child from a home? Even as we were taking in fewer kids by going to court to get authority to serve them in foster care, our safety record with investigations had improved by twice. We had fewer and fewer problems with, shall we say, false positives and false

negatives. At the same time, the number of kids leaving the system by reason of adoption or guardianship or reunifications went from about 3,900 to over 12,800 in '99. In order for the court to even process that, we had to work with the judges there, the state's attorneys, the public guardian, to help them put in an infrastructure. We actually put in copy machines at the court because the presiding judge there, Nancy Sawyers, said she didn't have it in her budget. I said, "If you need them, how about we lease it; you put it in the space?" The result was they could process a whole lot more in the way of adoptions just for the simple presence of a copy machine; it made the paper flow, and that made the cases move.

They had adoptions that went from—in '94, 663 adoptions. In '99, they had 5,765; that followed a year of 3,200, and was followed by a year of 4,700. Just amazing adoptions. And guardianships were high, and their reunifications were pretty decent, too. Doing the work in Cook County, where it mattered, by building partnerships was just absolutely incredible; it's what you had to do. If you look at the state's totals on page twelve, it has wards moved to adoption and guardianship, and just incredible growth of—just take the adoptions: we had 1,200 adoptions in '94; in '99 there were 7,295, and that was following a year of 4,300 and followed by a year of 6,200, and so on.

Illinois Department of Children & Family Services



Although the number of adoptions and guardianship conversions is falling, the rate at which children are being adopted in Illinois continues to be at or near the national standard.

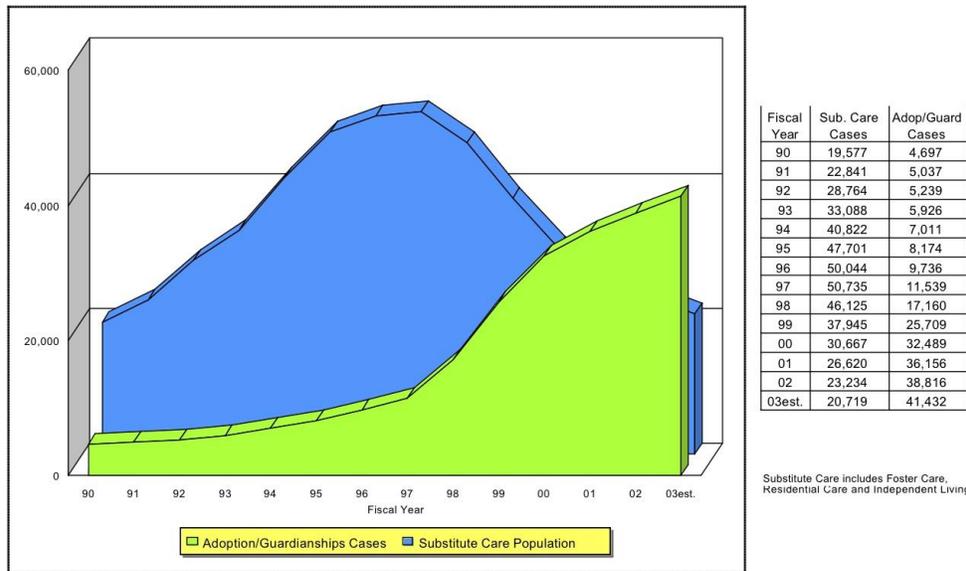
Page 12

Governor and Mrs. Edgar were recognized by President Clinton, and it is fitting that that happened. They were at the White House to receive an adoption excellence award, the governor having been almost slandered by President Clinton, I think. It was fitting, though, that they got this recognition. This would not have happened if I didn't have the support of the governor on

this stuff. There were a lot of people who could have showed up at his office and said, “This performance contract, I don’t like it; it’s going to make it hard on me.” No one dared try it. I think they knew that the governor supported changing the child welfare system. They’d have to get through us to get to him, but there were a lot of people that could get to him, a very popular person. But I never worried about that as long as we produced results and did the job.

One of the things that shows you how these systems change is the chart on page fourteen about the movement from how many kids are in foster care versus how many kids are in adoption. In 2000, we actually had more kids that were in active adoption and guardianship cases—they had moved out, and we were providing adoption subsidies and guardianship subsidies—more kids in that status than in foster care. We’re the first state in the nation to reach that.

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services
Substitute Care vs. Adoption/Guardianship Cases
FY90 - FY03



In late FY2000 the number of children in state supported Adoption and Guardianship settings exceeded the number of children in substitute care placements.
 Page 14

DePue: Does that mean, though, that Illinois is still being proactive in following what happens to those kids when they go into adoption?

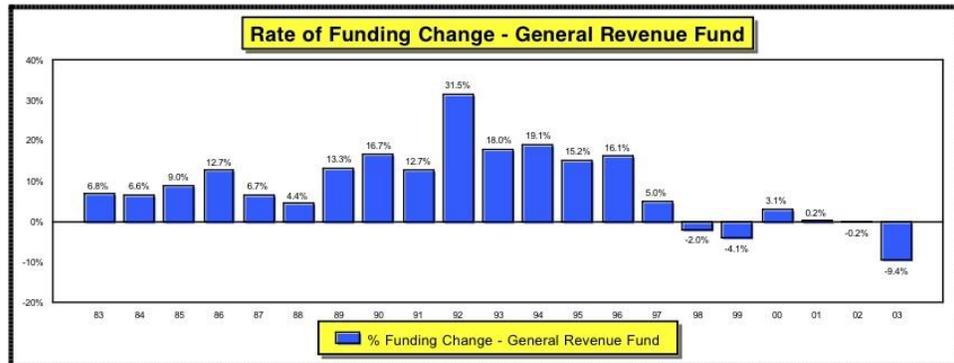
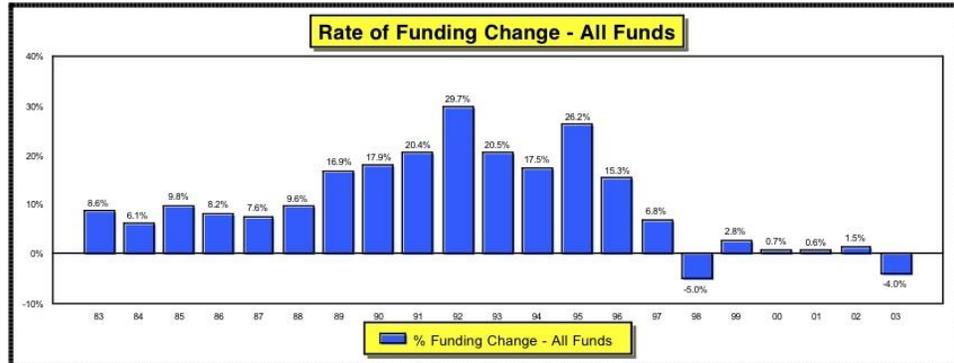
McDonald: Yes. There’s an adoption program available to kids in guardianship that actually provides supports to them. And there were cases that we would bring back into the system. So that would happen.

DePue: Cases that were brought back in because the adoption situation was just unsatisfactory?

McDonald: Less that and more that the kids, when they became teenagers... For instance, there were cases of adoptions that happened many years ago. Just meeting with some of these parents—the kids are teenagers, they're starting to act out. They've always had problems, but they could actually manage their problems when they were smaller. As they get to be teenagers, they're discovering these kids have an early onset of schizophrenia, they have mental illness issues, their behavior is dangerous, but they don't want to give them up; they just need help. So on a case-by-case basis, we would bring them back into the system, keep the families involved, place the kids—if the kids needed residential, we would do it. We would do whatever it would take to support them. There were some cases where the family just said, "We can't do this. It was more than we ever anticipated." That was a very small number, but I'm not going to say it doesn't happen.

We talked about the money. On page fifteen, the real key one for me is looking at the rate of funding change for the general revenue fund. The general revenue fund is the money that comes from sales tax and income tax and is available for the rest of government. If you look at the annual rate of increases in the DCFS budget, in '92, they had a 31.5 percent increase over the '91 appropriation, which was itself a 12.7 percent increase.

Illinois Department of Children & Family Services
Historical Funding and Expenditures
All Funds & General Revenue Funds
 (\$.000)



Fiscal Year	All Funds			General Revenue Fund		
	Funding	% Change	Expend.	Funding	% Change	Expend.
82	186,510.2		173,851.1	158,516.9		151,839.3
83	202,639.7	8.6%	185,133.5	169,293.9	6.8%	161,960.0
84	215,027.3	6.1%	193,661.0	180,416.1	6.6%	170,139.6
85	236,180.5	9.8%	215,672.6	196,650.1	9.0%	189,630.6
86	255,501.9	8.2%	241,902.6	221,530.0	12.7%	212,991.7
87	274,817.9	7.6%	262,849.6	236,284.4	6.7%	231,907.2
88	301,245.1	9.6%	287,973.3	246,672.3	4.4%	242,984.8
89	352,048.1	16.9%	334,542.3	279,531.3	13.3%	275,364.3
90	415,093.9	17.9%	399,691.4	326,105.7	16.7%	322,144.5
91	499,902.9	20.4%	490,176.1	367,660.5	12.7%	365,282.0
92	648,499.4	29.7%	588,114.3	483,326.3	31.5%	456,011.7
93	781,189.8	20.5%	725,350.4	570,279.5	18.0%	545,474.7
94	917,622.8	17.5%	886,526.6	679,387.5	19.1%	670,475.7
95	1,157,739.5	26.2%	1,122,276.3	782,636.1	15.2%	779,145.8
96	1,334,972.4	15.3%	1,303,889.9	908,539.8	16.1%	904,110.0
97	1,425,889.9	6.8%	1,380,130.8	954,240.6	5.0%	943,488.6
98	1,355,018.3	-5.0%	1,300,315.1	935,345.4	-2.0%	921,173.9
99	1,392,638.1	2.8%	1,345,548.8	897,095.1	-4.1%	888,720.0
00	1,403,017.3	0.7%	1,358,693.3	925,255.6	3.1%	920,093.2
01	1,411,837.3	0.6%	1,374,870.4	927,420.7	0.2%	920,071.7
02	1,433,446.9	1.5%	1,363,235.4	925,465.6	-0.2%	904,103.5
03	1,376,516.8	-4.0%		838,048.6	-9.4%	

DePue: In the governor's toughest budget year.

McDonald: Right, 31.5 percent. That's an outrageous amount of annual increase. In '93, there was an 18 percent increase on top of the prior year's 31 percent; in '94, there was a 19.1 percent increase. I had mentioned earlier that my

commitment was to get it to a flat budget within three years. We had a 15 percent increase in '95; in '96, a 16 percent increase; in '97, a 5 percent increase; and then in '98 it was a minus 2 percent increase, and even in doing that, we were able to reduce caseloads dramatically. The point is that all of the progress on adoptions, kids leaving the system, saves money; all the progress on improving services on the front end, and doing it wisely so the kids are safe, saves money. The point is that there was a very clear strategy to **do the work right**, and doing the work right is always going to cost you less than doing the work wrong. I think we were able and had the time to demonstrate it, and I think my colleagues would say that there was no finer time in their professional life than the time they had as we all worked together on making this—from what some people say—a worst-to-first child welfare system. In fact, some people still refer to the child welfare system under Governor Edgar and under my leadership as the gold standard for child welfare reform.

One was just the net cost of these things, and it's an interesting one that's a little more complicated and needs to be—it just means if you do the work right. This is not even adjusted for inflation, but in actual dollars, a case in 2003 cost about, on a per-case cost, the same as it did in '93, and you were getting better results. So that's the long and the short of it.

DePue: At the end of the Edgar administration, you're still right in the midst of this battle; the trend lines are starting to go down, but you're going to see much more dramatic improvement once you get into the Ryan administration. So let's go back and talk about the last year or so of the Edgar administration and change the theme here quite a bit, because towards the end of his administration, a couple things happen in 1997. One is that he announces his retirement. The other thing that really comes to a head in 1997 is what has been called the MSI scandal, and if anything brought in a question mark in his administration, it was the Management Services of Illinois situation that was the thing that did.²³

Very quickly, let me just lay this out: MSI was an organization that had a contract to identify places where there was welfare fraud. They would notify the state, the state would obviously be able to take action, and therefore you save money. MSI, because they had a contract, was awarded for doing that. You get to the 1994 election, and MSI was a contributor to Governor Edgar's election campaign, they were lobbying others, and they were giving gifts and other benefits to people within the administration. This came to light in a letter that was sent to Mike Lawrence—you'd mentioned that name before. Mike Lawrence notified the governor, and they decided they had no choice but to turn it over to the state agency, and eventually the FBI got involved with it as well. And for the next couple years after that, the case

²³ Jim Edgar, September 9, 2010, 944-957. For other perspectives on the MSI scandal, see Mike Lawrence, interview by Mark DePue, July 2, 2009, 58-71; Bill Roberts, interview by Mike Czaplicki, April 11, 2011; Gene Reineke, interview by Mark DePue, June 4, 2010, 54-65; Mike McCormick, interview by Mark DePue, July 22, 2010, 74-78; and Al Grosboll, interview by Mark DePue, November 6, 2009, 37-41.

developed, the FBI pursued the evidence, and it all resulted in criminal charges that were brought on several people within MSI and a couple of the people within the Edgar administration, especially the Department of Public Aid. So that played out in the news media on a fairly regular basis, almost daily once you got to the time when the cases are coming to a head in the middle of 1997. Did any of that play a role in what you were doing?

McDonald: Actually, no. MSI did minor work for DCFS, but it was a data processing contract they had that was awarded through CMS, so we had very little dealings with MSI.

DePue: Put you on the spot. What was your personal feeling about the nature of the charges, especially as they pertained to Governor Edgar and the senior people in his administration?

McDonald: I think the governor was poorly served by people around him. Anyone that knows the governor knows that he values his personal integrity almost above all else. I mean, it's the basis for him being the public servant he was at the time and his reputation now and actually his role as kind of an advisor to governors. He's one of the few governors we've had that left office with high regard, and he retains that. Everyone that worked for him knew that's who he was, and they knew his bar for that; they knew how high he set the bar on personal integrity. There's no question about that. To allow—and this is my personal opinion—to have allowed anything that seemingly crossed the line, that exposed the governor, he or his campaign, to any kind of attention... People were smart enough to know when something had crossed the line. It didn't turn out this way, but the fact that some people were convicted meant that something happened. It couldn't have happened without people at least leaving doors open. I think he was poorly served by people close to him that could have said, "No, we don't need that kind of help." That's my opinion.

DePue: What was your reaction to his announcement, also in the middle of 1997, that he's going to retire?

McDonald: That he was going to retire from public life; he wasn't going to run for a third term. I was not surprised. I was not surprised. Anne Burke and I had lunch with him. I think it was July second of the year he had his first... He went out to the western suburbs and was in a Fourth of July parade, suffered his first heart attack, and he was in Good Samaritan, I believe.²⁴

DePue: Was this during his election campaign?

McDonald: Yeah, it was heading into it.

DePue: So that was not a heart attack, but he ended up having—

²⁴ Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, June 18, 2010, 749-761; Sherry Struck, interview by Mark DePue, November 3, 2010, 72-77; and Bob Kustra, interview by Mike Czaplicki, January 28, 2011, 28-32 and 36-38.

McDonald: Angioplasty, yeah.

DePue: —bypass surgery.

McDonald: Bypass surgery, okay. You know, to me, it's heart and...

DePue: I was corrected by a couple of people: "No, he did **not** have a heart attack."
(laughs)

McDonald: Okay, thank you. When I heard that, I said, "He's a young man, and I think he wanted to be an old man." He was so close to his family, and still is. I think family to him was such an important thing that I never thought of him as particularly ambitious in terms of a personal ambition. I thought of him as having an ambition for governing right, but I also saw him as someone whose family mattered more than anything else. So I wasn't surprised [he decided to retire]. I actually think most people weren't too surprised, when I think about it. I think there's an expectation that if you're a successful governor and you have the kind of reputation he has, Oh, geez, why don't you just plan on going higher and faster? Because that's the expectation. Isn't that what everyone does? In fact, I think he wasn't conventional; he was more like the rest of us. I think that's good.

DePue: We are at the point in time where we've been at it for a little bit over two hours. We're getting close to the end of the day. We still have the George Ryan years to talk about and a little bit about Rod Blagojevich as well. My recommendation is that we leave that for another day. It'll be a much shorter session, I think, next time. Would that be agreeable to you?

McDonald: It is indeed, and again, I want to apologize for (laughs) being tardy today.

DePue: Here's where I'm coming from today. This has been a wonderful discussion and explanation on your part about what was going on in those critical years when DCFS was truly struggling. I think that's going to be a great thing for anybody who really wants to understand how bureaucracies work, how institutions work, and how they can be improved over time. So thank you very much for that, Jess.

McDonald: Thank you, Mark. I appreciate it.

(end of interview #3 #4 continues)

Interview with Jess McDonald

ISG-A-L-2010-040.04

Interview # 4: October 11, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Monday, October 11, 2010. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here with Jess McDonald. This is our last session, Jess.

McDonald: And I'm going to miss meeting with you, Mark.

DePue: (laughs) We'll have to think up some other reasons. Where we left it off last time, you had talked at length about your involvement with Governor Jim Edgar as his Director of the Department of Children and Family Services. We finished off last time talking about Governor Edgar's decision to step down—not to run for reelection—which means you're going to get a new governor. I want to ask you what happens now at the cusp of George Ryan coming into office.

McDonald: First of all, one of the understandings everyone in a cabinet post has is that whoever comes in chooses their own cabinet; it's not like it's civil service. You serve at the pleasure of a new governor. That's kind of a baseline understanding I think almost everybody has. And it depends. Some people chose it as a time to get out because they were going to pursue other careers, and others were interested in continuing in some role. I was very interested in continuing at DCFS; it was kind of a professional lifelong ambition to be the director of this department. So I enjoyed the progress we were making and was looking forward to making more.

DePue: But when we talked before about your decision whether or not to accept this offer to take over DCFS, the impression I got is you pretty much knew you were getting into something of a meat grinder; at least a seven-day-a-week job, sixteen to twenty hours a day, I think you said.

McDonald: Right.

DePue: And yet you wanted to hang onto that job.

McDonald: It may seem strange, but it's the kind of work that, if this is what you've been trained to do and you choose to do, it just connects with you, and you just really want to do it. Child welfare work involves caseworkers who put in the same amount of hours and supervisors who did the same. And people at all levels in the business, public or private, went way beyond the normal workweek and what you would expect in terms of effort, in order to try and better serve children and families that they run into. I mean, it really does take over your life. One of the biggest things people worry about in the field is burnout. But I for some reason just always connected with this, and I've always had a passion for the organization itself, so the ability to stay if possible was something I was really interested in doing. And we had seen improvements in the agency. I'm not saying that life was easier, but when you start to see things going in the right direction, and you start to see more people investing in the direction that the organization is going and working with it rather than taking shots at it, you want to stick around to help lead that organization to the next stage.

DePue: Did you feel like your work wasn't quite done in terms of the changes you wanted to see made?

McDonald: Oh, absolutely. It was one thing to make the turnaround that was possible under Governor Edgar. We got caseloads where they ought to be, we started changing part of the performance, we started getting adoptions in record numbers; but there was a lot of work yet to be done in really changing and reforming the system. What you really want to see in these large organizations and public systems is enduring change, not just something that gets you through to the next press release.

DePue: Tell us then how Governor-elect Ryan offered you the position.

McDonald: I was contacted by—I'm trying to figure out who it was, actually, but it was in the governor's campaign—probably his campaign head, Bob Knudson, about interviewing for the job should I be interested. I interviewed with the governor-elect and Bob sometime later; I think it was probably in January. So had a good interview, waited, then I got a call from the Governor.

DePue: Was this interview with the Governor himself?

McDonald: Yes, it was Bob Knudson first and then with the Governor. He came in and he joined the interview. The Governor-elect—I kind of get confused on these terms. Excuse me.

DePue: So it was before he took office, obviously.

McDonald: Yes, it was.

DePue: Once he offered you the position, did he have any guidance for you?

McDonald: He did not say specifically—in ways, it was probably very similar to Governor Edgar—“Do this, do that,” it was, “We like the performance we’ve seen; we’d like to continue to get that performance. Do you think that’s possible?” So it was a general discussion.

DePue: At this point in the relationship between the two of you, what was your general impression of George Ryan?

McDonald: I had worked on Governor Thompson’s staff when he was lieutenant governor, and I was involved in some decisions that I know he did not like, like the closing of some state hospitals in the Kankakee area.²⁵ He was aware of the fact, and he offered that and said, “I know that we may not have always agreed on stuff, but I respect the work that you’ve done as director.” So it was interesting. He was very personable in the interview, in the conversation. It was kind of more, Let’s get to know each other a little bit. How comfortable are you with me? How comfortable is he with me? I think it was more that than it was anything else.

DePue: Did you have any reason to believe that you wouldn’t be able to have a good rapport with the governor?

McDonald: I didn’t think there would be anything, but I wasn’t certain. I did not know him real well, and I assumed that if I were appointed I would get an opportunity to know him a little better. I felt comfortable with him, felt comfortable with Bob Knudson, who was to be his chief of staff.

DePue: Even at this point in time when Governor-elect Ryan is just getting into office, even during the election itself, there are some rumors about scandal and problems within the secretary of state’s office especially. Did that worry you at all?

McDonald: It didn’t. I read the *Chicago Tribune* more than anything else, and as I followed the *Trib*, they endorsed the governor-elect. I think I was like many people who didn’t really place much belief in the allegations, and we didn’t have any reason to know one thing or the other, but I didn’t place much into that. I think I just moved on from—you know, you hear it, and it wasn’t till later in the trial, actually, that I think people began to say, “Well, this really did happen.”

DePue: You were there for the entire four years. How closely did you work with Governor Ryan’s team?

²⁵ Ryan was from Kankakee County.

McDonald: In a very similar way to when I worked with Governor Edgar's office. For instance, I'd have regular contact with the budget person; I think Steve Schnorf was doing a lot of that. I worked closely with Bob Knudson on an as-needed basis. I felt comfortable enough. I'm going to tell this story because it is an important one in my judgment, and it told me a lot about him and gave me a sense of ease about how this was going to go, working in the new administration.

In February, after all the announcements and so on, we had a case of a young child who was four years old. She had spent all but sixteen days in foster care, and she had been horribly abused while in foster care. She was at LaRabida Hospital, having been taken from a foster home on the South Side of Chicago over to the hospital. The hospital was familiar with her. I called up a good friend and professional colleague, Dr. Paula Jaudes, who was the head of LaRabida, but she was also the medical director of the Department of Children and Family Services. She served in many roles, and just an absolutely wonderful pediatrician. I asked her if I could come down there and talk to the medical team about this case because I was so concerned about, How could a kid be exposed to so much abuse in the system, and they had knowledge of this child's history. So I spent the time there, and there are other things, and on a very personal level, I'll tell you this: After a while, when you're in these jobs—and maybe it's not true with other people—I worried sometimes that you do it because you get a lot of good, positive feedback from political circles or from the media or something like that, and that maybe I was in it for the wrong reasons; that I was losing touch with people who did the work and with people who were victims of abuse and neglect. I told Paula Jaudes I had this personal need to just talk to folks and, if possible, just observe the child. And she understood. I went down there, and I came back quite shaken and quite moved.

I called Bob Knudson when I got back and said, "If at all possible, I would like to have the governor go down to LaRabida and talk to these same people and meet with the staff and hear about this." He asked me why, and I said, "Because everyone gets concerned in government about why we get sued. Why does the Department of Children and Family Services and the state—specifically the director and the governor—get sued for all the things that happen in child welfare?" And I said, "This is the reason, because we take children from their families because of allegations of abuse and neglect, and then we're supposed to keep them safe. We oftentimes fail in that responsibility, and when we fail in that responsibility, we have to be held to the same standard as parents, because we act as parents." He said, "Put it in a paragraph; send it up."

I did. That was on a Thursday morning. I walked it up, he saw the governor, the governor changed his weekend plans, and on Saturday morning he went. I advised, "Don't go with media. We'll have a person there that can introduce him and so on." He spent a good morning there with folks. I'm told

when he returned he was very impressed with the people that served the child, but I think he also had a really better understanding about why things happen in these systems. The other thing is, I think he and Lura Lynn had a sensitivity to children, similar to the sensitivity of Governor and Mrs. Edgar. They all shared these children as a special part of government's mission mandate.

DePue: Had Mrs. Ryan gone with him?

McDonald: She did not go. I am told that the thought of going there and seeing the child was too upsetting. The outcome, though—I was told by some of the key staff that heard this—the governor made it clear that folks were not to meddle with DCFS, just in case someone was going to get off course or do something. I assume he meant, essentially we would get what we needed in order to serve kids right. He didn't say that to me, but it was recounted to me by the people that said they were in the room when they heard it. But he was very impressed by it. It would have been a nice event for someone to say, "The governor goes out and visits a kid." It never showed up in the media, and that was remarkable.

Now, I've checked with colleagues of mine at the time—we were at meetings nationally—and when I told them about this event, they were stunned because they could never get governors **near** a child like that in those circumstances and without media. I hadn't thought about it that way; I just figured it was good common sense, and he seemed to follow my advice on that, or his office did. So I appreciated that, because you don't want to make hay off of a child who's been abused.

DePue: We spent the entire last session talking about the kind of innovations that you made while you were under Governor Edgar's administration. Did all of that basically continue on? Were there any new wrinkles that you implemented?

McDonald: What's amazing is, I think that Governor Ryan's staff—in part because there were some people like Steve Schnorf who had some real familiarity with what had been done before—were very interested in seeing the improvements continue. I think we were quite fortunate that the budget was under control because the programs were working well. Without the foundation we had in the beginning, it wouldn't have been possible. But there was this foundation, it continued on, and we continued to have a great deal of success. But it was a continuation of essentially the very same programs.

DePue: Would it be right to say that the programs you implemented under Edgar's administration really started to bear fruit in a very positive way in the Ryan administration?

McDonald: That's true, but they started to bear fruit immediately. For instance, adoptions increased **during** the Edgar administration dramatically. They doubled during that period of time, and they continue to grow. **Improvements** in virtually

every area of the department's functioning happened **during** the Edgar administration **and** continued. Even the current director of the department has said publicly that the work that was done then has laid the foundation for the improvements they're continuing to make now.²⁶

DePue: Do you think that Ryan took credit for some of the changes that were going on?

McDonald: I think they took pride in the continuing progress. I never heard them claim it as theirs. But in an administration, they always talk in the budget address or State of the State, "And adoptions went from here to here," or there would be a high point that they would highlight. But it wasn't like the capital program becoming a new Build Illinois—I just used that to illustrate it.²⁷ "DCFS continues to do well, and here's the proof," is a way of putting it. I never got the sense there was a need to re-label stuff. Performance contracting remained performance contracting. Adoption programs continued to be adoption programs. We had improvements across the board because they were necessary to do. I think everyone recognized that they started a long time ago; they continued to bear fruit.

DePue: How many times did you have the opportunity to meet with Governor Ryan personally?

McDonald: I had a couple of conversations with him around cases that came to his attention, but basically we didn't have very many meetings; the meetings would be held with his key staff.

DePue: Would you say he was an effective politician?

McDonald: I have a narrow view on this one, and that's, How did DCFS do? And DCFS continued to prosper in the transition from Governor Edgar to Governor Ryan. By that I meant programs continued to improve, we were able to sustain improvements and build upon them, and the budgets were adequate to do the job, given what everyone's facing. From my point of view, DCFS was the priority it needed to be, and I never worried about it. I didn't have any ambitions in a broader political sense to try and figure out, so, how do I compare or how did the agency compare to anyplace else?

DePue: How about this: if you could compare the personalities of the two men, of Jim Edgar and George Ryan.

²⁶ Erwin McEwen is the current director of DCFS. He replaced Bryan Samuels as director in 2006.

²⁷ Build Illinois was a major infrastructure program undertaken during the Thompson administration. In 1999, the Illinois legislature approved the Fund for Infrastructure, Roads, Schools & Transit, which raised \$6.3 billion in new revenues to secure the sale of bonds for transportation and school projects. Governor Ryan strongly supported this program. On the importance of labels to policy salesmanship, see Jim Edgar, interview by Mark DePue, June 9, 2009, 245.

McDonald: Oh, I think they're very different personalities, there's no question about that. I think of Jim Edgar as a more studious—almost an academic, although I don't think he'd ever claim that. But I thought of him as a student of government and a student of politics as it affected government, and with a much different approach to day-to-day politics. George Ryan, I thought of as someone whose forte was the give and take of politics. Let me give you an example in both cases.

I used to have run-ins with Pate Philip on a regular basis; Senator Philip was one of the most powerful people in Illinois government in his role as Senate President. He had made some comments in the press shortly before the election, the second term, for Governor Edgar, and I think we talked about that briefly. But the following spring, my confirmation was held up. Governor Edgar and I met and talked about it. He called me over, and I asked him if he would mind if I went down and talked to Senator Philip. He said, "You can try it, but I don't think it's going to do any good." So I went down and talked to Senator Philip. I mean, I waited for hours, and then I got in the room and I heard a little bit about Senator Philip and Governor Edgar didn't always see eye-to-eye, which I think everyone knew. They're much different people, **much** different people—in a qualitative way, much different people. Jim Edgar being a really high-quality guy, a classy guy, to put it in the vernacular. But Senator Philip was very clear about his, shall we say, lack of enthusiasm for Governor Edgar, and talked a little bit about different styles. He said if this had been someone else, Governor Thompson, he would have been down here, we'd be drinking, this would all be solved, and so on and so forth.

Fast-forwarding, when I talked to Governor-elect Ryan, when he put in a call and asked me if I would accept the appointment, I said, "Yes, but, you know, I have these small problems with Senator Philip." He said, "Don't worry about that. I know that. I'll take care of that; don't you worry about that." It was very casual. [Another] little personal thing that he did, he called (laughs) my wife. I was in Washington on a panel giving a speech, and he called home in Springfield here about eight o'clock in the morning and said, "This is George Ryan." My wife said, (whispers) "Oh, yeah, sure." (DePue laughs) But he said, "Really, this is George Ryan. I was wondering if Jess was there." She said "No, he's in Washington." He said, "How could I reach him?" It wasn't a staff person, it was him, so she gave him the pager number, and he said, "Well, he won't answer." "Oh, he'll answer a page." "So how about, would you give him the number and page him for me?" So I got the page. I went out at break time and called him, and he answered the phone. He was in his apartment. There wasn't anyone else handling it. It was a very personable conversation; it was very welcoming and personable. But that's who he was. It was kind of like, "Okay, I've got this. I'll deal with the politics." It was a much different style. It was a different style from Jim Thompson, I'm sure; a different style from Jim Edgar, a much different style. Actually you would see that difference in the style play out in day-to-day work and in terms of how they managed government.

DePue: Do you think it was effective for him?

McDonald: I don't know if he would say—it may be the very thing that got him in trouble, and it may be the thing that got his successes in politics: his ability to be just very casual and very political.

DePue: I'm going to mine a little—

McDonald: And by the way, you are so far out of my area of expertise (DePue laughs) except to be an observer of this.

DePue: That's why I asked how often you had dealings with him, because I wasn't surprised when you said you didn't have a lot of direct dealings with the man.

McDonald: Right, right.

DePue: But I'll put you on the spot again. You've got into this a little bit. What is it about George Ryan, you think, that got him into trouble?

McDonald: You know, (pause) I don't know. Let's see. He trusted a lot of people that were friends. People have explained, in looking back, that there are the rules that are kind of the rules for the good old politicians, and that everyone has a little bit of that in them. For instance, all the ethics issues that have come up for decades in Illinois. We don't have to go too far back to find small breaches in ethics by elected officials and others. You'll find them in every administration at some level or another. If everyone were to be judged by similar standards, they'd say, "Oh, did something like that happen on my watch? Don't know, but it's possible that they would find that some of those things did happen."

What was interesting about it, if you followed the media on that whole issue around the sale of driver's licenses or something like that, was even after the prosecution was beginning, it continued to happen under a new and highly thought of secretary of state, Jesse White. They were still finding people doing this, as if what's wrong with people? Do they not understand that this is something that people may be watching? So at least if you were doing it, stop. But I think it's a culture of politics probably everywhere.

I think it's Potter Stewart who once explained that this country is made up of people who were kicked out of every other country—including not just people that were seeking to practice religion freely, but also people that were smugglers and bandits and all other riffraff—so that we're kind of an interesting mix. Maybe we never quite escape all of those lessons of the old political machines and stuff like that. I think that's probably what happens: what happens to the person that tries to run a perfectly straight campaign? What have been the lessons of someone who does that? I don't know. We haven't seen that person probably, really. I mean, everyone has contributions. We talked about MSI the last time. Here's MSI helping out in the campaign. It

wasn't Governor Edgar asking for it, but people around him were seeking or accepting the support. I think that, maybe unfortunately, just is the nature of that particular beast.

DePue: One of the people that was central to the Ryan administration, and central to the problems that the Ryan administration eventually had, was Scott Fawell, who I believe was his chief of staff later on. He was certainly in the center of that circle of influencers. Did you know him?

McDonald: I did not know Scott Fawell. The person I dealt with at that level was Bob Knudson. I think Scott Fawell had moved on to the McCormick Place authority.

DePue: The pier authority?

McDonald: The pier authority.²⁸ I think he had moved on. That was his reward, I suspect.

DePue: Any final words on the Ryan administration and your relationship?

McDonald: I look at these things over time. The ability of the Ryan administration to accept the foundations and the progress and the programmatic stuff that was built during the Edgar administration, at least when it came to child welfare, and I assume it was elsewhere as well, made all the difference at DCFS. It's always possible for someone to come in and say, "I don't want to do that; I want to change directions" without having a sense of why. But the continuity that was provided because they could accept and work with the foundation that was built made DCFS the successful entity that it became, and it took that long to make those changes. For whatever reason, that happened, and I attribute that to several factors in the Edgar administration.

I think they struggled early on, the governor's [Edgar's] administration. After the governor took the huge step of entering into the B.H. settlement agreement, consent decree, and committing to the change, there were a number of tricky starts and stops, which is not unusual in the early stages of implementing a huge piece of legislation when you have tight fiscal times. But then the ability to actually see it through in Governor Edgar's eight years was actually remarkable. There were times that required incredible patience on the part of the governor and his staff, when looking at the resource demands of DCFS and still seeing stuff that was less than pretty in the press, but they hung in there. That, I think, was the hardest part. Those changes, though, everyone acknowledged made sense, so that made it easier for the next administration, for the Ryan administration, to say, "We don't need to mess here; that work has been done." I think that's essentially what was done there.

²⁸ Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority (McPier), which owns and operates Chicago's McCormick Place and Navy Pier.

DePue: At the end of that administration, his [Ryan's] problems are front-page news practically every day; the indictment seems to be coming at any time. He's obviously not going to be running for office again. What was your personal feeling about all of that?

McDonald: My personal feeling was regret; I think that was the biggest one, just this regret that Governor Ryan had this history catch up with him. It was wrong, but the regret I had is that it happened at all; it didn't seem to me that any of that was necessary. I always wondered about that, but then, I've never had to run for office.—I regretted that for him and for Lura Lynn. I was saddened by it because I think that when the leader of an organization or the state does something that brings disrespect to state government or to an organization, it affects everybody that works there. It affects the people that receive the services; it affects everybody in the state. That's something that I've always been saddened by, to have that happen. It's happened to a lot of folks, and most recently former governor Blagojevich.

DePue: You've already said you didn't have a lot of occasions where you dealt directly with Governor Ryan. Did you like the man?

McDonald: He treated me well, so I appreciated that. I didn't have to fight side battles with him. He and Lura Lynn were supportive of the department, appeared to listen. I'll give you an example of something that is, I think, a really difficult situation. There was a case that I briefly mentioned before—I may have mentioned it off the record—it's Baby T case. This is not an unusual case except for the participants. When you have people of political or corporate stature, or someone with influence that is dissatisfied with the way the state agency is handling a certain case, it's not unusual for people to call whomever they can. In this particular case, a young child was in the care of a couple in Chicago who were very influential. They were so influential that no judge in the Cook County court system was willing to serve as their judge, so this case was being heard by a judge from Kane County. It's fairly unusual to have a juvenile court judge have a change of venue because of that. But it was also a case in which there was a serious conflict about the case plan: whether or not this child should have its rights terminated, what should happen next, whether the child should be returned home. The mother was very active and became very politically involved, had some very aggressive attorneys jumping in all over the place. In the end—or not quite the end—but one of the key legal decisions made was that a judge refused to terminate the parental rights of one of the children, and that was the child that was in the care of this couple.

Along the way, a lot of people called me on it, a number of them. I mean, I got calls from former Governor Thompson on this. I got a call one morning. They wanted me to tell our lawyers to appeal the court's ruling. Now, the appeal of the court's ruling would have sent a signal to the judge, in this case, that the state did not support working with the mother. It would have, in all probability, resulted in a change of custody—having the child

taken from the current foster parents, this couple, and placed someplace else with someone who was willing to work with this—and also a change of guardianship from the state to a private individual or someone else. That is always possible; a juvenile court has wide latitude in doing that. Our lawyers, in reviewing all the facts on this case, just said, “There’s no basis to appeal. The judge is not ordering anything except that the mother be given a chance to prove whether or not she can successfully demonstrate parenting abilities.” We explained that to the parties. “No child is moving. The child remains right where he is right now. The mother’s going to have to demonstrate that she’s doing everything required, and we’ll have to see if she does or not.”

So I got a call from the governor who said, “I am going to be meeting with the father,” and he explained to me everything that was going on. He said, “I really do think that they’re right and you should do this.” In the room at the time with the governor was Bob Knudson; Diane Ford, who was the lawyer; and I think Jim Bray, who was the public information officer for him. I was on the phone in my office, and the governor said, “I really think we ought to do this. So, Jess, what do you think?” I said, “Governor, with all due respect, it’s absolutely the wrong thing to do.” And he said, “Well, tell me why.” So I explained everything. He listened. There was this silence, and he said, “Okay. You’re the director; I trust you. I’m going with you.” And that’s the last I heard of it.

As it turned out, a year later the case went—although the parents got their own lawyers and went to court, all the work that had been done by the department allowed the mother to demonstrate whether or not she was going to be an adequate parent. And a court that favors biological parents—a judge, especially, who favors biological parents—ruled that guardianship would be appropriate, so this couple was able to achieve guardianship. They didn’t like me a whole lot, but I told the governor I personally would tell them what action we were going to take; that it was the right thing to do, and they may not like it, and I knew that would be the case. So I’m being a little obtuse about this because it’s a really sensitive issue; this case stuff is really sensitive, and I prefer not to actually use names if I can... It’s just not necessary. But I think the situation is one that a lot of people in the field can identify with at a lower level. In juvenile courts around the state, stuff like this happens every now and again.

DePue: But what I’m hearing is that when it came to the point where the governor needed to get involved or had decided to get involved, you appreciated that he, one, heard you out in terms of explaining your position, and two, ended up supporting your position.

McDonald: Exactly. That meant he had to deliver hard news in his own way to someone that was actually close.

DePue: We're at the end of his administration, obviously. The Republican Party in the State of Illinois did not fare well in that 2002 election. The Democrats had a close primary, but Rod Blagojevich won the primary. Jim Ryan was running on the Republican ticket. He had the wrong kind of name, coming after a big scandal with George Ryan. Blagojevich easily wins that election. What happens then as far as you personally are concerned?

McDonald: This was a very interesting period of time. I had not decided what I was going to do. I had been encouraged by folks to try and stick around. I was told by some folks, who were close to the administration but not in the Blagojevich administration, that I was a candidate, one of several they were considering. I had made it clear, as I had previously with other folks, that new governors get their choice of who they want in their cabinet, but I let it be known that I was interested in serving. I had on several occasions offered my resignation in writing to [Alonzo] Lon Monk, in a meeting with him and Louanner Peters, and they said, "Please, no, hold on to that. You're one of two people, and we'd like to have you, if you're willing, stick around for a while." I said okay.

One of the topics of the meeting was, apparently they had some candidates for jobs and we had plenty of openings for exempt positions, which did not require civil service status. But we did suggest to them that although we had plenty of those jobs, it's really important in key positions that they be people who are skilled in the area, who know what they're doing, and one of them was the position of deputy director for child protection. I had a very qualified person in the position, and in this meeting, they asked me about someone else. They asked me if I knew a certain person. I said, "No, I don't." They said, "Well, we'll send you his résumé." I said, "Okay." But I thought I had the understanding when I left that meeting that key positions, like deputy director's positions, would be positions they would run by a director for agreement. And if there was disagreement, then you make your other decisions before announcing them.

DePue: Is this before the inauguration?

McDonald: This is after. I'm being called down. I come down from Chicago for a meeting in the governor's office with Lon Monk and Louanner Peters; I then drive back up. On the way back up I get a phone call, and I'm told that the governor has just announced that (laughs) there's a new deputy director for child protection at DCFS. I'm stunned, but I get the message. It turns out this particular person had been fired by DCFS in the past, and the media just had a field day over this particular appointment. Not only that, but I had a very qualified person sitting in the job. His wife heard it on the news, so they heard it. So this all came back later.

But later that week, I just made the decision: I'm gone. When I talked to the governor's staff about it, I asked Louanner Peters, "Was there something about our conversation I misunderstood? I thought that you would

be running names by, that I was going to look at this résumé and we'd talk." She said, "Well, the governor made this decision on his own." "You mean without anyone advising him, without talking, without checking to see if this person's qualified or anything?" She said, "The governor made the decision on his own." I said, "Okay." So on a Thursday night, I wrote a letter to the governor's office. I took that letter of resignation. It went up. I sent an e-mail to staff thanking them for all of their work. We had what were known as—I guess now they call them blast e-mails or whatever, but it went out earlier than most, so the governor's office was a little surprised. But they had their warning.

Their style of operating was, in a nutshell, contemptible. To consider DCFS a throwaway agency, and to consider child protection a throwaway patronage job—that you can just put anybody in it—that, to me, told me what they would be like as stewards of child welfare. I realized then that I would have virtually no say whatsoever in this administration and probably was not really a candidate except a total fallback until they could find someone. At that point, I just decided, I will get out.

DePue: Do you remember roughly the time that occurred, when you handed in your resignation?

McDonald: Yeah, it was in March, and it was on a Thursday night. I don't remember the exact date; I just remember it was on a Thursday night. I was trying to figure out how to send an e-mail, and a couple of staff people came over and told me how to get an e-mail that went to everybody as opposed to... I was not used to using the e-mail in the system because the lawyers told me not to use the e-mail. (DePue laughs) And we just finished up stuff. So that was late on a Thursday night; Friday I was talking to foster parents. It surprisingly made the papers in the early morning edition. I did not send it to the media, but someone did. I left on Friday—or I didn't leave then, I announced it. I gave them thirty days' notice, essentially.

DePue: In other words, you were two months into the administration before you turned in your resignation.

McDonald: Right.

DePue: Had you ever met Governor Blagojevich?

McDonald: No.

DePue: Had you sought out an opportunity to meet the governor?

McDonald: No. I have always—kind of training, I guess—you work through the appropriate chains.

DePue: And obviously he hadn't looked for the opportunity to meet with you, then.

McDonald: Right.

DePue: What happened in your life—and let's move through this fairly quickly, if you don't mind—after you resigned?

McDonald: I took about a month or so just to kind of look at options. I was afforded an opportunity to head up a grant that was funded by the Pew Charitable Trust on foster care reform, kind of a national education effort around foster care issues and financing; I did that through the University of Illinois. There's a research center for children and families over there. I headed up that project for over a year and then went into independent consulting. I started serving in December later that year on something known as the Braam Oversight Panel. There is a child welfare litigation settlement in the state of Washington; it's a panel of five people, and I'm the child welfare expert on the panel. I've been doing that since, I think, '03.

DePue: And that keeps you busy to this day.

McDonald: That and the consulting does. The biggest thing about consulting is making the transition from telling to listening. When you're a director, I always believed in the concept of active listening, that I wanted people to actively listen to me. The real issue when you're working with people in consulting is that you actually have to listen to them. You would be a great consultant; you listen really well. (laughs) So that's actually been a new experience but a much different style of helping people. Instead of directing, you have to help them find their way. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't, but the one thing you have to remember is that you're no longer running any one ship.

DePue: Yes, that would be a big change.

McDonald: It is a big change.

DePue: What I want to do next is very briefly go through a list of some of the things that you've been awarded over the last ten, fifteen, twenty years. This is 1997, the Motorola Excellence in Public Service Award. This is a statewide reward, and you're the recipient of that; that's obviously something that you're proud of, and rightfully so. I'm going to list some of the others, unless you want to make any specific comments on any of these as we go through here. 1996: Award of Excellence in Public Child Welfare Administration from the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators. So this is only about two, two and a half years into the time that you've actually had the job.

McDonald: Yes.

DePue: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2002 Adoption Excellence Award; the 2004 Exemplar Award for Outstanding Service by the National Network of Social Work Managers; 2000 Lifetime Achievement Award for the Illinois Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers; and the

Lifetime Achievement Award for the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators and the American Public Human Services Association. All that's a mouthful, I must say.

McDonald: Well, the organizations' titles get longer, which means they're less effective than they were before. (DePue laughs) No, those were all recognitions—each and every one of them—of what everyone did in the system. Believe me, I was proud to accept those awards, but I always did it with the full understanding that I did not ever consummate a single adoption; that was done by people in the field. But to have a system, to have the honor to lead a system that was filled with such good people that did good work and got good results, to have the support that we had—it's special. These awards punctuate it a little bit, but they're not **ever** as satisfying as the real thing of just doing the work.

DePue: It's clear that you had great success; that the child welfare system in Illinois was turned around; that because of that, you probably saved lives and certainly changed an awful lot of lives in a positive way. So I'm going to now ask you to put your modesty aside for just a bit and reflect on yourself: what particular traits or skills do you think led to the success that you had?

McDonald: First, I mentioned very early on that my parents taught us to work and to value work. Actually, I joked we had work permits when we were two years old. I was going through some of the materials from our basement last night, and I joked with my wife; I said, "Oh, here it is; here's my work permit when I was two years old." But all of us were kind of—**you work**. I think just having a strong work ethic was a big part of it, and that came from them. My father worked for the government; he worked for the Treasury Department and IRS, and he valued public service. He was quiet about it, but I had a sense that working in the public sector, in public service, was a good thing. I've never really had an ambition to go beyond that. It's not about getting wealthy. I've actually been surprised at how many people... When you go to class reunions, it's always interesting: more people are interested in the work that people have done with their lives than what kind of car they're driving. It's really intriguing, because you find some just amazing stories about what people are doing in this country and other countries to make the world a better place. I'd like to think I learned some of that, or somehow or another it was just something that was part of my makeup.

My experience in Vietnam taught—if you're going to be blessed about being there at all, it's to be there when I was there, have the opportunity to get to know the Vietnamese people, and get to work with some kids, just to have some exposure to their lives. That was really important. I think all those experiences kind of helped.

One of the things that people would say about me is that I was a tad assertive or aggressive, and when I believed in a certain point or something like that, I was not going to give it up easily. I was convinced from all of the

work I had done in the field, the work I had done around DCFS—around budgets and around policy—and the people I knew that worked there, I was absolutely convinced that this agency had the makings of a great agency. And it was because of the people that were there. I was absolutely convinced that all of us could change that, and that's exactly what I believed. I believe that everyone was part of that and that my job was to set the table, to listen to every good idea.

I used to say—and to this day believe—you rob and steal every good idea you can get that will make a difference in the way things get done. There is no pride of authorship; you get as many ideas on the table, and you encourage as many people to think about it. You hear from people at every level in the organization. I used to shadow, if you will, caseworkers, just to get their feedback on what they were seeing; some of them were very clear with me, and they knew they could say what they wanted to say. I'd hear from judges on a regular basis. It's being out with people that actually did the work. Matter of fact, I was in Chicago so much, I used to run into people on the weekends just because I'd be up there for other reasons, and everyone that was up there was convinced that I lived in Chicago, because they were so used to absentee leadership. There are too many good people in this system that serve it. I just think everyone wanted to be director of that agency, and there are a lot of people who could have been and would have done a fantastic job. I'm just glad I had that opportunity.

DePue: You had opportunity to work with lots of different administrations. Now, admittedly, early on, you weren't close enough to see the inner workings of the administrations, but towards the end of your career you certainly were. So I want you to make an assessment of Governors Walker, Thompson, Ryan, Edgar, and Blagojevich. How would you rank them?

McDonald: Rank them. (pause) Walker: ambitious... Thompson: I thought he had a way of bringing people together on both sides of the aisle, had a way to work with people analytically and politically. I think a lot of him, a great deal of him. Jim Edgar brought the highest level of integrity to the office that I've seen. You can look around the country and you won't see better examples of that. Not as close to a lot of people and programs, but focused on what was the most important thing to achieve in government. George Ryan: just a nice guy, capable politician—probably more than a capable politician—heart in the right place, I think, for the most part, but flawed in a very significant way. Blagojevich: I think what has happened speaks for itself, and I don't have a lot of regard for him. The amazing thing out of all of that is that through the good and bad leadership you get, government manages to survive and hopefully prosper, and not just in one area or the other. I don't know if you really wanted me to rank top to bottom, because, you know, different times, and I think everyone has their own ranking on these.

DePue: I think what you did was very illuminating.

McDonald: Okay.

DePue: How about the thing, when you look back in your own personal career, that you were the most proud of?

McDonald: I can tell you in a heartbeat. I was a caseworker, and I remember sitting in this living room with this family when we were actually getting the kids back home. I'm not going to tell you the name of the family, but I can tell you the name of the kids. I have an actual image of that evening in a downstate community, and just being able to help return these kids to their parents. And they did well, for as long as I know. That was one of the absolute total highs. That was it.

DePue: How about a disappointment?

McDonald: (pause) I don't think I ever had any really major disappointments, but there was a disappointment of a certain type in government, and I'll give you an example: Pate Philip maligning minority workers out of Cook County, and the tepid responses to that by many people.²⁹ The tinkering people would do with the department's budget, which was in retribution for something they didn't like, but was clearly going to cause a negative impact on how children and families were served. It's the games that people would play in politics that did not serve children and families well, and there are far too many of those stories. Those disappointments were an accepted part of life; it's just that you would wonder, you'd say, "How could someone that says they care so much do something like that?"

DePue: We did this interview because this is part of the Jim Edgar Oral History Project and you were a critical member of that administration, so I'll ask you to give an assessment of the Edgar administration.

McDonald: Came in at one of the most difficult times fiscally. One of the things I've always believed from my training in the Bureau of the Budget and on the legislative appropriations staff is, I don't care how great the idea is for programs; if it's not affordable, it will be an idea that won't be realized. So getting the state's finances in line was job number one, and that meant making hard decisions. Now, what's amazing about that is making hard decisions is usually accompanied with creating great resentment, and that was not the case. Actually, I think his approach to managing the state's difficult financial crisis was unifying, that everyone appreciated the leadership in bringing this to a successful conclusion. But I think that now, you don't find that kind of a unifying message around trying to deal with the fiscal stuff.

²⁹ During an interview with the *Daily Herald* editorial board, Philip criticized DCFS workers' handling of the Keystone Kids case and remarked, "I'll say it—some of them do not have the work ethics that we have. Secondly, they don't turn on or squeal on their fellow minorities. I don't know what you do about that, but it's kind of a way of life." *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 1994.

And look at what we're dealing with today. When's the last time the general assembly said, "We are not the last word in appropriations?" I remember Sen. Howie Carroll standing up at the end of every session saying, "We declare the budget to be balanced." That was because the general assembly was very clear that they were the last word in appropriations, and Governor Edgar was very clear that they were. I think governors before him and after him have felt the same way, until recently when it's, Let's just pass the buck because we're not quite sure what we want to do. Governor Edgar never passed the buck, and he took strong stands on social issues that people didn't like—choice. I think he was a fiscal conservative, and he was more socially moderate than most Republicans liked. But I will tell you, I really identified with that kind of leadership.

Above all else, he was extraordinarily principled, and that can mean lots of different things. It means a lot of people don't get what they want, so they're upset because someone is taking a principled position on stuff. I didn't have the pleasure to get to know him at a really personal level. I think he had very little time to have a broad circle of friends. I think he was committed to his family in a way I've not seen any other governor before and since. I think he was committed to governing well. He had a small circle of friends—that's my impression—but he didn't go out of his way to try and figure out, How can I make everybody I meet my friend. He just went out of his way to make sure, How can I be a good governor for everybody that I meet?

DePue: How would you personally like to be remembered?

McDonald: (pause) Kindly. (laughs) You know, it's funny, I hadn't thought about... I think as someone who helped other people get the job done, because I got plenty of recognition in the media for stuff that happened on a day-to-day basis and for other awards. I've got plenty of that stuff. But I think I would be disappointed if people in the field didn't understand that all I did, everything I did, was about making the system better for them and the kids and families they served. That's how I'd want to be remembered.

DePue: You have any final words for us, then, Jess?

McDonald: It's about public service, and I think one of the things that it's real easy to be cynical about is public service. One of my favorite books is *Stewardship* by Peter Block.³⁰ It's about the notion that your responsibility, whether you're in the public or private sector, is to leave the enterprise better off for your having been there. That was one of those things I encouraged people to read, and offered it to young people who were thinking about any kind of endeavor, because it can put you at odds sometimes with the comfortable way to go. But I do think that, in a way, if you think about effective stewardship and

³⁰ Peter Block, *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self Interest* (San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Pub., 1993).

leadership, you think about Jim Edgar. I'd like to be thought of in the same way.

DePue: This has been a wonderful opportunity to get inside DCFS and really understand how it works, how any governmental institution like that works, and I appreciate the time that you've taken to allow us that inside view, Jess.

McDonald: Thank you, Mark. You're a good listener.

DePue: Thank you.

(end of interviews)