

Interview with  
Beverly Helm-Renfro  
Interview # 1: June 15, 2010  
Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

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DePue: Today is Tuesday, June 15, 2010. My name is Mark DePue, the director of Oral History for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I am delighted to be here with Beverly Helm-Renfro. Good morning, Beverly.

Helm-Renfro: How're you doing?

DePue: Doing great. I'm really looking forward to this interview. Actually, this interview has two distinct directions. Today we're going to talk about growing up and especially as we go through the process of your early career, your growing up in Springfield, we want to weave in the story of your father, Doc Helm, who is a legendary figure here in Springfield, and the photographer of many politicians as he worked for the Secretary of State's Office for a decade. Part 2, which will be the next time we meet, will be your experiences as then-Senator Barack Obama's secretary, in the early 2000's. So, another important and significant chapter, and two very different kinds of discussions, I think. But it's a delightful opportunity for me to meet with you, so let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

Helm-Renfro: I was born in Berwyn, Illinois, adopted to Doc and Dorothy Helm. They called the Lutheran Orphanage there—I think it's in Alsip, Illinois—and asked them about children. My mother did not have children. So, my dad had told them that the prerequisite for this was that they were going to have a boy. Boy was first. That was the absolutely bottom line. Well, they called my mother and told my mother, we have a beautiful baby girl and we think that you may like it and maybe Mr. Helm would like her too. But, we also have a little boy that's about three and you can come and see him as well. See what you see and think about it. So, Mom and Dad carted off to Chicago to go see the quote "boy" and it came out that they took him through the nursery to my crib, stood there and was talking. My Dad put his finger down there and was tickling me or playing with me, Mom said. The woman said, "Well it's time to go see the little boy." And my dad says, "No, I'm taking her home," because I wouldn't let go of his finger (laughs).

DePue: Now, I think you didn't say when your birthday was.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, May 26, 1946.

DePue: Very good. So we got the hard part out of the way. Do you know much about your actual parents' background?

Helm-Renfro: No, I do not, I do not. There was adoption papers and finally, when Mom passed away, that I got to see those that just had basically the information from the adoption agency as to our health and everything pertaining to that.

DePue: I know you had a brother as well.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, Jimmy Helm, or James Richard Helm.

DePue: Who worked as a photographer here in this institution for many, many years.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, and started out with Dad. Well, Dad was going to make a photographer out of Jimmy, because he couldn't make one out of me. (laughs) I guess he didn't think it was a girl's thing. But, I loved to take pictures as well. Jimmy and my dad were the technical ones. I like to do pictures whenever I liked to. And so that's the way we've done it.

DePue: Is Jimmy younger than you?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, he is three years younger than me. He was born in 1949. The orphanage called my mom and dad, and said "We have a boy by the same mother and different father. Would you be interested?" So they went to get him. They hid him out at my grandmother's house for about four weeks 'cause he was going to be my Christmas present. I had a Christmas present; I almost thought it was a doll sitting in the highchair and I went to touch him and he went to screaming and he screamed the whole day long. I told my mom, I said,

“Please, I do not want a baby brother, take him back,” Mom said, “ I don’t think we can take him back now.” (laughs)

DePue: I’m sure that at this point—he just passed away this past year—that you would love to have the opportunity to have him back.

Helm-Renfro: Oh yeah, yeah. I really would. You know, he died in July the 14<sup>th</sup> and so it’s coming up close.

DePue: Let’s talk more about your parents. Let’s start with Doc.

Helm-Renfro: Okay, Dad started out with the Secretary of State in 1934.

DePue: I believe he was born in 1911?

Helm-Renfro: In 1911.

DePue: And I bet his given name wasn’t Doc.

Helm-Renfro: No, it is Eddie Winfred Helm.

DePue: In a lot of things I’ve read about him they refer to him as Winfred and not Eddie.

Helm-Renfro: No, his first name is Eddie Winfred Helm.

DePue: How did he get to be Doc?

Helm-Renfro: That started in Mount Vernon. He worked for a pharmacy as a teenager and he would take the medicine to the elderly that couldn’t get out in his neighborhood, like cough medicine or whatever. He’d get it with his own money sometimes, and take it by their house and give them the medicine. That’s why they came up with the name Doc.

DePue: Okay. 1934 you said he started with the Secretary of State?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, he started putting the flag on the top of the Capitol Building, when you had no harnesses or anything to protect you. He climbed up there every morning and put it up, and every evening he took it down.

DePue: Do you have any idea how he got that job?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, my uncle Eddie, which was my grandfather’s [brother], Daddy’s uncle, told his dad, “Now, if he’s not going to go to college,” he says, “that boy ought to have a job. So I’m going to take him to Springfield and get him a job.” Because Uncle Eddie was high up in politics, I understand. But we’ve never been able to find any information on him. I wish we could.

DePue: You said he was from Mount Vernon, though? How much of an African-American population did Mount Vernon have at the time?

Helm-Renfro: You know, I really couldn't tell you. I'm not sure. But they had a considerable one and they were working-class people. Most of them worked for... Grandpa used to do railroad cars, manufacturing company that was there. And I think a lot of them probably worked there at a menial job.

DePue: You said he was involved in politics. Was he Republican at that time?

Helm-Renfro: You know, I don't know what outfit he was. We don't have any information. Nobody every talked about him.

DePue: Because that's during the time, of course, when Franklin Roosevelt was elected in 1932 there was a huge shift in the Black population at that time who had always seen themselves as Republican because of the Lincoln connection—

Helm-Renfro: Right.

DePue: —and started to vote Democratic after that point.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, and I'm not sure. I would assume that whoever the Secretary of State was at that time, probably that's who Dad came under, that political round there.

DePue: Do you have any idea of how the family ended up in Mount Vernon?

Helm-Renfro: Grandpa married his second wife—he moved there, um, let's pass that one. I'll get back to you on that one. I didn't bring the history of how they did that.

DePue: You can always add that when we get to the point of reviewing the transcript.

Helm-Renfro: Okay.

DePue: Sorry to put you on the spot there like that.

Helm-Renfro: That's all right.

DePue: I read something else, that he enjoyed being a hobo.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, loved it. But it seems they always caught him by the prison and would put him out. Dad got so scared, because him and Mr. Bish, who was his best friend, and what they would do, they would put on their like coveralls over their suits, hop the freight train, ride them to Chicago, and then come back after the weekend. But they always got caught before they got to Chicago and they put them off by the prison in Pontiac. Dad and them were afraid that they would think they were state prisoners so he stopped hobo-ing.

DePue: Was he doing this during the time that he was actually working for the Secretary of State's office?

Helm-Renfro: No, this was before he ever went to work for the Secretary of State, when he was still in Mount Vernon and Mr. Bish was still in Mount Vernon.

DePue: It illustrates, though, how tough the times were then. I'd never heard of somebody doing it because they enjoyed doing it.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, he enjoyed it because he got to go places he had never been. Um-hm. They couldn't afford to travel.

Granddaddy used to have us laughing because my dad used to stutter when he was young. One Thanksgiving he told my grandpa, he says, "I-I-I w-w-wonder what the poor folks is having for Thanksgiving dinner." Because they had a feast. There was eight of them, and my grandmother and grandfather. And my grandfather looked at him and he said "Probably the same thing we havin' boy." Because Grandpa had a garden outside in back of the house where he raised potatoes, corn, you know, and we would, whenever we'd go to Mount Vernon to visit Granddaddy, we'd always have to.... We always lined up on each side of Granddaddy and walked down the streets with him. And when somebody said hello, you said hello. It don't go you not say hello because Granddaddy was going to tan your behind right there.

DePue: Tell us a little bit more about your dad, then, during those early years, working for the Secretary of State's office.

Helm-Renfro: He started there and then he went into microfilming into the library.

DePue: What was he doing initially?

Helm-Renfro: He was a janitor and put the flag up on top of that building every morning. That was his duty.

DePue: At the Secretary of State's Office or the Capitol Building?

Helm-Renfro: No, the Capitol Building, because the Secretary of State has all the ground.

DePue: It's not a bad gig to have in the middle of the depression, is it?

Helm-Renfro: No, but it... I was really thin. A good wind could have just carried me on off. (laughs) and I thought, oh my goodness, Dad.

DePue: Then what's the next step...

Helm-Renfro: He went to microfilming into the Secretary of State's Library. He asked the head librarian at that time, and I don't have her name, if he could develop some film because they had a photo lab there. And she says, well, I guess on

your lunch hour and your break, yeah, if you want to develop some film you can go ahead. So Dad did. Mr. Bish was his first guinea pig and then my mom, then there was Jimmy and I. (laughs) So there was a long line of guinea pigs so that he could perfect his profession.

DePue: His profession at that time, that's when he began to...

Helm-Renfro: He was taking pictures all along. My understanding is, from my aunt that passed away several years ago, Dad was interested in photography when he was a young boy in Mount Vernon.

DePue: Do you have any idea what drew him to photography?

Helm-Renfro: I don't know, I don't know.

DePue: When did he start working this job of microfilming?

Helm-Renfro: He started in '34—I would say maybe early 40's.

DePue: I saw something that suggested 1942, so he had been working for quite awhile there. I assume somewhere in this process he got married as well.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, Mom and Dad were married in December 25, 1941. I always to think of that whether it was '40 or '41. (laughs) They had a Christmas wedding and my Uncle Booker who was—him and my dad looked like they could have been twins but they were two years difference in age—and everybody that was at the wedding they were coming up and congratulating my Uncle Booker and my Uncle Booker got tired of them telling them, “No, I'm not Doc, Doc's over there.” (laughs) So finally he just says “Thank you. I'm glad.” (laughs)

DePue: Tell us a little bit more about your mother, her maiden name?

Helm-Renfro: Mason. She comes from a long line...Dorothy Jennette Mason.

DePue: Comes from a long line of...?

Helm-Renfro: Uh, teachers. My grandfather ran the Pekin Theater and they were all involved in it when they were kids. They would pop the popcorn at home and my mom and her other sisters would take the people's money for the popcorn; they could bring their own soda in at that time. Then my Aunt Lillian because she was the oldest—she was born in July of 1899, and she would take the tickets at the desk, and my grandmother would be there. My Aunt Gwen who is still living now—she is 91—she said her little basket was up under where Aunt Lillian was taking tickets so she couldn't run around. Um-Hm, yeah.

DePue: Was your mother a little bit younger than your dad? He waited for awhile ...

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, my mother was born in 1916, January 14, 1916.

DePue: And she was already teaching at the time they got married?

Helm-Renfro: My mother was not a teacher. She did factory work. She worked for... they were out on 9<sup>th</sup>...Sangamo Electric. She worked out there as a factory worker.

DePue: Do you remember the story of how they met?

Helm-Renfro: I do. Mrs. Wynona Bish was her best friend and her run-around partner. She was dating Edgar Bish who was Dad's best buddy. So Mom met Dad. Mom had just broke up with somebody else that she thought she was going to marry and she didn't. But she ended up starting to date my dad. My grandfather did not like him. He thought he was a slickster. (Ha-ha) So Mom had to do some really maneuvering to get out, to go to dances with my dad. (laughs) So that's how they met. I think Grandpa kind of lightened up a little bit, 'cause they got married.

DePue: He thought he was alright after?

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: Well, they got married at an interesting time. This is three weeks after Pearl Harbor. Was there any thought of his going into military service?

Helm-Renfro: I assume he tried. They did not take him and he has told this story, that, because he had a heart murmur he could not go in.

DePue: Let's go back to his career as a photographer because I think it must be about this time that it starts to take off and become something more serious.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes.

DePue: Can you tell us a little bit about how that happened?

Helm-Renfro: The lady who was in charge of the microfilming library part of the Secretary of State saw that there was something in Dad's pictures that she really liked. So she went to the Secretary of State and told him, "I think that we have a photographer here. I want to show you some pictures." She asked Dad if she could take some pictures with her. She showed them to him and everything and that's how Dad became a photographer. He wasn't Chief Photographer at that time but he was Photographer and I think he was the only photographer they had.

DePue: Okay. Being the photographer at the Secretary of State's Office, does that mean he's taking photographs for only for the Secretary of State's Office, or does that mean that he's in the Capitol Building?

Helm-Renfro: He's in the Capitol Building, he's in the library, museum; wherever they needed him he was there.

DePue: I don't know whether this is a question you can answer, but what was it that they saw in your dad's pictures?

Helm-Renfro: I think just the eye that he had for taking a picture. Dad never took more than one picture. If he told you he was going to take one picture, that's it. Dad took that one picture. And he'd tell you, "I can get it in one shot." And he would do it.

DePue: One-Shot Doc?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm. He became One-Shot Doc.

DePue: That's kind of a natural, isn't it?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. (laughs)

DePue: So he had an eye for composition?

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: Was it primarily people he was taking pictures of?

Helm-Renfro: Not only that, he took pictures of—I have a picture of a carrot that was split in half and the carrot looks like it's two legs walking—scenery, buildings. The fire department used to—and maybe I can get in trouble telling this story—the fire department brought Dad one of their boom trucks to lift him up so he could take an aerial view of the Capitol Building. He was not afraid of heights. I'm scared to death of them. I think Jimmy was, too. But Dad was not. I guess after putting that flag up there it killed the fear.

DePue: Well, that gets some good exercise going up there every day to put that flag up.

Helm-Renfro: Dad was skinny; tall and skinny.

DePue: I also know that he developed a practice of having two cameras. What was that about?

Helm-Renfro: He had the same camera that he had as a professional with the Secretary of State—his was the same. When Dad wanted to take a picture that he was commissioned to do by the Secretary of State, he would take those pictures and if he saw something he wanted to take with his camera, he took it with his camera. Then he would bring it home at night and develop it in his photo lab at home.

DePue: Do you remember seeing him down there in the photo lab when you were growing up?



Helm-Renfro: Oh, yes, yes, many a day, many a day.

DePue: Did you get in trouble ever, going down there?

Helm-Renfro: No, really I didn't. We knew that we did not interfere with Dad's work and when we'd go down there it was just fascinating because there was 'Boots' Holland, Mr. Rose and my dad that were in the photo lab. Boots looked like my dad, too.

DePue: Boots Holland?

Helm-Renfro: Boots Holland, he was from Taylorville. And he looked like my dad. Folks would mistake him for Dad, too. Dad said, "I am not down there playing music, Okay?" Because Boots played in a band. So they'd swear that Dad was down there playing in a band (laughs). Dad said, "No it's not me, it's Boots."

DePue: Let's get back to a little bit more about your growing up. We've talked a lot about both of your parents, but what was life like growing up in that household?

Helm-Renfro: It was fun. Dad and Mom took us everywhere. There wasn't a place that we didn't go that Mom and Dad couldn't take us. We would go on when he was photographer for the Southern and Northern jurisdiction of the Supreme Council (of the Lodge). He was photographer for St. Paul's AME Church which was his home church here in Springfield. Pavey AME Church in Mount Vernon, Illinois—he was their photographer. He was the family photographer. People would call him for pictures at all times. Insurance companies would call him to go out and take pictures of an accident.

DePue: Did he ever get tired of being the photographer on call?

Helm-Renfro: No, no. When Dad dressed in the morning in his suit and his dress clothes—and that's the way he dressed seven days a week—he stayed dressed until he went to bed at night.

DePue: So that's what you're remembering. I'm looking at a picture of Cook Witter report—this one is February 29, 2004—on the cover there is a picture of your dad with his camera, suit and tie, sharp looking dresser.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, and that's the way he dressed all the time. Yep.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about the neighborhood. Was this primarily a black neighborhood you lived in?

Helm-Renfro: No, not at the time. It integrated a few years after we moved into it. But Dad wanted to buy the house. He had seen it, wanted to buy it, there was not any problems with him buying it because, not Doc Helm. (laughs) But when he

first saw the house it had a lot of work to do on it. And so he went to Conrad Noll, the father at that time.

DePue: The lawyer in town.

Helm-Renfro: Um-Hm. Told him that he needed to borrow three hundred dollars to put down on this house and he would get it back to him within six months. And he said "Do I have to sign any papers with you, Conrad?" and Conrad said "No, your word is your bond." So that's where the house came from. Dad went and put the three hundred dollars down.

DePue: What's the address of that house?

Helm-Renfro: 1128 South Pasfield. I live a block from it. I see it every day.

DePue: It's just north of South Grand, isn't it?

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: So it's not what we would consider today as the traditional east side of Springfield?

Helm-Renfro: No, no. That when they first got married they did live in the east side; it was on East Jefferson, 1100 block, that was their first home. I'm not sure if they rented that home or whether they owned that home or how that took place. But when they got married that's where they moved to.

DePue: Where did you go to school?

Helm-Renfro: I went to Hay-Edwards grade school, me and Jimmy both. Mrs. Turnbull was our kindergarten teacher. We have pictures of birthday parties in her room, and all the way through school.

DePue: I wonder who took those pictures.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, it was Dad. Mom always made sure that we had cupcakes and ice cream. Kids loved our birthdays. (laughs)

DePue: This was in the 1950's when you and Jim were growing up. What was the racial climate in Springfield at that time?

Helm-Renfro: You know, I really can't say because I don't know whether we were protected or whether we just never saw it. My mother's father had passed away. My grandmother still lived in home place at 124 North 14th Street. I mean when we went there we had friends and everything around us that we knew growing up. But when we went to Hay-Edwards School and when we began, I think we were totally the only blacks that were there when I started. Then it started

integrating from there because more and more Blacks were moving into the neighborhood.

DePue: Do you remember when you first became aware that you were different from other people around the neighborhood or in the school?

Helm-Renfro: I don't think I ever thought that. You know, it was like, I think I felt it more when I grew up than I did when I was a child. Because my friends were white, they were Jewish, they were... You know, those were my friends I grew up with and we went all the way through grade school with and they made no differences. Their parents made no difference. We knew that the drug-store on the corner we could not go in, because they didn't want us in there. I remember when my brother was, mmm, about fourteen he decided to try it. He went in and got a cherry coke. (laughs) But he had to take it out; he couldn't sit there and drink it.

DePue: That sounds like that would have been in the early '60s by that time.

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm.

DePue: Did your family have a television growing up?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. I don't think when we were younger, because our activities during the summer were like outside. We had a big back yard, we had a swing set, we had friends, we had parties all the time. My mom and dad would entertain their friends. We were always included. My mother belonged to a bridge club. The only thing Jimmy and I hated was to have to clean that silver every time the bridge club came.

DePue: When they had these parties, and when your mother had the bridge club over, was this an integrated group or was this... ?

Helm-Renfro: No, no, they were all black.

DePue: How about the church?

Helm-Renfro: Our church was integrated. Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, it still stands on 15<sup>th</sup>, between Washington and Jefferson and it's still integrated.

DePue: Would you consider the family religious?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, yes, yes. They had their very religious moral background. My mother was totally upset when I moved to Ohio and told her I was becoming a Baptist and I was leaving the Lutherans. She like to hit the ceiling. "You can't do that!" And I said, "Well why can't I?" "Because we adopted you from a Lutheran agency and we told them you would be Lutheran." I said, "Mom, I'm grown now. I think they figure I can make up my own mind." Mom said, "Oh, I just can't understand this." (laughs)

DePue: So she was the one who was the strong Lutheran and the strong religious influence?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes. We went to Sunday School at Holy Trinity. My mother's sister, Aunt Lucille, she would come home every weekend from East St. Louis and my Aunt Helen would come home from Centralia. They were the two teachers; Aunt Lillian was the social worker. And so, Aunt Lucille would fix pancakes. She fixes divine pancakes. But if you didn't go to Sunday School, you didn't get pancakes. You could forget it. So we were all eager to go to Sunday School. (laughs) Then we would go to the house, because we were right behind the church, and we could walk right across the alley-way and go right into Grandma's house, have our pancakes and that and be ready for church.

DePue: And get both.

Helm-Renfro: Yes. (laughs)

DePue: I'm interested, in part—I guess I should confess I'm a life-long Lutheran—and you don't find too many African-American Lutherans who have grown up in that tradition. You mentioned, was it your father who was more aligned with the AME tradition?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, he came out of Pavey AM&E Church out of Mount Vernon and then came into St. Paul's here. Um humh. And we didn't go to church with him that much. It was always with Mom. I guess maybe it was that we were supposed to be brought up Lutheran because we were adopted or either that was my mom's concept. I'm not sure which one. (laughs)

DePue: Was he going to a different church or he just wasn't going?

Helm-Renfro: No, he went to St. Paul's every Sunday. He never missed a Sunday if he could go.

DePue: Well, that's interesting.

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: Where after Hay-Edwards, what's the middle school?

Helm-Renfro: I went to, uh, it's the school right off of MacArthur.

DePue: Is it Franklin?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. I went to Franklin Middle School. I was the only African-American there the first year. The only one. But I had grew up with all these kids; these were all still my friends. So I didn't have a real problem integrating into that school system because people knew me.

DePue: This would have been—I'm trying to figure this out—about 1959, 1960 when you got there?

Helm-Renfro: Probably so, because I graduated in '65.

DePue: My question earlier about whether or not you had a television at home is based in part with how closely the family was watching what was going with the Civil Rights Movement, because the late '50s and early '60s was a very active time for this.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, and it became my militant years. My mom and dad were livid. (laughs) We had a couple that lived down at the end of the block. He was a Black Panther and his wife was too. I used to love to go down there and just hear about the things that they were doing in the Movement. You could watch it on TV and, yes, we did have a TV, we always had a TV but I don't think maybe in our younger years we paid that much attention to it. But as we grew up, yes, that's the way we got news and information.

DePue: Do you remember your parents' feelings about the Civil Rights Movement, about the Freedom Rides and the peace marches and things like that?

Helm-Renfro: My mom and dad were kind of like from the old school and they were kind of like, you know, they were glad to see that this was all going on, but they didn't like the violence when they would attack the Freedom Riders or when they would attack them when they would go the [lunch]counters. Mom and Dad told us, "You stay out of that corner place. Don't you go over there, because I don't want anything to happen to y'all."

DePue: That corner place was where the Black Panther was hanging out?

Helm-Renfro: No, that was the drugstore that didn't like to serve blacks.

DePue: Oh.

Helm-Renfro: But I played with his kids. (DePue laughs) So I don't know what that was all about.

DePue: That was okay with your parents and that was okay with the owner of the drugstore as well?

Helm-Renfro: Mm hmm, yeah, because we were all friends. We were all friends in that neighborhood. And everybody knew. If they saw you doing something coming home from school, my mom knew before she had me hit that door, or Jimmy hit the door.

DePue: Was the neighborhood primarily white at that time?

Helm-Renfro: It started integrating. We had a school teacher that had the house next to us; that was Mrs. Hammonds and she was with district 186. Then we had next to her, I'm not sure...

DePue: I'm assuming she was black?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. Even though that she was fair enough that she didn't look Black. And then, two doors down, there was the Haydens. His son played an instrument, I forget what it was. He was very well-known and I can't remember what it was. And then there was the Holmes, Smiths were next to them and then the Black Panther family, the Greers—(laughs)—in fact, I think the Greers were probably the darkest blacks on that street. Maybe that's why my mom and dad had that fear or thing that they would upset the neighborhood. But it never happened. It never happened.

DePue: If you don't mind my making an observation, you're fairly light-skinned and Jim was as well. Was that a factor in your being able to get along with the rest of the kids in the neighborhood regardless of what the racial mix up was?

Helm-Renfro: It could have been. I don't know, but it could have been. With Jimmy and I having the same mother, our mother was White our fathers were Black.

DePue: Okay. Let's go back a little bit to your father's career during this time. He was obviously very well-known within the government circles as well.

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: Were you aware of that, conscious of that?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes. We got to see all the dignitaries. We got to meet them all. We got pictures taken with them: Gene Autry, Mohammed Ali, Martin Luther King, Peg Leg Bates, uh...

DePue: I'm not sure I know who that is.

Helm-Renfro: ...Count Basie. He was a performer and a lot of people don't remember him but he was a good performer. My dad was a founding member of the Frontiers International and every year their fund raiser was to bring named people here. So we got to meet a lot of these people through that organization. And then when we traveled, I got to meet presidents of the Bahamas. The only trip I didn't get to make with my mom and dad was when they went to Africa.

DePue: When was that?

Helm-Renfro: They went to Africa, I think in the '70s with the Council of Deliberation, which is the lodge. They went to Africa and that king was, I understand, killed; my dad told me, "I'll never go back to Africa." I asked him, "Why, Dad?" He said, "To see the poverty there and to see a king live the way he

did. We ate off of gold plates and gold knives, forks and spoons and gold chalice at the palace. These kids were sitting there waiting for them to throw the garbage out, and guards were there so that they couldn't even have the garbage." He said, "I'll never go back."

DePue: You mention the Frontiers International, what was that?

Helm-Renfro: They were a service organization. They're still alive and kickin'; every year they have the Martin Luther King birthday. My father was the founder of that group, along with Dr Lee, Mr. Leon Stewart...

DePue: Very good. How about the Council of Deliberation. You mentioned lodge a couple of times; tell us a little bit more about his lodge activities.

Helm-Renfro: Okay. There was, let's see, the Supreme Council of Deliberation and what he would do, he was the photographer for them and he belonged to, I think it's the Northern Jurisdiction. But he used to take pictures for the Southern so the Southern hired him too. So we got to go every place. We got to go to Philadelphia, we got to go to Atlanta; they have their big meeting every year. So that was our trip.

DePue: Is this an African-American fraternal organization?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, um-hum. Just like the Shriners here have the White side, there's been a Black side too.

DePue: So the affiliation would be with the Shriners?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hum.

DePue: Okay. It sounds like he had moved up pretty well into that organization, as well.

Helm-Renfro: Yes. He was the—I'll have to get you the name of it complete—but he was over the State of Illinois.

DePue: The 'Supreme' whatever that position title was?

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: Well that's impressive. I kind of cut you off while you were talking about some of the people you met. Quite an eclectic group: Gene Autry, the next thing you mention, Mohammed Ali, Peg Leg Bates, Count Basie...

Helm-Renfro: That is a funny story right there with Mohammed Ali.

DePue: Well, go ahead and tell us that.

Helm-Renfro: We sit up there and Senator Charles Chew, he kept telling me “I’m going to bring Mohammed Ali here.” I said, “Yeah, okay. Well when you do, tell him I’m available.” I just knew Charles Chew did not know this man. Well, I happened to make the mistake of seeing him at the fight in Manila that they did: it went overseas to have the fight because he couldn’t fight here, Mohammed Ali, couldn’t.

DePue: The “Thrilla in Manila”...

Helm-Renfro: Yep.

DePue: And he was Mohammed Ali by then.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, and I’m going “Oh no, there’s Senator Charles Chew. He does know him.” So Chew brings him to Springfield. So, anyway, Senator Chew calls me and he says, “We’re over here at the Howlett Building and Mohammed Ali wants to meet you.” And I’m going “Oh, what did you tell him Senator Chew?” He said, “Just what you said.” I thought, Oh, I’m not going over there. He said, “Come on over; he wants to meet you.” So I went on over. Dad was over there taking pictures and everything. Dad said, “What are you doin’ over here?” I said, “Senator Chew told me to come over here and meet Mohammed Ali.” So Dad said, “Well you might as well get in the picture with him.” So I got my picture taken with him and Dad sent it to him for him to sign. He didn’t sign the picture; he signed a piece of paper that went with the picture. I said, “Okay, whatever.” But when he met me and Chew says, “Well this is the one that says anything.” And my dad looked at me and says “What did you say?” I said “I didn’t mean it Dad, I just didn’t mean it. I just knew that Senator Chew did not know him.” And so Mohammed Ali laughed and he says “Yeah, Chew can be very raw at times, can’t he?” And I said, “Yes.” (laughs)

DePue: Well maybe you need to tell us a little bit more about Senator Chew, then.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, Senator Chew was a character. Senator Chew liked to party. Senator Chew had a gold Rolls-Royce.

DePue: What was the district that he represented? Do you know?

Helm-Renfro: It was in Chicago and I’m not sure what district it would have been. But he represented Chicago.

DePue: Was he African-American?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes.

DePue: But the old-school, apparently?



Helm-Renfro: Oh, so much of the old school. My boss was Fred Smith at the time, and was a very old-school gentleman. My name was Miss Beverly; he never called me anything other than Miss Beverly. He told Chew, "That's just a spectacle you don't need to have here. Now you take that car somewhere else and you take those women somewhere or send them back, but you are going to act like a gentleman being a State Senator." So, my boss would keep him straight. (laughs) He'd come in our office all the time and my boss would say, "What are you coming over here for?" He said "I came to see how Beverly was doing." "He said she's doing just fine. Now Miss Beverly, don't let him sit down. You go on out that door Chew, I mean that." And so he'd go out the door.

Now if they couldn't find Chew for a vote, they called my boss, Fred Smith. Fred would go find him and tell him "We need you for a vote." Or Daley would call the office and say "Fred, is my son on the floor?" Daley was the mayor of Chicago, now at that time. And he would say "Yes" "Well, then you find him. You find Charley Chew and you find my son and tell them we need this vote." They were usually in their offices. So he'd go get them. Fred Smith was the Orator of the Senate. When they needed to buy time to get all the Democratic Senators on the floor, Fred got up and spoke on any subject he wanted to speak. But he would tie it into that bill one way or another. (chuckle) And he would talk as long as he needed to talk to get them all on the floor.

DePue: We're into the early 70's now, I think, which is the time frame you're talking about. Let's go back again to the 1960's and talk about the years when you're in high school. Where did you go to high school?

Helm-Renfro: I went to high school at Springfield High School and graduated from there in 1965.

DePue: Did you have similar experiences as you had at Hay-Edwards and at Franklin?

Helm-Renfro: Springfield had blacks that were already coming in, so they were there. Then there was myself and Shirley Wilson that all belonged from that neighborhood. I don't remember Mrs. Hammond's daughter going there. But anyway, it would be all of us. I think maybe I noticed more that there was a difference, because most of them that came in from the East side would come—they were not as fair-skinned as us. So the thing of it was we thought we were better than they were. I think I worked very hard at proving no, I'm not. I'm just African-American like you are. But the first year was hard because they assumed that because you're fair-skinned you thought you were better than we were. And because I had a lot of white friends, because I grew up in that neighborhood.

DePue: If I can, you mentioned yourself that you're half white, as well. Did you ever identify yourself as being white, or as being mixed?

Helm-Renfro: No, hm-um, no.

DePue: Always identified yourself as being Black.

Helm-Renfro: Mm hmm.

DePue: Why do you think that was the case?

Helm-Renfro: I think that's because my mother and father and the family I had around me. You know, we were all so well-connected and we were just so family orientated that you just didn't really think like that.

DePue: Would you say that you identified yourself that this was a different culture than if you had grown up in a white family, though?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yeah.

DePue: How so?

Helm-Renfro: I don't think I would have had all the experiences I had (laughs). I think that's probably the basic thing. And I probably would have grown up thinking more that I was white than I was black.

DePue: Did you see any racial tensions in Springfield High School while you were there?

Helm-Renfro: There were several. There were several. Especially when some of the white boys would try to cross over with black girls. And some of that was happening then.

DePue: That they would try to date black girls?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm. And that wasn't happening. Even the black girls weren't prepared for this.

DePue: You said that wasn't happening. Why was that?

Helm-Renfro: It's just that the culture that we came from was that you actually do not cross over. You were black and because of that, the first thing that people would say when they got into an argument, that you were a—I can't say the word, an 'N' word<sup>1</sup>—and I think all of us felt that at Springfield. I think all of us felt it.

DePue: If I understand this right though, you're saying the feeling among the black students was stronger that that wasn't allowed more so than on the white side?

Helm-Renfro: Probably so. I would think so.

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<sup>1</sup> Nigger was the word, a harsh pejorative at that time. The underlying usage had changed considerably from the time of Mark Twain's works in which it was an identifier, not a racial slur.

DePue: I'm guessing you were a very attractive young lady at that time.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, (laughs).

DePue: Did you have some white boys that were kind of flirting around a little bit?

Helm-Renfro: Some that I had gone to school with all my life, they may have been flirting but I didn't see it. (laughs) That wasn't happening.

DePue: So, in your mind that just wasn't allowed?

Helm-Renfro: To me, I don't think it was that it wasn't allowed; I think my parents would have been broad-minded enough that if I had decided that that's what I wanted, that that would have been okay. But I wasn't into boys until almost my senior year because Doc and Dorothy didn't believe in that. Your homework and your school work were your priority, and family.

DePue: What were your interests at the time?

Helm-Renfro: I liked accounting and I wish I had pursued that. Um, I enjoyed just being around the family. We had such good times. When I was in high school, I became more of kind of like a care-giver for my mom because my mother had had cancer. She had had her breasts removed and the lymph nodes all up under her arm, under the radical ones, surgery. So, my last two years was kind of nursing her all back to health. So my school was, do homework, home. So my activities were basically—my accounting teacher saw something in me and made me her assistant—so basically that was all I was in.

DePue: What were you thinking your future was going to be at that time?

Helm-Renfro: I wanted to be a model. I wanted to be a model.

DePue: How did you come up to that decision?

Helm-Renfro: I don't know. You used to have the *Ebony*<sup>2</sup> Fashion Shows come every year and I love clothes. My aunts, my mom's sisters, used to fight over who was going to take me shopping for my dresses. But I was a tomboy, too. (laughs) That combination didn't work too well.

DePue: Was athletics even an option for young ladies at that time?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, I did trampoline at the Y. Mom and Dad had us in the Y. I did trampoline. I wasn't really like running. I liked horseback riding at the time; had never been on a horse but I thought it was interesting. (laughs) Eventually I did get up on a horse. And I thought, uh, no this is not for me. (laughs)

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<sup>2</sup> A popular magazine for and about blacks.

DePue: I keep going back to this, but this to me is the historical part, the fascinating part: mid-sixties, oh my gosh, there was so much going on during that time. Were your parents active politically, at all?

Helm-Renfro: My dad more so than my mom because of his job, not because it was the Civil Rights Movement or anything like that. Dad felt that, his philosophy is that, if he did his job well, nobody really noticed the color of his skin. He was Doc Helm the photographer. That's what my dad worked at, all the time perfecting. We weren't allowed to get into that whole scenario other than see it on TV, because Dad said "You know, people may not accept you as well because of your mixed parentage, than if they would if you were all black, darker skinned." And I could see where he was coming from then. I really could, because all of us in that neighborhood kind of stayed to ourselves, even though we were five houses straight down. We didn't play with those kids as much because we had grown up with our own set of friends. So, it was kind of a mixed thing. In the 60's I guess it was just... I was fascinated by the Civil Rights Movement.

DePue: But it sounds like as a spectator, more so.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes. Then when Martin Luther King came to Springfield in the 60's—I think it was '65—and met with Mayor Howarth, black peers I think really had decent jobs. Springfield was kind of not in that whole scenario. So I don't think that Springfield was as active in the Civil Rights other than a few factions here and there, than most people were.

DePue: Is that because you're saying there weren't the pockets of Black poverty like there are today in Springfield?

Helm-Renfro: There was the John Hay Homes.<sup>3</sup> We weren't allowed to go to the John Hay Homes.

DePue: That was your father's decree?

Helm-Renfro: That was Grandma's decree. Grandma lived at 124 North 14<sup>th</sup>. Boys would come by and they'd say "Ooh hi, Bev, how're ya doin'," and my grandma would say, "Get on goin'" and Grandma would imply that.

DePue: This is your mother's mother?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm, yeah.

DePue: But also, this is the time when there's a lot more blue collar work available in Springfield.

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<sup>3</sup> Crowded multi-story public housing units on the east side of downtown, occupied largely by blacks at that time. They had been replaced at the time of this interview by attractive individual largely single-story units.

Helm-Renfro: Right. And my mother's sisters were teacher, social workers, and a nurse. So, they had their profession and when they got into those professions they branched out. I had an uncle that was in Quincy that was a teacher. Two of my aunts were teachers: one in Centralia, one in East St. Louis. Social worker aunt that was in Danville, Illinois. My Uncle Jimmy worked at Pillsbury [Mills] and had a good job there. Mom worked at Sangamo Electric, brought in good money for those days. So Aunt Evelyn had married a gentleman in service so she was off in Germany and all those other places where they accepted blacks. So there wasn't the need to go out there and fight because Grandpa, my mom's dad, had kind of, well, put all his daughters and sons on the track they should be.

DePue: I'm assuming that quite a few of the people within your immediate family circle had gone to college as well.

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes.

DePue: Any particular college that they had gone to or all over?

Helm-Renfro: I'd have to ask Aunt Gwen about that, but I think that Aunt Helen went to the University of Illinois. I think she went to the University of Illinois. I'll have to ask Aunt Gwen; she can tell me exactly.

DePue: Let's get to finishing high school and beyond.

Helm-Renfro: Okay, so the last year of high school I met a gentleman. He had just gotten out of the service and I got married in October of '65 (laughs)

DePue: This must have been a whirlwind romance, then.

Helm-Renfro: It was the last year of high school and my mom and dad weren't too happy because he was four years older than I was. Mom and Dad thought he knew a little bit too much that I didn't know because he had been in the service and around. They wouldn't let him take me to my prom; I had to get a high school gentleman to take me. Because at that time the high schools required a grown man couldn't walk in there; it had to be somebody who was in a high school. I remember the guy that took me to high school. We had fun during our high school years. I had girlfriends that were now black. I would go over and spend the night. We'd get in trouble, though. We decided one night that we wanted to go down and see what the Railroad Tavern was like.

DePue: The Railroad Tavern?

Helm-Renfro: The Railroad Tavern. I was about seventeen. We talked Mrs. Bruce into taking us down there. She says "I'm going to take you down there; you've got twenty minutes and you'd better be out." We said, "Okay, no problem." There was no back door to this tavern, okay. (laughs) It sat on the railroad tracks (laughs). And so we went in—Mildred, Mia and her sister—we went in and

we went there, and no sooner had I got in there, somebody saw me, called my dad, told my dad, “Your daughter’s down here at the Railroad Tavern.” My dad came. They stopped the music and all I heard, and I saw my dad—Dad didn’t see me but I saw him—they stopped the music and they said “Beverly Helm, your dad’s here.” We snuck around the thing, got in Mrs. Bruce’s car and went and got ice cream and went back to our house so I wouldn’t have to lie to my dad. My dad called and said, “Well where’ve you all been?” I said, “We went to get ice cream.” He says, “Somebody saw you down at the Railroad Tavern.” I said, “Railroad Tavern? Hum, maybe it’s somebody that looks like me.” Mrs. Bruce said, I’m not going to lie to your dad no more. “Yes, I took ‘em to go get ice cream.” She didn’t mention nothing about the Railroad Tavern, so she actually didn’t lie to him. Yep, um-hm. But everybody knew me in Springfield, so if I was somewhere where I wasn’t supposed to be my mom and dad got a phone call.

DePue: Seventeen, so you’re not of drinking age, did you...

Helm-Renfro: No. Didn’t drink. Didn’t want to drink.

DePue: Just was too curious about what was going on...

Helm-Renfro: What was going on. Everybody was talking about it.

DePue: What were they saying about the tavern?

Helm-Renfro: They were saying, you know, it was the hot spot to go and everybody was down there dancing and having fun; we wanted to see. So we got Mrs. Bruce to drive us down there, so we could see.

DePue: It sounds like your dad was very protective of his reputation.

Helm-Renfro: Um, probably so. Yes. He worked hard to get that and be recognized for it, and that people respected him for who he was. Yeah, so he probably didn’t want me to get in trouble (chuckle).

DePue: Or Jim, either.

Helm-Renfro: No, no. But Jimmy had a little more leave-way than I did. Jimmy, when he was sixteen, got his car. I couldn’t have a car. I didn’t learn to drive until I was late in my twenties.

DePue: But apparently all that protection didn’t stop you from meeting this young man.

Helm-Renfro: No. Dad would let me go out to Withrow Elementary School; on Friday nights they had dances out there. I guess I was a little devious then, I guess so. I got to admit to it. Mom and Dad said that we could go out with a couple of seminary students from Lutheran Concordia.

DePue: That sounds safe.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, they were black. We made them drop us off at Withrow, then come pick us up (laughs). That's how I met Marvin; he was there.

DePue: Your husband's name then is Marvin? What was the rest of his name?

Helm-Renfro: Eugene Day.

DePue: He was still in the service at the time?

Helm-Renfro: No, he had just gotten out of the service, the Navy.

DePue: Was he wearing his uniform when you met him?

Helm-Renfro: I'm not sure if he was or not. I'm not sure. Hm, I don't know. But my girlfriend, Mildred, was dating his best friend. I think that's how the meeting came about.

DePue: What was it about Marvin that struck you?

Helm-Renfro: I guess that he has such a wonderful smile. Just had a good presence about himself. He was short like me (laughs). He wasn't too much taller than I was. And, the coal black wavy hair and the smile, yeah, I think that had a lot to do with it.

DePue: At that time what did he see himself doing in the future?

Helm-Renfro: He had a job at Wiley Office Equipment store. He delivered and drove for them.

DePue: So that's what happened to the modeling career?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. Unfortunately, that's what happened.

DePue: Was it the family's intention that you get done with high school and you go straight to college?

Helm-Renfro: I think Mom and Dad kind of left that up to me. Modeling was what I wanted to do. They had talked to modeling agencies; in fact I could have gone to one in Chicago. But my mother and dad weren't too happy about me having to go to Chicago. That was a little bit too much freedom than, you know, being here.

DePue: Was this a modeling agency that specialized with African-Americans at the time?

Helm-Renfro: I don't know if they did or not. I don't even remember what the agency was. But I think it was an integrated agency.

DePue: As I understand, you did go to college, though, after you graduated.

Helm-Renfro: Well, no. I went to college later in my life. (laughs)

DePue: Let's postpone that, because I also know that about a year later you had a baby.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, Sheila. Sheila Reneé Day.

DePue: Were you working at the time?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, Dad says "Okay, since you got married and that, you need to have a job."

DePue: Did he know anybody in State government who could help you get a job?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, yes. Dad knew everybody (chuckle). So I got a job with the Secretary of State's office. Um-hm.

DePue: Who would've been Secretary of State at the time—Paul Powell, maybe?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, I think so.

DePue: What did you do at the Secretary of State's office?

Helm-Renfro: First job was teletyping. We would take information from the State Police; it was in the license plates division. We would get information from the State Police and then we would have to teletype them back from that license plate, who the owner was and who it belonged to, the address and everything.

DePue: Did you like that work?

Helm-Renfro: It was alright. I worked at nights.

DePue: Why were you working at night?

Helm-Renfro: Because that's when they had that job available. It paid decent money.

DePue: Was this something they had people doing around the clock then?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hum, yeah. And the only opening, I think, when I first went to apply for it, was the night one.

DePue: Your husband had his work as well?

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: So you're juggling two careers at the same time as being a young mother. Where did you live?



Helm-Renfro: We lived in an apartment building my dad had. My dad was also a very good—no I can't say that—my mom was very good person as far as making sure places were maintained. My dad started buying property and we'd move people in; this was one of the properties he owned. We had the bottom apartment.

DePue: I don't want to get too far beyond your youth and your childhood years before I ask you this question: Who during that time was the most powerful, most important influence on your life?

Helm-Renfro: Ooh, probably my dad and my mom.

DePue: Together as a team?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm.

DePue: At that time did you have an understanding of how successful your father was?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes. Then I did. Then I did.

DePue: Okay. How did you end up being able to get to college, then? What time did that happen?

Helm-Renfro: That happened back in probably the 90's.

DePue: Oh, then we want to postpone all of that for awhile. Then let me move to this. When did you move away from the job of being a teletype operator?

Helm-Renfro: The Secretary of State was looking to create a new division where they would have people that specialized in nothing but doing license plate renewals—not the renewals—but vendors would come in, we'd do the whole thing, walk it through the whole process of getting plates, titles done, fees paid, everything at one-stop shop. That was because the Secretary of State wanted a program like that, because it was all scattered out. So there was me, Cindy Pride and there was about eight of us in that group. What we would do: when people would come through that needed to get it all done in one place, we would take it and walk it all through, tell them what the fees were, what checks they needed to write, then we'd walk it all the way through, get everything, come back, get their license plates and they were out the door

DePue: So this means you're working during the daytime in this job.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes

DePue: When did that job start?

Helm-Renfro: I don't know. Probably about '68, that's what I'm thinking, '68.

DePue: Okay. Well '68 is a pretty momentous year for American history as well. I want to just get your reflections on some of the things that were happening at that time: the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, all these things seem to be coming to be a head and it all seemed to be happening in 1968. What was your feeling about the Viet Nam War? You're married to a young man who recently got out of the military.

Helm-Renfro: Right, right. You know, I'm not sure. I understand that there was a lot of people that were against the war and a lot of people for it. So, I guess it was just kind of daily keeping an eye on what was going on, in politics and in the war and everything. But I don't know if we really had a stance on it. I would think that—if I was venturing to guess—that whatever the government had said, that's what my parents would have believed at that time and went forward with that and probably would have been not too happy with the people that were against the war.

DePue: You mentioned before they had a dim view of all the violence going on.

Helm-Renfro: Right. They definitely did not like the violence.

DePue: Do you remember when Martin Luther King was assassinated?

Helm-Renfro: I was in school, no I wasn't...

DePue: That was April of 1968.

Helm-Renfro: No, I was at work, I think, when it came through.

DePue: An awful lot of the major cities with African-American populations exploded. Chicago certainly was one, but not alone in that respect. What was going on in Springfield? What was the reaction here?

Helm-Renfro: I think it was total shock. That this man was a man of peace; he was man that was trying to change things in the system so that blacks could go, or anyone, could do whatever they wanted to in life. And it wasn't just particularly the whites, blacks could, anybody; and for him to be shot down like that was just... I just remember just crying when it came across our computers. Our computers would be able to get the news, and somebody said change your computers to the news and then that's when we knew. It was just devastating that this man had been killed—this man that stood for so much peace and love and was shot down.

DePue: Was there any fear of there would be violence in Springfield because of that?

Helm-Renfro: I think that there wasn't a lot of fear. We hoped that it wouldn't happen. We kind of stayed close to home. Dad went out to things. Dad didn't seem to have a fear so, you know, I don't think we had that actual fear there in Springfield.

DePue: Your mentioning your dad brings up the question here: was he involved with chronicling, photographing the life of the black community in Springfield?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, very much so. He would take pictures at weddings, he would take pictures at birthday parties, family reunions, um, just everybody and anyone. We have so many pictures that I still have to go through. And negatives—when my brother passed away—there's boxes upon boxes of nothing but negatives.

DePue: This might be a bit of an unfair question, but at that time of the Martin Luther King assassination, would he have had the impulse: I need to go out and see what the reaction of the black community is?

Helm-Renfro: No, no. Dad wouldn't have done that. No. I think the churches had a lot to do with keeping the calm here, that we do not need to tear up the city and our community to get across the hurt and the pain that we're feeling right now.

DePue: Well that wasn't the end of the violence in 1968. A few months later you have the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and then you've got the spectacle in '68 at the Democratic convention in Chicago. Were you paying attention to that?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. Very much so. (laughs) But, I mean, it was like, okay, this was happening in Chicago. You kind of expected Chicago maybe to do these things. But you didn't expect Springfield to do it. I think there was a lot of calm. We had pastors that got together and would keep the calm in the community here. Then we just saw another; when Bobby Kennedy was killed it was like it was another incident of whether there would ever be unity in the community. If people would ever—Black or White—be able to trust each other. You had that kind of trust factor there and you looked at people differently.

DePue: Was this the time frame then that you were interested, at least, in the Black Panthers that were down the street?

Helm-Renfro: No, that was more in Martin Luther King's years in the 60's.

DePue: Earlier.

Helm-Renfro: Uh-huh. I was interested in their philosophy because I heard so much on the TV about how negative they were and how they were destroying stuff and killing people. I had known the guy that was a Black Panther. I had known him for years, his family, so it was easy that I started going down there and hearing some of their philosophy. Some of the things they were doing, and I was like, okay this is not what we're seeing. This is not anything like we're seeing.

DePue: What were you seeing when you went down there then?

Helm-Renfro: I would sit and listen. I don't think I wanted to take that next step to become a Black Panther, but I wanted to listen to their views. I think I always liked to hear both sides of the story and then I could make up my own mind. Then basically, I could say to my mom and dad, "You know, they're showing them as killers and that but the Federal government's giving them the Free Lunch Program, or Free Breakfast Program for kids. So why are they all bad? Maybe we're seeing just a fraction of their group that are bad or want to go out and hurt other people. But we're not seeing the whole picture; they're not telling you the whole picture."

DePue: Their approach was certainly different in many respects than what Martin Luther King was advancing. Then post-'68, things did get a little more violent, didn't they?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. They did.

DePue: What was your parents' response to that, where you have this group that was much more violent in pursuit of civil rights?

Helm-Renfro: I don't think they thought it was right and the right way to do it. I think that they thought King's way was the right way. Dad admired King once he met him in '65 here in Springfield, and talked to him. I think my dad really became to look at Martin Luther King as probably the person that will do the things that we need to do to get the jobs we need, to be able to live where we want to and everything. But my mother and father had already succeeded in that. So my dad was like, "You don't get involved in all these things, for the simple reason is that I have a job that I do and I do very well." So I don't want to say that it wasn't that he didn't want to rock the boat, it was more like his philosophy was that you just do the job that you're supposed to do, and people will see you in a different light. They won't see you as that African-American or that black man. No, he's One-Shot Doc.

DePue: So in many respects your father and the success he had in his career—both your parents and many people in your family—they personified what Martin Luther King was preaching about.

Helm-Renfro: Right, right.

DePue: Let's make a shift here—pressing the point and making it hard on you I'm afraid—but let's go back to your beginning to work with Fred Smith. I think that was 1972, 1973. How did that come about?

Helm-Renfro: I was tour guide at the time.

DePue: Tour guide?

Helm-Renfro: Secretary of State had set up this new system of tour guides. So, me and Cindy Pride, we became tour guides, the first of the whole group.

DePue: Tour guides where?

Helm-Renfro: The Capitol Building. We would tell the history of the Capitol Building. So one of the stops was the Illinois State Senate and my dad was on the floor at the time. I have to back up and tell this story. Cecil Partee was the Senate—no he was not Senate President then—but he was on the [Senate] floor and my dad was on the floor. He said to my dad, “I’d sure like to get to know her.”

DePue: Who did? Cecil?

Helm-Renfro: Uh-huh. About me. My dad says, “If you even think about it, I will run you out of Springfield, Illinois.” I did not know that this had transpired. Dad never said anything. The only time that I found out about it was when I went and interviewed with Fred Smith. Dad was friends with him; he would take pictures over at the Capitol Building. Fred was looking for a nice African-American secretary, somebody that presented their self well, to do the job.

DePue: What was his district?

Helm-Renfro: He was more like, it was the thirteenth senatorial district, now I think it’s the thirteenth, twelfth, somewhere in there, in Chicago. It would have been Lake Shore Drive area.

DePue: So this is the traditional African-American community he’s representing?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. Yes. And so Dad said, “Why don’t I let you interview my daughter?” (laughs) He said, “Okay, bring her over.” Because I always dressed decent, I’ve never been able to dress **down** a lot. A lot of people at work even today that wear jeans and that, I may wear them every now and again but that is not my thing.

DePue: After all you grew up in a house where your father always dressed well.

Helm-Renfro: Yes. And sometimes you can’t get people to understand that this is a tradition, okay? You don’t wear jeans to work. Oh, my dad would have flipped out if I’d worn jeans, or pants, at that time, to work. I was to look like a lady at all times.

DePue: What were Senator Smith’s expectations for your job, then?

Helm-Renfro: Just to keep his office together, make sure that everything was done for his constituents. When a constituent had a problem, I was to solve it. If I couldn’t solve it, then he became involved. And State agencies did not want him to become involved.

DePue: This is quite a different kind of challenge than being a stenographer and a tour guide.

Helm-Renfro: Yes. It was a big change.

DePue: I mean, this is more than just being a secretary. Were you the only assistant he had at the time?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. There was one senator, one secretary.

DePue: Where was he in the hierarchy of the Senate leadership?

Helm-Renfro: He became the Dean of the Senate. He was the oldest member in the Senate with the most years.

DePue: Did that get him a larger staff though?

Helm-Renfro: No.

DePue: He's not the Senate President or the minority leader?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm. He was Dean of the Senate and that was it.

DePue: Do you remember any of the specific challenges that you discovered when you first started working?

Helm-Renfro: Well, the thing of it is, that when I would work for Fred, when Miss Margaret would come—that was his wife—I was at Miss Margaret's disposal. And that could conflict with what you were supposed to be doing on that job, because you were supposed to be there. But if Miss Margaret needed to go over to the church, or somewhere, and Miss Margaret asked Miss Bev, Miss Bev went. We had to work that out one way or another. (laughs)

DePue: How would you describe Fred Smith's character and his personality?

Helm-Renfro: He was from the very, very old school of being a gentleman. He was a total gentleman at all times. He was kind of like... I guess he was kind of like the godfather for most of them there, because when they wanted to seek advice they came and talked to him. When Mayor Daley called, he called Fred Smith.

DePue: Does that mean that Smith was Daley's man in the Senate?

Helm-Renfro: There was probably several, but I think that Fred, he knew was the old statesman and if he wanted to see where the climate was or something, or wanted to talk something over with him, Fred would get the call. I would say, "Just a moment, Mayor Daley, let me go get him from the floor." At that time we were outside the Senate floor and I would just go ahead and ask him to step off the floor and come and talk to Mayor Daley. So he [the Mayor] would say, you know, "Oh yeah, they're all on the floor." And sometimes there was a vote on a bill.

DePue: How would you describe his politics?

Helm-Renfro: Very Democratic, very Democratic. He believed in the Democrats and their system. When they did not do everything that was gentlemanly-like, or if he thought that they were not leaning the way they should, old Fred would have a stiff talk. (laughs)

DePue: When you say “very Democratic” does that mean that he was more loyal to the Democratic Party than being a philosophical liberal?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, he was much the Democratic Party and the gentleman of it, the statesman. Him and Corneille Davis, because Corneille was in the House and Fred Smith was in the Senate.

DePue: What was his profession?

Helm-Renfro: He worked for the city of Chicago but I couldn't tell you. That was always kept separate from his duties here.

DePue: The years you were working with him, this is during the time-frame as I recall when there was a transition from coming every other year to being a yearly thing and transitioning more to become a full-time legislature.

Helm-Renfro: We were more yearly. When I got over there it was more yearly; they were there every year and they would be there in the late hours—you would stay 'til they went home. If they were there until three o'clock in the morning, you stayed until three o'clock in the morning. Sometimes Senator Smith would say, “Now little lady, you got a baby at home; you go home and get that baby and bring her on back here with you, because you don't need to be away from your baby.” And I'd bring Sheila up there. So Sheila was born into this, too. Sheila, when she was one, was one of the poster kids for Paul Powell. He had a hat, the flag, sitting in the rocking chair (laughs) and I think one of Dad's cigars in her hands. (laughs) I'll have to find that picture.

DePue: Well that answers the question I was going to ask: whether you knew Paul Powell, another colorful character.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes.

DePue: Tell us a little bit about Paul Powell.

Helm-Renfro: My dad traveled with him, mostly.

DePue: This was when he was Secretary of State, right?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes and he would travel with him. Paul Powell was from Vienna which was not far from Mount Vernon; they were both from Southern Illinois. Dad would travel all the time with him as his photographer, would go to all these

meetings and different organizations that he would speak at. They would stop somewhere to have dinner or to have lunch or whatever. And some of these places would not serve them because of my dad, because he was black. And Paul Powell would look at them, "I'm the Secretary of State and I will not be back to your establishment. If you cannot feed him, you cannot feed me." So they'd drive all the way to Mount Vernon, to my grandmother's house. My grandmother, no matter what time they came, would get up, fix them a full course meal, and they would eat dinner there. That was more often than I thought it was, um-hm.

DePue: Well that's a fascinating story, not one that you would expect to hear about Paul Powell, but so much of his reputation today is tied to that shoe box after he died.<sup>4</sup>

Helm-Renfro: I know, but he was always... Dad traveled with him everywhere. Wherever Paul Powell went, Dad went, because he was his number one photographer and he knew Dad would get the shot the first time.

DePue: What was your dad telling you and the rest of the family about Paul Powell as a politician as a personality?

Helm-Renfro: He respected him. He highly respected him. Dad was as shocked as everybody else was about the shoe box (laughs) but I remember Dad saying, "Hm, I wish I'd known about them shoe boxes." (laughs) He says, "I don't know where the money came from; I don't have anything to do with it."

DePue: So he obviously wasn't there taking pictures when the illicit transactions were going on.

Helm-Renfro: No, no, huh-uh. That was probably a backroom deal that Dad was not invited to. I would assume that maybe that was Paul Powell's way of protecting him, as well as his driver. Because I know the driver is one of the gentlemen that called me and told me after Dad had passed away, about him and Paul Powell and when they'd go into a restaurant. He said, "I couldn't get over—your grandmother had white carpeting in her entrance way into the house—we'd come in, there'd be mud on our shoes from where we'd been trampling through cutting ribbons or whatever, and she would say, "I didn't get it so you couldn't walk on it. Just walk on through." They'd want to take their shoes off and my grandmother said, "No, you would offend me if you do that." So they'd walk on through. She said, "It isn't nothin' that I can't clean." Um-hm.

DePue: Well, you lived amidst a lot of colorful personalities here.

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<sup>4</sup> Secretary of State Paul Powell, a powerful Democrat from southern Illinois who maintained a hotel suite at the St. Nicholas Hotel in Springfield, died suddenly in October of 1970 while in Minnesota. Within days, some \$800,000 in cash was discovered in a shoebox and other containers in his hotel room, causing huge speculation about the source of the money, especially since Powell's state salary never exceeded \$30,000 per year. He died with an estate of \$3.2 million.



Helm-Renfro: Oh yes, yes.

DePue: The job the years you were with Fred Smith, tell me what you liked most about the job and then we'll let you tell us what it was you didn't like about the job.

Helm-Renfro: Okay. Well the day that I walked into the office I walked into Cecil Partee's office and said to his assistant, "Senator Fred Smith has just hired me as his assistant." Senator Partee walked out and he saw me and said "what are you doing here?" I said, "Senator Fred Smith has just hired me as his assistant." "That's fine. Put her on payroll and get her out of my office." He wasn't taking no chances that my dad thought something. He said, "Your dad's done told me he'll run me out of Springfield, and he's probably the **only** man that can do it. No, you stay in Fred's office." (laughs) I thought that was so comical. Dad would come over and he'd see how we was doing; I'd say "We're doing fine." Dad believed in you not taking a lot of time off. I think out of fifty-eight years that Dad was there, he was only sick maybe three or four days. He lost all that sick time when he retired.

DePue: What did you like most about the challenge of being...

Helm-Renfro: I think I enjoyed the constituent work. I mean everyday work was fine, but the constituent work was kind of like a challenge because you would have to get to the different agencies and get the information as to what was going on with this person or why this person didn't get this cleared off of their record, a DUI or whatever, and it had been so many years that it was still sitting there and it should have been cleared off; they had the paper that showed it cleared off and they would send me a copy. So it was interesting to get all those things done. Or people that wanted to get on to state jobs or whatever, we'd have to steer them in the right direction as to where to go to get to fill out the applications and everything.

DePue: What part of your background and your training prepared you to do all the constituency work?

Helm-Renfro: I think it was love for it. I think it was just that...

DePue: You just learned as you went, then.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, um-hm. You would learn who were your key people, if you needed to talk to when you wanted to get something done. And you got it done because all you had to do was call and say this is Beverly from Senator Fred J. Smith's office. Because by that time he was Dean of the Senate. They knew he had been there the longest and everything and they wanted to go ahead and get things done for him as much as they could. Sometimes we weren't successful in doing what we needed to do.

DePue: You've mentioned several times he was the Dean of the Senate, was that an official position or the title that the longest serving senator got, or...?

Helm-Renfro: They distinguished him with that title, Dean of the Senate. It's hung up over his door.

DePue: Very good. Now, what was it you didn't like about the job?

Helm-Renfro: The late hours. (laughs) Two, three o'clock in the morning and have to be back at 8:30, that was a little bit much when you're raising a young daughter.

DePue: Were you getting overtime pay for that?

Helm-Renfro: No, no.

DePue: A regular eight-hour-day salary.

Helm-Renfro: That's it. That was it. But when you signed on you knew that was part of the job.

DePue: Obviously Smith didn't see any other way because he wouldn't have told you, "Bring that baby back here."

Helm-Renfro: I think he loved for her to come. He loved for her to come.

DePue: Was he a good family man himself, then?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes. There was just him and Miss Margaret and I believe he had kids but I'm not sure how that whole scenario worked. Because he wasn't about talking that much about it. There'd be times when Mrs. Smith would drive him down and he'd say, "Miss Margaret she sat up there and she said, 'Oh Lord, take this wheel, I'm tired.'" He said, "I looked over at Miss Margaret and I said, I don't see God sittin' there so you better keep your hands on that wheel and keep a-drivin." (laughs) Oh my goodness.

DePue: How was the job different when the legislature was not in session, or he wasn't in town?

Helm-Renfro: It was quieter. You would go home on time. (laughs) Um, you still did a lot of constituent work; that was a year-round job. Answer correspondence: he kind of gave you free rein to be able to answer the correspondence. I would just ask him what his position was on a bill and then if people wanted him to vote on that bill, we'd send them a letter saying that yes, he supports the bill and will be voting in the affirmative from the desk when it comes before the senate.

DePue: In that position did you have an opportunity to meet all of the top politicians in the State?

Helm-Renfro: Um, not so much, but sometimes they'd be out on the Senate floor or in the Senate President's office or whatever, so you may meet them coming through. Governors would come through; we'd meet them.

DePue: Do you have any memories of meeting Richard Ogilvie? I think he would have been the Governor when you first got there.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, I think I met him, but I wasn't closely affiliated to—yeah, he was a Republican.

DePue: (laughs) Well, Dan Walker wasn't a Republican.

Helm-Renfro: No, Dan was a very nice man. I met him several times, probably through Dad more than through the Senate and then he was over in the Senate sometimes.

DePue: So you had a favorable impression of Dan Walker.

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: You might be one of the few people in town who did at the time.

Helm-Renfro: I thought he seemed like a decent man to me. I mean he always treated everybody decent, so, you know.

DePue: Did you have an opportunity to meet the mayor?

Helm-Renfro: Houston or...

DePue: Major Richard J. Daley.

Helm-Renfro: No, I got to talk to him on the phone.

DePue: Was that usually a pretty short conversation?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes. He wouldn't talk to us on this.

DePue: So he wasn't going to have a "chat you up?"

Helm-Renfro: No, no. It was like "Is Fred in the office?" and I'd say "No, he's on the Senate floor;" or "He's at the hotel; he hasn't come over yet." And he'd say "Well, you tell Fred to call me when he gets in."

DePue: Was he one of those people you referred to formally as Mr. Mayor?

Helm-Renfro: I don't think I called him anything; I'd just say, "Okay, Mayor Daley." (chuckle)

DePue: Any other names that come to mind? How about Jim Thompson?

Helm-Renfro: Jim seemed like a very decent man; even though he was a Republican, he was a decent person, very decent.

DePue: How about some of the other names you would have dealt with?

Helm-Renfro: Um, Governor Edgar, we didn't like him too much.

DePue: Because?

Helm-Renfro: Because at that time that's when they wanted Dad to retire, to give his position up. My dad, oh, my dad was mad that day. He called me; he was livid. "They have come over here and told me I have to retire. I'm not going to retire." Then the madder he got the more he thought about retiring. "I'm just going to leave. I've got fifty years." I said, "Dad, Dad, you don't want to do this. Don't do this yet. Just calm down and wait 'til we talk tonight." By that time I knew kind of what the system was like. And I told Dad, I said, "Now..." and Dad said, "Never mind, I'm not retiring, I'm not going nowhere." I said, "Okay." He says, "I'm going to make a phone call." Dad made a phone call and at the end of that phone call Dad had his job, he had a raise, and they left him alone.

DePue: What....

Helm-Renfro: I can't tell you who he called because he never revealed it.

DePue: I know that Edgar became Secretary of State in 1980, I believe. Was that when this would have happened? That sounds like fifty years would have been several years later.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, because Edgar and then....

DePue: Fifty years would have been '84.

Helm-Renfro: Okay.

DePue: And Edgar was the Secretary of State at that time.

Helm-Renfro: It would have been under Edgar. Yeah.

DePue: Well, you're not in the State of Illinois at that time either, are you?

Helm-Renfro: No, at that time I lived in—hmm '84—I was in Ohio. When Fred retired in '78 at the end of his term, I decided that this was a good time for me to branch out. I had never been anywhere but I had been to visit Cincinnati several times to visit a cousin and fell in love with the city. I'm thinking, okay this is good opportunity for me to really branch out. So I moved to Ohio.

DePue: Were you divorced at that time?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm.

DePue: When did that happen?

Helm-Renfro: Uh, let's see—Marv and I were married for about three years, and the reason we were married for the three years was because I was hoping he would kind of change and it never happened. I think with the Service and everything he just couldn't, he just couldn't.

DePue: So all these years you're working for Fred Smith, you were single?

Helm-Renfro: Uh, let's see... (hesitates) Yeah, some of it. We won't talk about this.

DePue: Okay. I assume your family was helping you raise your daughter, then?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yeah. She stayed with nobody but my mom and dad. I would go out once a month with my girl friends; she would go down there, she would sit up in my dad's lap and start crying. "She's gonna leave me again, Grandpa; she's leavin' me again, Poppa Doc." Dad thought that was horrible. "You're just leaving this child all around." I said "No I don't, I don't go nowhere. I just go out once a month." "No," he says, "you been going out." So my mom finally told me, she says, "Don't lock the door, just keep the door right there, wait for a few seconds and walk back in." I walked back in, Sheila wasn't crying anymore. Her and Poppa Doc were playing. I said "You big faker." I told Dad, "Can't you see through that?" [Dad said] "That baby knows what she's talking about." ...Sure thing (laughs).

DePue: When Smith retired in '78, was there any thought that you might be able to find another position in the State?

Helm-Renfro: I could have worked for the House member that was coming over, but I really didn't like him. He just wasn't my idea of the gentleman of Fred Smith. So I decided that was the best time for me to make my move.

DePue: Well, you made a big move.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, I did.

DePue: And what led to that decision to move to Ohio?

Helm-Renfro: I had flown up there and interviewed for a couple of jobs. I had a job waiting and I thought that this was the best opportunity I can. I wanted to get settled before Sheila came, so Mom and Dad had Sheila; they called me about six months later and they said, "You need to come and get your daughter." (laughs) I said, "Why?" Somebody called Poppa Doc and said she was over at the John Hay Homes with her little friends (laughs) from school. She had ridden her bike over there. My dad was hot. So he said, "She needs her mother." So then Sheila moved with me to Ohio. Let's see, I moved in '78,

she probably came the beginning or about the middle of '79, because I think I had her finish school here.

DePue: What did you do in Ohio, then?

Helm-Renfro: I worked for an insurance company as an insurance agent. Then, after that, I decided to—I always loved kids, I always had everybody else's kids when Sheila was growing up; they'd always want to congregated at our house. Kind of like when I was growing up with my mom and dad, they always loved to congregated at our house because Mom always had sweets there and ice cream and, you know, and milk and all that kind of stuff, so it was like a congregation place. But, I decided I was going to watch over kids. The woman that I went to church with at that time—that's when I came off Lutheran and became Baptist—the Baptist church had their great-grandmother who was in her late nineties and then her child and her nieces and nephews. They all wanted to be in that same house with somebody who would come and take care of the kids and the grandmother at the same time. So I went ahead; I took that job and did that for several years. Then I started volunteering at a halfway house for juvenile delinquents and met a girl friend of mind there. She was a social worker for that group home and so I worked for them as far as volunteering: coming in, really cleaning, keeping some program stuff together and all that kind of stuff. Then they offered me a job so I went with them. It was a new pilot program they had to teach these kids that were fresh out of juvenile delinquents' home and juvenile detention—and some of them had been to juvenile prison—to have a skill. There was two old gentlemen—and I think that's why I stayed—two old gentlemen that had all this skill in how to carve woodworking and make things and so that's what we did. We taught the students there how to do that.

DePue: This is going back to some of the crafts and skills that your dad would have probably been thrilled about.

Helm-Renfro: Oh yeah, yeah. I still have the cedar chest he made in high school. The teacher told him, "You need to learn how to do this because you'll never do anything **but** this kind of work."

DePue: What community in Ohio was this?

Helm-Renfro: Cincinnati.

DePue: Cincinnati. This was basically where your daughter was going to be growing up as well. She came of age there.

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm.

DePue: Did she like Cincinnati?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, she loved it. She loved it. There was a girl next door and then a couple at her school that became instant friends and did everything together.

DePue: Did she graduate from high school there?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, um-hm.

DePue: Where did she go after that?

Helm-Renfro: She went to work for Squarey Foods and they put her in the accounting office and so she helped with accounting because she was good at math, too. Her and I both loved our math. She worked for them for about eight years and then she went to Converge's in their accounting department.

DePue: Converge's?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, they are the central billing agency for a lot of different companies, like Southern Bell, they handle all their transactions through there. I think Sheila said they have Wells-Fargo, a whole different agency. Some of their billing stuff they handle all through their agency. That's what they do. Then Sheila's been going to school for accounting; she's going to get her degree next fall.

DePue: Oh, okay. I know you came back to Springfield in 1988, so that was ten years in Ohio. What brought you back to Springfield?

Helm-Renfro: My mother had gotten sick, very sick. I came home for the weekend and my dad... I had never seen my dad break down and cry, never in my life. And he said he just did not know how he was going to handle my mother and work. I said, "Well it's not an issue, I'm coming home." And so that's what I did. I moved back.

DePue: This is 1988. Your father had been working now for 55 years. Wasn't he eligible for retirement?

Helm-Renfro: My dad didn't want to think about retirement.

DePue: That just wasn't in the cards for him.

Helm-Renfro: It wasn't, hm-um. He had enough vacation time, he could take it and travel all he wanted to, but he wanted to come back to his job.

DePue: So that's who he was. He was Doc Helm, One-Shot Doc.

Helm-Renfro: That's right, um-hm. Yeah.

DePue: He must have loved that life.

Helm-Renfro: Oh yeah, until he got very sick he was still taking pictures.

DePue: Let's talk about your parents and their health situation and we'll finish off with that for today.

Helm-Renfro: Okay.

DePue: Your mother is what brought you back. How did that situation develop over the next couple of years?

Helm-Renfro: Mom ended up getting better. I ended up going back to work for the State. I stayed there for about a month when my pastor called me from Union Baptist Church and he said, "Beverly, I been looking over your resume," because I had taken it to him because Reverend Shultz at one time was very connected in the city as well as my dad.

DePue: What church was this at the time?

Helm-Renfro: Union Baptist Church. I'm still a member.

DePue: Go ahead.

Helm-Renfro: And so he said, "I have an opening for a director of the nursery here. Would you be interested? In fact, I think you're the only person who would suit that position. I talked to your dad. He's still talking." (laughs) So he said "When can you start?" I said, "Well, I had only been on that job six months, so I said, "I'd have to give them some notice, at least two or three weeks." And he says, "Okay." So I went in and talked to my director and told him that I had a permanent position and what I was going to be doing and that I would be leaving and how much time did he need. He said "I really need to fill that position before you leave." Well, a light-bulb went off in my head—okay, Sheila just moved here, she don't have a job yet, this would be good for Sheila. I said, "I think I have someone for you." He said, "Will she be dedicated to the job?" And I said, "Yes, she will. That's the way we've been raised." And he said "I assume it's somebody you know." And I said, "Yes, my daughter. She just moved here from Ohio and she needs a job." So, she got the job. I trained her for two weeks and I went to Union...

DePue: Very good.

Helm-Renfro: ...as director of the nursery.

DePue: What were you doing for the State then?

Helm-Renfro: I was with the Illinois State Board of Education. There was teacher shortages and what we would have to do is go ahead and make sure that they had the background: they had graduated from high school, they had filled out all the paperwork correctly, the school was going to give them the courses that they needed and they could be accepted because of their grade average. Then we would fit them into these shortages, like if they needed a high school teacher.



There might be two or three that wanted to be high school teachers and they could be trained to be high school teachers and get that education.

DePue: When you went to Union Day Care, that job evolved over time, too, didn't it?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes.

DePue: Tell us about that.

Helm-Renfro: When I went to Union Baptist Day Care, I told Reverend Shultz, "Now I'm going to tell you right now, I'm going to run a tight ship and you have several people down there that I'm already noticing that probably don't need to be around the kids." And he says, "Well, I got to give them a job. You're going to have to work with it." I said "Reverend Shultz, now wait a minute, you told me when I came I had free rein." He says, "I can't give you free rein like that." Then we had a board of directors that wasn't going to give me free rein. And then I had one board member that just was there every day breathing down your throat about stuff. So I got tied up taking classes at Lincoln Land Community College for early childhood education because that was the prerequisite for me to become the director, that I went ahead and take these early childhood classes.

So I started taking those and they had the classes there at Union in the evening. So that was good. So I could just after the day care closed out, then we had the classes for early childhood and the university used Union as one of their sub-classes. And so, we did that. Mrs. Shultz was a teacher, so when I would have to be out of the office for training, or that, I would always ask her to come in and step in for me. She would always come in as the head teacher and step in.

So, that was working out pretty well until an incident happened at the nursery. A parent called me the following morning and was going to DCFS<sup>5</sup> about her child had been violated. And I said, "Well I don't know anything about this. Nobody has said anything, nobody has written it down. Please" I said, "do not go to DCFS until you talk to me. Will you come here and I'm going to talk to the staff and find out what went on." It happened to be that one of the staff members—he was one that worked in the kitchen because I didn't want him around the kids. I had a gut feeling and I told Reverend, "He can work in the kitchen, he can drive the bus, but I don't want him as a teacher's aid." And the reverend said, "Why?" I said, "I can't tell you why, I just have a gut feeling. He just doesn't...he acts like the kids get on his nerves too easy. I can't have that around the kids." So Reverend said "Okay, if that's the way you want to do it, that's the way we'll do it." But he was in the classroom that day and there was a kid that evidently would not lay down on the cot. Well, when I'm there, the ones that didn't want to lay down on the

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Children and Family Services.

cot, they always came over to my office and I'd sit in the lunch room and we'd do little games or we'd do some coloring, or we'd talk about things that were going on in their family lives and everything. I wasn't there that day and he told him that if he didn't lay down on that cot he was going to lay on top of him and make him lay down. Well, he did. When I found out and I said, "You write it up and you write it up now." I went up and told Reverend Shultz, "Reverend Shultz, DCFS has to be called." He says, "No, now let me talk to him first and that." I'm thinking, I'll never be able to work with kids if DCFS finds out that I covered this up.

So the parent came in and I told her I found out what happened. She said that's what the child told her too, that he kept trying to make him lie down on the cot; he wouldn't lay down so he decided he was going to lay down on top of him. And I said, "No, that is unacceptable." She says, "Well, I'm telling you what, I'm going to DCFS now. You need to either call them or you'll be in it too." I'm thinking, Oh, I can't do this. So I told them, "I'm going to take a break." I go down the street to the pay phone; I call DCFS and says I didn't want to disobey Reverend Shultz and I knew he was going to call them, but I didn't know how long it was going to take him to call. And I think he wanted all the facts, too. So the thing of it was, I wasn't waiting. So when I called, they said "Yes, the parent is sitting right here and I'm glad you called, because you would be in trouble just like the rest of the staff for covering it up." And I said, "Yes, I knew that, I know the statutes as well I was to know that, so I'm calling you to tell you." They said, "We're coming in and we're taking all the files out and that person is to be fired immediately."

So I went back to the day care and I told the gentleman—I can't remember what his name was now, but I can see his face vividly—I told him, "You're fired. DCFS will be coming in here." Reverend Shultz said "How do you know that?" I said "Because the parent's down there telling them now. To tell you quite frankly, Reverend Shultz, I left this building, went down to the pay phone and called them myself. I did not want to disobey you but I just knew that this was going to be ugly and I was not going to be in the middle of it." So within the hour DCFS came in, they took all the files, they took everything and told me to call parents and tell them to come and get the kids. I think we were closed for two or three days before they let us open it back up because there wasn't any other incident. This person just didn't know how to handle the situation and handled it very badly.

DePue: I know eventually you opened up your own day care. Was that shortly after this? Did this precipitate that decision?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes (laughs). Because I had my thing with the people there. I told Reverend Shultz, I said, "You know, they're not doing what they should be with the kids. I can't watch them all the time and make them do what they're supposed to do. So, therefore, I'm going to open my day care at home." And he said, "I already know that." And I said, "How do you know that?" "You've

applied for the license and it's been approved." I said, "Ye-s-s-s." (laughs) He says, "I could've stopped it as a board member—I sit on one of the boards—but you go ahead and do what you have to do. I understand." After that, a girl friend of mine that was a day care teacher came over to Union and she had the same problem. That's why they couldn't keep directors. So I opened my day care home. Reverend called me about three months into that and said, "Miss Bev, this is Rev." I said, "How you doing, Reverend?" [He said] "How's that nursery going over there? I hear you've got a lot of our members over there." And I said, "Yeah, I do." [He said] "I want to bring my granddaughter Denisha over there." I said, "Isn't the day care still running?" He said "Don't go there Miss Bev. I'm bringing my granddaughter over. You got room for her?" I said, "Yeah, I've got room for her." So he brought his granddaughter over. Then the people at Union were really livid when they found out I had the granddaughter and she not downstairs in the day care. I think they kind of went downhill.

DePue: Is that day care still operational?

Helm-Renfro: No, no. It hasn't been for years. My thing is, my pastor now, T. Ray McJunkins, has done told me that once I retire from the Senate, then he wants me to open that day care back up. And I said, "Are you sure?" And he says, "I know I do. You're the only person for that." But I do run the Sunday nursery at church. He got me into that five years ago.

DePue: Let's close today then with going back to the thread that's been tying this all together in terms of your growing up and coming of age and finding your own career and being successful in a variety of different things, and that's your father's career as well.

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: We need to close off with your parents.

Helm-Renfro: Okay. My parents instilled the value in us that you don't go out there to be seen; you go out there to do the job that you were hired to do. Once you do that, people will see that you don't want to be seen for everything you do and that's the way you go through life. You go ahead and do what you're supposed to do, you do it the right way, and you treat everyone with respect. And from there your reward will come.

DePue: You've come back to Springfield in '88 because of your mother. But it wasn't too long after that that your father had some serious health problems.

Helm-Renfro: Yes. He ended up being diagnosed with leukemia.

DePue: When did that happen?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, let's see. I would think—Mom died in '91, so it was right after that. Dad had been getting sicker and sicker and he wasn't telling us. He went to Dr. Lee, and Dr. Lee ran tests and everything and then told him he had leukemia. But Dad stayed working until he retired. Mom had already passed. He retired in 1992.

DePue: When did your father pass away?

Helm-Renfro: '94.

DePue: Three years after her. How old was he at the time?

Helm-Renfro: Dad was—ninety-four less eleven—Dad was eighty-three.

DePue: In most measures, a good and a very successful and incredibly rich life, sounds like.

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes, yes. I don't think he had any regrets about anything. He mourned my mom.

DePue: Did they have quite a large funeral, then?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes, yes. Mom's because of the Mason family and what they stood for and their friends and everything that they had over the years. Dad's was bigger because the lodge members came from all over the country to pay tribute to him. I just remember them coming and walking in, just droves of them. Actually they're supposed to give the hat, pass it to the front, and Dad had told them that it was to be passed to me, that I would probably be the one who would join the Eastern Star's or whatever. But my husband is a lodge member, so eventually maybe I will do that.

DePue: Did he have a lot of people from his many, many years in state government who were there as well/

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes and friends, Max Karpman and Willis was still living then, Willis White, all his state people, everybody he knew from the state was there. Any and everybody.

DePue: The Secretary of State at that time would have been George Ryan.

Helm-Renfro: I don't think he came. But I think someone came in his place.

DePue: Were there photographs spread around that your father had taken?

Helm-Renfro: You know, we didn't. We didn't on Dad's funeral. I know when Dad passed away, he was living with me at that time because he couldn't do it for himself any more and he was being fed through a tube; I had to do that every day and so he lived with me. I told Jim, "He's going to have to come with me, because

you're working every day. I have the nursery here. I have staff working with me. I can go up and check on Dad all the time. I can check him and see if he's okay and see if he needs anything or whatever." So that's the way it was.

DePue: Did you find that an uplifting ceremony for both your parents in the nature of the funerals that they had?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes. Yeah, because I know how well liked they were but some of the people that called afterwards to tell me the stories, like Paul Powell's driver, and some of the other stories, those were great stories to hear. And that he was that respected by a Secretary of State that he would walk out of a restaurant because my dad couldn't be served?

DePue: Yeah, that's an important story. Well, this has been delightful, to have the opportunity to talk with you today. Next time around will be equally as interesting because you're going to be talking about the current president of the United States. So, anything you'd like to say in closing today?

Helm-Renfro: No, I may have some other things to say. I guess I can back up. Dad was known in Mount Vernon for making his own kites and flying the highest. He held that distinction among his buddies, that he had that. He was a soft-ball player, too. He played baseball, um-hm, yeah.

DePue: Well, one of our motives for doing this interview is to have a reason to put more of his pictures up on the Internet and hopefully encourage you to— somewhere down the road—include some of these into the State Archives as well, his personal photos.

Helm-Renfro: I think that right now, I want to continue working on them. It kind of gives me a satisfaction, with Jimmy being gone now, that I have a mission to do and I need to finish that mission. At least to be able to get the photographs in the boxes that they need to be in. The Lodge has contacted me. They want some of their photos and they're willing to pay for them. There's a scanner that I would love to have that cost about three thousand dollars. (laughs) It will scan negatives as well as pictures and I would love to be able to do that. But I understand from the lady that I met at the State Journal Register that there's a cheaper one that you can get for about twelve hundred that does the same thing. And I'm going, okay, maybe we can work on this.

DePue: You are a caretaker of quite an important legacy, then.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, I am.

DePue: Thank you very much, Beverly, we'll pick this up in the next week or two.

Helm-Renfro: Okay, fine.

(end of interview #1)

Interview with  
Beverly Helm-Renfro  
Interview # 2: July 13, 2010  
Interviewer: Mark DePue

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**A Note to the Reader**

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DePue: Today is Tuesday, July 13, 2010. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is our second session with Beverly Helm-Renfro. Good morning, Beverly.

Helm-Renfro: Good morning, how're you doing?

DePue: I'm doing great. I'm looking forward to this.

Helm-Renfro: I have, too.

DePue: There are a lot of interesting things to talk about. This is really the first time that I will have an extended conversation with anybody about now-President Barack Obama, but you knew him in quite a different capacity.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, I did.

DePue: We should also say that we're presently in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in an office here. I know when you first came in here you said there

are still several things that you wanted to catch up on as far your dad was concerned.

Helm-Renfro: Right, right. I had forgotten some things and left them out because we got so involved in the history of us growing up and how it was with my father, that I forgot about some things that he really did as firsts.

DePue: Let's say that we're talking about Doc Helm

Helm-Renfro: Doc Helm. There's some things that he did was that he was the first—him along with several others—that formed the Frontiers International. They're a group here in Springfield and he's one of their founders.

DePue: What is Frontiers International?

Helm-Renfro: They're a service organization and they continue to serve the city of Springfield. They have the Martin Luther King Breakfast every January. They sponsor that. Dad and several others in that group were responsible for forming that group here in Springfield—their Chapter.

DePue: That's no small affair here in Springfield.

Helm-Renfro: No. No, it's not. And they started out first by bringing concerts here of well-known bands or singers or comedians or whatever. They brought them to Springfield and then it progressed to the breakfast.

DePue: Okay. Anything else that you wanted to mention? I'm sure you have some.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, People's National Bank. It's now Marine Bank out on Cook Street. My father was one of the founders of that bank. It was him and several others like Dr. Lee, Mr. Stuart, Max Karpman, there were several of them. I think there was about ten of them.

DePue: Do you know what drove him to want to found something like a bank? That's quite different from what he was doing otherwise.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes. The reasoning behind the bank was that there was no bank that would actually serve the black community. So they wanted to form a bank that would serve the black community where they could have checking accounts, where they could get loans, they could save their money, and they could feel safe and confident about it. Because a lot of the older black people did not believe in banks or that; well, they kind of hid their money.

DePue: They remembered the Depression era when the banks failed.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, they did. Yes, they did. But the stocks went very well. People bought the stocks and it came to be.

DePue: So not only was this a public service that he was doing, it was a savvy business venture.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, it was. Yes, it was. Um-hm. And he was probably one of the first blacks in the city of Springfield that started buying property and renting to other blacks. He had about six of them by the time he finished. A couple of them were apartment buildings and he rented them out; he made sure that people were comfortable and kept them up.

DePue: With the kind of stature he had, did he get involved in other civic groups as well?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, he was a part of the Minorities in Government; he was one of their founders, also.

DePue: With all of this, it sounds like he wouldn't have that much time at home.

Helm-Renfro: I know (laughs). He was kind of absent, but when he was there it was just a good time. Dad always kept his suit on from the time he got up in the morning until the time he went to bed just in case anybody would call him. In 1972 he became the Sovereign Grand Inspector General for the State of Illinois. He covered the whole state.

DePue: Well, that's a mouthful. Exactly what is that?

Helm-Renfro: That is with the Council of ...let's see. It would be with the Lodge, and I think it's the Supreme Council of the Southern and Northern...the Southern district...or his was the Northern district of the United States. But he was also the photographer for the Southern and Northern districts. So we traveled quite a bit. That was always our summer vacations, going to lodge meetings all over the state, all over the United States. We just traveled with Dad.

DePue: I was going to say at first, it sounds as if this pretty much tied into the State of Illinois, but you got to travel all over.

Helm-Renfro: We got to travel all over. I got to go to the Bahamas with my mom and dad. We took my aunts with us and we all had a good time. (laughs)

DePue: Any other trips that you especially remember?

Helm-Renfro: We just traveled all over: Philadelphia, Atlanta, all over the United States. I think maybe the only state that I did not go; Mom and Dad went to Alaska, they went to Africa, they went to Virgin Islands, we didn't go then. But, I mean, all the places that he traveled in the United States, yeah, we went. Those were our vacations. Plus, we had a summer home in Michigan and we spent two weeks there every year. (laughs) So we had a full summer. You get out of school, you're ready to travel, ready to go.



DePue: With all of this then, did you have a good sense of the stature that your father had in the community?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes, people would say, "Oh, you're Doc Helm's daughter." And I'd say, "Yes." "Well, hi, how're you doing?" (laughs) And that was all there was to the conversation. If I had a beau that came by, my dad said, "They got to come in the house. They do not sit out in that car. They do not honk at you. They come in the house and they meet me. And when they've met me, I'll lay out the ground rules." I said, "Okay, Dad." There was only a couple that I dated. Dad laid out the ground rules and if they didn't follow them that was the end of that. Might as well forget it. (laughs)

DePue: What were the ground rules?

Helm-Renfro: Ground rules: that you had me in by a certain time; that you didn't think that you were going to take advantage of me, because that wasn't going to happen; and that I had my own money, so if you even tried something, I could catch a cab and come home. And Dad said, "Don't have me come looking for you." And that's the way it was.

DePue: Well, with you knowing what the ground rules were, does that mean that you were reluctant to have potential beaus be introduced to your dad?

Helm-Renfro: I really wasn't ... you know, I really didn't get interested in guys, I guess, until I was about almost eighteen years old because we traveled so much. If we were in Springfield we were at my grandmother's house or at our house and I had my friends in the neighborhood, so it really wasn't about going out until I got in high school.

DePue: Well, what else do you have that you wanted to pass on?

Helm-Renfro: Okay. Oh, his lodge history, also. Dad started his Masonic career in Mount Vernon, Illinois with the Forest of Lebanon Lodge 71 in 1933. He was the youngest man to become the 'Most Worshipful Master' there and he succeeded his father; that's how he became Most Worshipful Master. Then when he came to Springfield, he joined Menelit Consistory 49 and that's where he was the whole time.

DePue: Well, listening to the names you realize how much history and how much lore is attached to being a lodge member. For those of us who have never been involved, it is very much a mystery, but I'm sure it was very much part of his life and how he identified himself.

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm. Yes. He also was the photographer for his church which was St. Paul AME Church. He was one of the first to take pictures inside the Illinois Supreme Court. That was quite an honor for him because nobody had been able to go in and photograph them.

DePue: That sounds like there was a decision that was made by the Supreme Court, or somebody, that allowed the photographs to be taken.

Helm-Renfro: That probably was, yes. He was the first. He was also the first layman to be honored by the legislature. They honored him.

DePue: Do you remember what the specific honor was?

Helm-Renfro: Um, let's see, I have it somewhere...

DePue: Well, they certainly all knew him and they all wanted to have him take flattering photos of themselves.

Helm-Renfro: (laughs) Yes, yes. I'm trying to find it here. I can't find it right now.

DePue: Would some of these legislators have hired your dad or contracted your dad to take publicity photos for them as well?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes, yes. And I really have to admit that my brother was the one who took Barack's first photos when he first started running for the U.S. Senate. He told me, he said, "I need a good photographer in Springfield because I want a good photo. Do you know anybody?" I said "Jimmy can you come over?" And he came over and took Barack's first pictures. Now we even had a photographer on, but Barack wanted to separate it. So Jimmy came over and did his pictures for him.

DePue: That was a private contract...?

Helm-Renfro: When he was going to run for the U.S. Senate. Um-hm, yeah.

DePue: Okay. What else do we have, or are we ready to move to your experiences with Senator Obama?

Helm-Renfro: I think we're about ready to move to that.

DePue: Well this is a nice transition into that, mentioning that Jim, who, before we started here today, you were mentioning that he passed away a year ago tomorrow and he's certainly missed here. But let's get to Senator Obama. He first was elected to the Illinois Senate, I believe, in 1996 which precedes your association with him. Tell us how you got involved.

Helm-Renfro: Okay. When he came into the Senate in '90—he would have been sworn in in January of '97—Beverly Criglar was his legislative assistant. Beverly and I were friends and one evening I happened to see her when we were out at a place we usually ate which was Boyd's.<sup>6</sup> I was telling her I was thinking about coming back to the State. I had run my own day care home for about fifteen

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<sup>6</sup> Boyd's Family Restaurant on South Grand Avenue East.

years. I said, but the thing of it was that I didn't have insurance, I didn't have a retirement fund to build up and I was thinking about it. She said "Okay." I didn't hear from her for awhile and one of these days she called me and she says "This evening can you come over to the State House?" She said, "No, never mind, don't come to the State House. I'll get Barack at dinner time to go ahead and interview you." And she said, "Can you meet me at Sebastian's?"<sup>7</sup> "Okay." I said, "but Beverly, I hadn't really thought about coming back to the Senate." I was thinking maybe Secretary of State, or his office, because I was familiar with that, and I was familiar with the Senate, too, but I knew the long hours.

DePue: How much did you know about Senator Obama at the time?

Helm-Renfro: I didn't know a lot about him. I told her, "Okay I'll go ahead and interview with him." So I brought my resume and everything and I went to Sebastian's and met him. When I met him he kind of took me aback and shocked me because of his stature and his long fingers and just his—the whole personality was so much like my dad's—I was going, Oh, Bev, I don't know. (laughs) She said, "I know, he sounds and acts like your dad, doesn't he?" I said, "**Um-hm**, yes he does." But he interviewed me that evening and he told Bev, "Now, you know you've got a handful of people you've got to interview." And Bev says, "Well, I think that this is the interview that you need to take, seriously." And he says, "No, you have to interview everybody."

DePue: You were going to interview with other people?

Helm-Renfro: No. He was interviewing other people. I guess assistants in the Senate that wanted to move or whatever, or other people outside the Senate that wanted to move. So Bev said, "Okay." He said "We'll call you by Thanksgiving." Thanksgiving came and went and no phone call, so I just forgot about it. I said, "Okay, he's not going to call and it's not going to happen."

DePue: This was what year again?

Helm-Renfro: This would have been 1999, Thanksgiving of '99. And so Christmas—no the day before New Year's—Bev called. She said "Beverly, Barack wants you to start on the second." And I said, "Oh, I can't do that. I've got parents with kids." I said, "Tell him that he'll have to wait until the fifteenth or the end of the month, because my parents have to find day care for their children." She said, "Okay, I'll tell him but he really wanted to get you in here and get you started." And I said, "Well, Bev, can we work together maybe in the two week interim and figure out everything so that when I come in I'm not going to have to have you teach me everything?" because she had moved to another agency. So we worked every night for two weeks. On the second I told my parents—reluctantly, I told my parents—I said, "I have a chance to go back to

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<sup>7</sup> A well-known restaurant in downtown Springfield.

work for the Senate. It would mean that I would have health insurance and retirement.” They were all saying “Oh, go ahead and do it, we’ll find nurseries, we’ll find...we’ll stay off for a couple of weeks, or whatever, but you go on.” So on the fifteenth or around the fifteenth, I went to work for Barack.

DePue: Let’s back up a little bit. Do you remember anything about that initial interview that you had with him?

Helm-Renfro: Um, he was sitting there eating dinner (laughs) at Sebastian’s. He just asked me a few questions. He asked me did I know basically about the procedures and I told him I had worked for Fred Smith and he says “Oh, okay.” He didn’t know that before. And he said “What are you doing now?” And I told him that I was working in child care and I had my own daycare home and that I loved it, but I needed insurance and retirement and some security with it and everything. So he agreed. He said “Okay” and he didn’t ask too many questions. I think Bev had kind of filled him in mostly, exactly, you know, about me. So I think that was why he didn’t ask that many questions.

DePue: Okay. Now let’s get back to the time that you start working for him. Talk about what happened then.

Helm-Renfro: Okay. Well I went in on 2000 and it had to be around January 15<sup>th</sup> or something, right in there. I came in and I sit at the desk and I had been working there for two weeks, at night, and so everybody looked at me—since there was four of us in that area—they looked at me and finally one of them said “And you’re who?” (DePue laughs) I said “Oh, I’m Beverly Helm and I’m Barack’s new assistant.” They said, “Oh, okay.” So then Barack comes in—it’s a session day—he comes in and gives me a big hug and that, “Bev, I’m glad to see you on board” and that. “What do we need to do?” I said, “Well Bev and I have worked for the last two weeks, every evening and on weekends to get me up to par. I think that pretty well I can get started without having a lot of training.” And he says, “Oh, that’s good. Bev said she had been working with you.” He said “Have you gone upstairs and told them to put you on payroll?” And I said, “No, I didn’t know whether you had to do that, or me.” So I go upstairs to—at that time it would have been Senate President Emil Jones’s office—and Courtney Nottage was his Chief of Staff. I said to Courtney, I said “My name is Beverly Helm and I’ve been hired by Barack Obama to work as his legislative assistant.” Courtney looked at me like I had lost my mind (laughs). He said “There’s a procedure we go through.” I said “Well you need to talk to Barack about that because he told me I was hired.” He says “Fill out the papers. When did you actually start?” I said “Well I’ve been working every night with Bev and on weekends.” And he said, “Okay. From the day you started working with Bev, then that’s when we have to put you on payroll. We can’t put you on payroll now; it has to be from then.” I said “Okay.” So he did.

I went back and Barack said “Are you settled in?” And I said “Yes.” He says “We need to have a discussion.” And I said “Okay.” So I went into his office and closed the door. He says “There’s a lot of times—and I want to get this straight up front—there’s a lot of times that I have people that are homeless, I have people that have HIV, I have people that are disabled and can’t function for themselves so they have care-givers with them. I have seen how some people react to these people. I don’t want that to ever happen.” And I told him “You don’t have to worry about that, because I was raised not to react to people like that. They’re just people like everybody else and so that’s the way I’ll treat them.” He said, “We’ll get along fine. Go on back to your desk.” (laughs) And that’s what we started.

DePue: You said there were three other women who were out there in the general work area as well. Talk about the structure of the Senate staff, because I assume they weren’t all working for Obama. They were working with other senators?

Helm-Renfro: No, there was Bunny and she was working for Senator Link. There was four offices on one end and then the four of us sat out in the main office area. Then there was Jill—I can’t remember Jill’s name—she worked for Senator Silverstein. There was Sherri Williams who worked for Senator Lisa Madigan at the time and then myself, with Barack.

DePue: Were each one of the senators authorized one assistant?

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: The official title for the assistant was...?

Helm-Renfro: Legislative Assistant.

DePue: What were the duties of a Legislative Assistant?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, they were numerous. We would keep up with the correspondence. We also would greet the people, set appointments for our senators for the Springfield area, because they all had district offices and the district offices were handled by them. We would do constituents’ complaints or constituent work; if a constituent would call and say, “We’re in our seventies and our son is down in Marion, Illinois and we can’t get down there any more. Is there a prison up by Chicago that he could be moved to that we could see him? We haven’t seen him in four years.” Well, my job was to get on that phone and call the department of corrections and they would let me know if that was a move that could be made. It was never “Senator Obama wants you to make this move.” It was “Is this prisoner allowed to move to a facility closer to Chicago.” And that’s the way we handled it. If it was maybe a mother that had not gotten her check, or Link card, we would call and find out what the problem was. If there was a problem then we would call that person back, tell them to send us those things overnight and we would walk them over to the

agency or send them over by a page; we had pages that would do runs outside the building.

DePue: When you first started then, had Bev already briefed you on all the important contacts with these various agencies?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, we had a list of who our legislative liaisons were with different agencies and who were her people that she worked mostly with. And so, I'd just call and introduced myself, told them that I had taken Beverly Criglar's place, she had explained that you're a good resource and will I be able to work with you? And it was yes. You know, never got a no.

DePue: What was your assumption, that basically any time they're getting a call from the Legislative Assistant to a legislator, then they need to be paying attention?

Helm-Renfro: You know, I think that they did, but I also think that it depended on if the legislator was calling every-so-often or every time you turned around. (laughs) Because I had some people who, you know, didn't always get it back to me as fast as they should and then I'd have to have Barack make that call. "You know Barack, they're a little slow on this; this is all the information I've collected and can you make that call?" And Barack would make it to the director.

DePue: Was he always Barack, never Senator Obama?

Helm-Renfro: Whenever we were in the presence of anyone, it was Senator Obama. But when it was him and I, it was Barack. When I was in that office taking dictation from him, or him telling me what he needed to have done, it was always Barack.

DePue: Were those part of the ground rules that he gave you, or it that just part of your deference?

Helm-Renfro: No, he wanted me to call him Barack all the time and I said, "Oh no, I can't do that. I was brought up that you have that official title, as State Senator, so it will be Senator Obama in front of everybody. Now, if I'm in your office taking notes, or whatever we're doing, or we're outside the office, because you need something outside the office and you know where this place is—so come on with me." And I'd take him and then it was Barack.

DePue: Did he have a sense when you first started working for him, who your dad was?

Helm-Renfro: No, no. He knew nothing about my father.

DePue: Did you fill him in on that?

Helm-Renfro: No, I kind of left that a mystery. But Barack knew that he had been a photographer for the State and that he had probably the most years, more than most people, 58 years. But I think every senator filled him in.

DePue: I'm sure that was the case.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, I'm quite sure that the Attorney General Madigan filled him in, because when I worked for Fred Smith, Lisa would come over always to the Senate side and she was a little bitty tot. I'd say "Lisa, get back on over to the House side. You shouldn't be running these halls late at night like this." And she remembered. Her mom walked in to see her one day and she said, "Beverly, what are you doing back here?" Her mom remembered me. So it was a thing I think every senator filled him in on, who Doc Helm was.

DePue: When did you have an opportunity to first meet Michelle and the girls?

Helm-Renfro: Basically, Michelle and the girls came down for his swearing-in. I'm not sure whether it was the 2000 swearing-in or if it would have been 2004 swearing-in, or 2005, actually. But they came down...

DePue: So, 2001 swearing-in?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm. But I had been talking to Michelle the whole time. Michelle would call and see if he was in, because he always talked to his girls every night before they went to bed. He would ask about their day. If he was on the floor, I'd transfer him down to the floor phone so that he could talk to Michelle and the girls.

DePue: Was he working late hours, then, that he would be able to call from the office?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. Sometimes we were in session late at night—maybe midnight, one or two o'clock in the morning—and he would sit there and say, "Why don't you go home?" And I said "No, Barack, I'm not going home. We're supposed to stay until they adjourn so we know what time you're supposed to be here the next morning." And he said, "Okay, if that's the way you want it" and I said, "No, that's the way it is."

DePue: That leads me to one of my next questions but I'm going to sneak this one in here: Where did he live in Springfield?

Helm-Renfro: He was at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Hotel and that's where he stayed. Now there were times that we had to get him into other hotels but what I would do as soon as we got our Senate calendar, I would fax over to them the dates that he was going to be in Springfield and reserve his room for the four months that he was here. You can always cancel, but it was better for us to always have that.

DePue: This is an inside Springfield kind of question, but I thought that the Abraham Lincoln Hotel was the Republican hotel?

Helm-Renfro: It was the Renaissance at one time, but that's where he stayed.

DePue: That across the street is the Hilton and that was...

Helm-Renfro: The Hilton, and he stayed there a few times, but the Renaissance was the most time when I was with him was there.

DePue: And did it have the reputation of being the place that the Republican legislators stayed?

Helm-Renfro: I don't know; I don't think so.

DePue: Okay, I might have that reversed. Tell us about a typical day then. You kind of hinted at that.

Helm-Renfro: Let's see. Barack would call and say, "Do you mind going downstairs?" And I would say, "No, what do you want? But, I know Barack, you want your oatmeal and your banana and some tea." He said, "Yes, that's what I want." And I'd go down there; we called it the Rathskeller, or it was where you could eat at. But sometimes he'd be running late. He'd always get in a game of basketball first thing in the morning, him and his buddies, they would have their workout; then he would come in and sometimes when he didn't get breakfast he would ask me to go down there and get it and I told him I didn't mind. He says "You don't mind doing that do you?" And I said, "No, I don't mind."

DePue: What time did you get there?

Helm-Renfro: I was always there about 8:00-8:15; our starting time was 8:30. I always tried to make it in early on session days so that I could get things lined up. If he had committees, I would pull all the bill jackets with the bills in them that he was the sponsor of so he would have them for those committees, put a label on top of it—this is Revenue Committee, this is Public Health Committee, these are the bills you have for today. And then any correspondence or questions that I needed to ask him, I wanted to make sure I had those ready, so that when he first came in he was ready to go.

DePue: Okay. When did he normally arrive?

Helm-Renfro: If the session was at 10:00, probably about 9:30. And then sometimes committees were at 9:00 so he would be there before 9:00.

DePue: It sounds like these were long days when session was going on.



Helm-Renfro: Yes, some of them were. When it got towards the end, they got to be long sessions. He was the chair of the Public Health and Welfare Committee, which I was his clerk for that committee so I took the roll-call, I took witness slips, and then would make sure that everything was correct with the staff there; then we'd have to go file it so that it could be read on the floor how it had passed out or if it didn't pass out.

DePue: How late were the nights when they were getting close to the end of the session? You've already suggested that...

Helm-Renfro: Yes, probably about 1:00 in the morning sometimes.

DePue: Was it unofficial policy, or official policy, that the legislative assistants were supposed to stick around?

Helm-Renfro: It was supposed to be official, but there were some legislators and there were sometimes even Barack sent me home. He said, "You don't need to stay. Go home." "Okay." (laughs)

DePue: Were you keeping track of it by hours or were you salaried in this job?

Helm-Renfro: Just salary.

DePue: So, you're not getting any extra pay for staying until 1:00 in the morning.

Helm-Renfro: No, no, no, no, no. They did have a standard policy where sometimes they would give us extra comp days. But it never matched up to the hours we worked.

DePue: Tell me what kind of boss he was.

Helm-Renfro: He was a good boss. I would sit there sometimes in awe of Barack, because he would have a director in his office and they would be discussing whatever was going on, and he'd hear people outside; he'd come to the door and he'd say, "Oh, this is my group from Chicago, from my district. They're here to lobby for HIV legislation. Well you know I'm on board. You need to talk to the rest of the people. Bev, can you put them in contact with people they need to talk to on that committee?" "Oh, yes. I'll give them their names and their office number." And that's what we'd do. And then some of them he'd sit there and talk to. It got to be so many that I had such a rapport that they wouldn't even meet with Barack, they'd meet with me. (laughs) And then they'd say, "Well, we'll see him on the floor." I said, "Okay, I'll tell him that you're here, so he can introduce you on the floor," because they'd be up in the gallery.

DePue: For your relationship with the senator at that time, I want you to apply some adjectives on how you would describe him.

Helm-Renfro: He was articulate. He was conscientious. Umm... , purpose, he had a purpose. When he had something, he just didn't do legislation that wasn't—I don't mean to say didn't mean anything—that wasn't in line with what he felt that he wanted to do, then he only sponsored that legislation. He would not sponsor gun legislation, because he said there was too many children on the south side of Chicago being killed every day so he did not sponsor it, he would not vote for it.

DePue: How would you describe his personality in terms of, was he gregarious and outgoing? Was he more reserved?

Helm-Renfro: He could be very outgoing, but he had a reserved portion about him. I think especially family or image-wise. His image was something that he guarded very much; he was very proud of his image. We never had to worry about whether there was going to be any rumors about him. (laughs) He talked to his family all the time. He'd come down here for the fair with Malia—that was before Sasha was bor—for Democrat day and I'd take Malia and we'd go trudging through the horse barn and the cattle (laughs). Barack said "I ain't going through them things." I said, "Okay, me and Malia will." So we'd leave them doing all their little speeches and we'd go on over and just enjoy the fair.

DePue: Would you define him, describe him, as being ambitious at that time?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes. I think Barack had in his mind, and this is just from my perspective, that he kind of knew where he wanted to go and what he was going to do. I think in all, I thought myself, that the senate would lose him sooner or later, because there was things that he wanted to do that would help nationally, like health-care—he did the All Kids bill. He did work on the bill with Ryan for the prisoners, the stay of execution, that bill that they went ahead and stopped.

DePue: Governor George Ryan.

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm. Yes.

DePue: The amnesty for all the people who were sitting on death row.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, and there was a process that they went through of making recommendations. Barack was a part of that process. Those were things that he believed passionately in. He believed passionately in the people that were disabled and people that were HIV, and homeless, that were still struggling. So those were his passions. From my perspective I always thought that his next progression would be to the national level.

DePue: Was that something that he talked to you about, his ambitions and his goals?

Helm-Renfro: No, not so much as it was just something that you saw in him. Something that you knew he was, maybe not even consciously thinking about. I don't think that he even consciously thought about it. Then he decided to get his feet wet

was running against Bobby Rush, Representative Bobby Rush; he lost but he came in second.

DePue: That was just before you started working for him, right?

Helm-Renfro: No, the election was the year that I worked with him, because I went up and took a few days off and went up to help him go to the El trains [in Chicago] and pass out literature, helped in the office, his campaign office.

DePue: You were in an office setting where there's other—I assume most of these were women—who are working in this office setting, and they're working with other senators. When you ladies would talk with each other, what was your sense of how they were sizing up Obama and his ambitions and his future?

Helm-Renfro: You know what, I never got into those conversations. I may listen to them, but I never put my input into it. Because I know Barack was a private person and I know that any decision that he would make would come with his family, would be a family decision. And I just didn't feel it was my place to engage in those kinds of conversations.

DePue: From the campaign we heard the allegations from the Republicans side, of course, that there were many times he voted Present on the legislation. Would you describe him during that time frame as being cautious sometimes?

Helm-Renfro: No, I think that a lot of times, and sometimes—I'm not going to say all the time—but sometimes that he voted Present, maybe because a fellow legislator, he didn't want to vote it down, but he voted Present.

DePue: Did he ever have conversations with you that were more of a philosophical nature in terms of his views on different issues?

Helm-Renfro: The biggest one was that had to do with the gun issue. At one time the gun lobbyists were calling us, he couldn't even get through on his own phone to get hold of me about some information, and when he did, he said, "Beverly, I have been trying to call you. Did you take the phone off the hook?" And I said, "No, Barack, the gun lobbyists have been calling. They've been calling me and Senator Madigan's office and we can't even get a phone call out before the others ring in. They're ringing in so much that they're ringing up in the president's office. And they're calling us and asking us what's wrong. It's because we're getting so many calls." He says, "This is going to stop." And I said "Okay." So he got off the phone and about twenty minutes later, those phone calls were gone. We were no longer getting them.

DePue: Were these calls in favor of more gun control?

Helm-Renfro: No, they wanted less gun control and Barack would never vote for that. At one time, he says, "You don't need an Uzi to kill a deer. I can't vote for that because that's killing the kids on the south side of Chicago."

DePue: Were there other issues that he talked to you about or was it more of a professional relationship?

Helm-Renfro: We had a professional relationship, but I also want to say that I think it was a friendly relationship. Barack would sometimes call in, he'll say, "I have to get home this evening, I'm hoping we'll get out of here early because Michelle has something planned," or it was their anniversary or something. "Oh, okay. Well, we'll check around to see what's going to go on." And he'd say "Okay." Or, you know, he'd come up there and he says "You know I just want to take a few minutes and make my phone calls." I'd say, "Okay," and I'd just shut his door because I knew who he was calling; he was calling Michelle and the kids.

DePue: Do you know who his confidants, who the people were who he would share his deeper thoughts with?

Helm-Renfro: I think probably Senator Link was one of the closest ones. Terry Link.

DePue: Okay.

Helm-Renfro: President Emil Jones. I think they had a lot of talk.

DePue: Well some accounts say that Emil Jones, who was, of course, the Senate President here most of this time, was his mentor, as well. Would you describe that relationship that way?

Helm-Renfro: I think so. I think so.

DePue: Was that something that Senator Obama was seeking out at the time or was it more that Jones kind of took him under his wing?

Helm-Renfro: I think it was mutual. I think President Jones took him under his wing, but Barack would also seek advice. Or maybe not so much advice, but wanted to pass his ideas by him.

DePue: Did you ever see where he had a temper? These are high stress jobs.

Helm-Renfro: Barack was one that did not fly off the ...did not have a temper.

DePue: You saw that in some other legislators?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yeah, I could see some of...(laughs) and I guess it's public knowledge. The only time—and it's really not him flying off the, off or anything—there was a gentleman that came from Chicago, wanted to talk to Barack. He hadn't

been able to get hold of him in the Chicago office. Of course not; he was down in Springfield seven days a week, or six days a week, and he was at home one day a week. This was towards the end of the session and he could not get him to come off the Senate floor. Well, they're on third reading votes, so no, no senator comes off on that missing the vote. So he came down to the office and he tried to bully me. He was quite a big fellow (laughs) and I just kept talking calmly to him and told him, explained why Barack could not come off the floor and that he really needed to make an appointment in the district office **after** session. The session only had two more weeks to go. And he just kept on and kept on. So the lady that sat next to me, Sherry, says, "Do you want me to call security?" I said, "No, I think I can handle it." So he finally left after awhile, but he had an earful to say. So, anyway, when Barack came down, Sherry started—I wasn't going to say anything to him—and Sherry said, "You know, there was a guy here from Chicago and he was really bullying Bev. At one time we thought we should call security because he really got in her face about it." And he said, "Is that right, Bev?" And I said, "Yes, but he's gone back to Chicago. Here's his card and he wants to see you." So Barack said, "Well, he'll see me after session because I'm down here for fourteen days straight. I came here to work, not to go to Chicago." Well, the gentleman came back the next week and Barack happened to see him. I happened to be taking a folder up to Barack and saw Barack talking to him. And he told him, "You will **never** talk to **any** woman like that. That is not being a gentleman-like. If you want to bully somebody, come and bully me. But you will not bully her again. You need to apologize to her." I was standing right behind him, whether I should have backed up two steps or left, I didn't know. But the guy says, "I'm sorry." And Barack said, "You make an appointment in Chicago, and don't make it until I get back to Chicago." And the guy said, "Well I need to see you right..." He says, "Nothing is that important. If it was **that** important you would have gotten hold of me before I was down here for fourteen days straight." And I think it was an issue he was having but he had been having it for awhile and just all of a sudden needed to get Barack involved in this whole situation.

DePue: Where was this discussion?

Helm-Renfro: On the third floor of the rotunda.

DePue: So kind of in an open area where others might be hearing as well?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, uh-huh. Yeah, but Barack was very quiet, he was very composed. I did not see him raise his voice or anything; he just told the gentleman exactly what he wanted to tell him.

DePue: One of the things when we were talking, not during the interview, you mentioned the kinds of things he would do when he would possibly get bored?

Helm-Renfro: (Laughs) Yes, Barack liked my little squeegee-ball that AARP gave us to just exercise your hands and that. So one night we were sitting there and we were waiting for committees to finish. All his had finished and we were real late at night. So he was throwing the ball up against the wall. Anyway, he came out in the hallway and he says, "See Sherry I can throw it." And he was throwing it, and he threw it on the wall behind me and when it came back it hit me in the back of the head. Barack was so apologetic. I said, "Barack, it's a rubber ball, it did not hurt me, okay?" He said, "But, oh no, oh, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." He kept apologizing. I said, "Barack, stop apologizing. It's alright." He said, "Oh, I would never do that." And I said, "Yeah, I know." (laughs)

Or, if he knew that there was committees meeting that night and he was finished with committees and we were not going to go back in session, sometimes he wouldn't even come back to the office. He'd leave, and I'm going "I need to talk to him about some things. I wonder where he's at?" So I'd call him on his cell phone and I could hear the wind whistling. I said, "You're on that golf course, aren't you?" He'd say, "Yes, but don't tell no one where I am." (laughs) He said, "I didn't have any more business there tonight, and so I decided to come out and shoot some golf." I said, "Okay, nobody'll know." People would come by, "You know, I need to talk to Barack." "I'm not sure where he's at, I know he's out of the office." That's all I would say.

DePue: Had you read his biography?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, I did.

DePue: Did you find that helpful in terms of understanding who he was, where he came from?

Helm-Renfro: Um, somewhat. But I think it was more meeting him and working with him that you understood more about Barack.

DePue: Again, there's so much that's written and said about him today, from every single corner of the political spectrum as well.

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm!

DePue: How would you describe his personal demeanor?

Helm-Renfro: He was soft-spoken, very diligent about what he was doing. We had a bill that had to do about insurance for the State of Illinois. There was a part in there where he had guaranteed all the insurance agencies, and that, that it would not become a one-payer system. That means that one insurance company would get the contract or whatever. There was a lobbyist that was supposed to bring him an amendment to this bill to make it run smoother. And so anyway, I just happened to be glancing at it and I looked at it. Barack came in and I said "Barack, you need to look at this amendment." And he said, "Well, why? Did he bring it by for me." I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well go ahead and fi..." I

said, “No, I don’t think you want me to file this bill yet with this amendment.” He said, “Well what’s in it?” I said, “Read that line right there that says one-payer system.” He said “Oh, my goodness, I am so glad you caught that.” We had already started to get phone calls and faxes about that he had gone back on his word about the one-payer system and he said that would never happen and now you’re introducing an amendment to it. But that amendment never got on that bill.

DePue: Can you explain a little bit more the implications of the one-payer system?

Helm-Renfro: It would have left other insurance companies out and that’s not what it was meant to do. It was meant to, just like the national one that he’s done now, it’s not one-paying system. You can go in there and pick and choose the different plans that you want. If you need long-term care, or if you need hospitalization, if you just need general health care, prescriptions, that’s the way he wanted it. He didn’t want it to be where one person dictated what everybody else would get.

DePue: We’re on the issues, some of the important legislation, and obviously the core of what he was pushing was the health issues and other things that would be helping his constituents. Abortion was also something that came up. Do you remember any of that?

Helm-Renfro: No, I think that might have been handled as not him as a primary sponsor on it. So I probably wouldn’t have handled the information on that one.

DePue: Did you have an opportunity to see him on the floor of the Senate, ever giving speeches, or anything like that.

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes, we could put on to our thing for the video recording and where you could see him speak.

DePue: What’s your impression of him on the floor?

Helm-Renfro: He knew exactly what he was going to talk about. He did not have to have a piece of paper in front of him. He knew what he was going to speak on. He was a legislator that was able to walk across that aisle and say to the Republicans, “Okay, what is it about this bill that’s so distasteful that you won’t vote for it? What can we do to work on this together?” And he got through some legislation because he could walk across that aisle and make that difference.

DePue: Was he the kind of speaker, that when he was talking, the rest of the senators would be paying attention? Because the place is notorious for people talking and others not paying attention.

Helm-Renfro: And I think it was. They wanted to hear what he had to say and they wanted to hear what was so important because Barack didn’t get up on every bill. It was

bills that he was very compassionate about. There was other people in the Senate that were compassionate about their bills. If there was something in a bill that he didn't agree with, he would ask that senator. He would explain on the floor, why, that was a part in there. Then he would want to know with that legislator, "can we pull this out of the record, and you and I work on it so that it's palatable for everybody."

DePue: Okay, I'm going to put you on the spot some more here, Beverly. I'm sure that when you hear these things said about your former boss now, you always have some reaction to it. But how would you describe him in terms of his political philosophy at that time, and where would you put him on the political spectrum at that time?

Helm-Renfro: I don't think Barack was your typical politician. His was more the issues that he wanted to see happen—issues that would help people. People, I think, were his most important asset; that he wanted to help the people that needed it the most.

DePue: Did you see him as an ideologue or as a pragmatist?

Helm-Renfro: I don't know what ...

DePue: Somebody who was driven by political philosophy, or somebody who was driven by trying to solve problems?

Helm-Renfro: Driven by what he thought would solve the problems.

DePue: Okay.

Helm-Renfro: Yes. That would put him in that whole category right there.

DePue: Okay. Well let's change the subject here a little bit and not put you on the spot.

Helm-Renfro: Okay (laughs).

DePue: What did he do in his free time? You mentioned already that he was playing basketball before most days.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, he liked to play basketball; there was a group of legislators and lobbyists that played basketball.

DePue: Democrats? or both sides?

Helm-Renfro: I think it was both sides. I never knew who was playing or whatever, but I think it was both sides. You had golf days—that was when anybody who would golf, lobbyists, him, he had some lobbyists that were his friends. Poker



nights: that was a mixed group that was Democrats, Republicans, and lobbyists (laughs).

DePue: What were the stakes?

Helm-Renfro: I don't know. I don't know, but I know that Senator Link came in one day and he says "I'm getting a little tired of your boss." And I said, "Why is that?" He said, "Because he wins all the time and he studies it too hard." (laughs)

DePue: Well here's an aside: you might not know that Richard Nixon, when he was in the military during World War II in the Pacific, became an expert poker player as well.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, okay.

DePue: So that's one thing that the two men might have shared in common. I don't know if there's many.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, there could have been, um-hm.

DePue: That was just a way for him to let off steam?

Helm-Renfro: Let it all out, trying to get away from it, step back, and he started fresh the new morning.

DePue: In his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, he talks about his days in the legislature and regrets that by the time he was there it was more partisan that it used to be. But the stories about him and basketball and golf and poker nights, those are very much the old-fashioned collegial aspect of the legislature.

Helm-Renfro: Right, and I'm not sure but I don't think at those times for all of them to relax and just...I don't think it was a political thing. I don't think they bantered back about which bills was going to go, or why are you doing this or that; it was just a relaxing and easy time.

DePue: During the sessions, how often did he get back to Chicago?

Helm-Renfro: Whenever he could. Sometimes he would even travel back in the evenings. Maybe we got out at five o'clock and we had committees afterwards but he had no committees, no bills in those committees; he'd drive home and then drive back in the morning. So he was very much family-orientated to spend as much time with his family as he could.

DePue: You were working for him at the time Sasha was born. Do you remember that?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, I do. His assistant in Chicago was on vacation and he had asked me to come to Chicago and work the Chicago office. We were not in session during

that time. I said, "That's fine, no problem." A couple of days before we were going to leave, Sasha was born. He brought her home and so I called him and I said "Well, we're probably going to head out tomorrow morning." And he said, "Come on by to see Sasha." And I said, "Okay." So I went on by to see Sasha; Sherry and I both did because she was up there for Senator Madigan's office. So we went by and saw Sasha. I was holding her and Malia looked at me and she says "Okay, you can give her back now." (laughs) And we thought she was joking at first, but Malia was not joking. And I said, "Okay, I'm just going to hold her a few minutes more." She said, "I said give her back." (laughs) Barack said, "Now you know Bev and now she's going to hold Sasha for a minute." She said, "Dad, she needs to give my sister back, Sasha." And I said "Okay, I'm not getting on your bad side Malia. Here, Michelle, here is Sasha." (laughs)

DePue: What's your impression of Michelle?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, Michelle is a wonderful person. I think, and Barack always would say "She's my leveler. When I think that something is going away, I can talk through it with Michelle and get a new perspective, a new understanding and think about and say, well, maybe that's what they were trying to say, or trying to do but I'm not saying it the right way or dealing with it the right way." She was the level one. When decisions were made about him running for the U.S. Senate and before that, Michelle was the first one he talked to; Michelle and the girls were the first people that he talked to. Not to anybody else but to them. When he decided to run for the U.S. Senate, he came and told me, "Well, I talked to Michelle and them, but I want to get your opinion. What do you think about me running for the U.S. Senate?" And I said, "Well, go for it. You'll win it." And he said, "Oh, you're just prejudiced about the whole thing, aren't you?" And I said, "No, Barack, I think you would be very good. The things you've done here in the Senate, I think you could help on the national level." He said, "Okay, now I want you to understand something. If I run, you have to stay completely out of it." And I said, "Well, why?" And he says "Because you work for the Illinois State Senate." He said I would not want to have it on my conscious that you got fired because you were helping me on my campaign here." So I told him, "Okay, but I can do what I want to after hours, can't I?" And he said, "Yes, but not a whole lot. I don't want your name up in everybody's mouth saying, Beverly's doing this or Beverly's doing that." But he wanted to meet some of the leaders in the black community here and so I set up a Meet and Greet for him at our church, at Union Baptist, and he got to meet some of them; some of them were gung-ho from the beginning: "Oh yeah, we're jumping on his bandwagon." So they were with him from the beginning and a lot of those were precinct committeemen. So he got to know some of them that way and they worked for him all the way through. I stayed out...

DePue: Was this 2003 when he first was thinking about this?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, because 2004 he would have been elected. Yes, yes. And so we did it that way. Then what I did was, we had committee meetings, he still had his State business to do—Illinois State Senate, he was a senator, he still was. So, if we had a committee, he would go home every evening, I don't care when it was—he had a driver at that time, somebody that drove him, back and forth—so they would be ready to drive. They would tell me, “Okay, Bev, as soon as he's out, call us and we'll pull up in front and he can get in the car and go.” So that's the way I'd handle it.

Well, in the morning time, if he had a nine o'clock committee meeting—our committee met a nine o'clock—sometimes he'd be running a little late coming in. I'd have my cell phone with me and I'd bend down and I'd say “Barack, where're you at?” and he'd say “I'm about five minutes out.” I'd say “I think I have to go to the ladies room.” And I'd go to the ladies room; by the time I got back, Barack was there. (laughs) And then I think Senator Burzynski at one time told me, “I notice you go to the bathroom an awful lot, and I don't see the chairman sitting in that seat. Are you buying time for him?” (laughs) And I said, “Me?” He said, “Yeah, you.” And I said, “I can't lie to you.” And he said, “Okay, that's alright. I knew that's what was going on.” And so I'd buy him a little time.

DePue: Well, I want to talk a little bit more about before he made that important decision to run for the senate, and then we'll go back to talking about that especially.

Helm-Renfro: Okay.

DePue: My questions now are going to be about when session wasn't in. Did he have a job; did he have another occupation at the time?

Helm-Renfro: Okay, yes, he was a professor at the University of Chicago, I believe it was. He taught Constitutional Law. And he also belonged to a law firm at that time.

DePue: How was he able to be a professor, I mean, I'm thinking of your classic giving lectures, classes, grading papers, and things like that, when the bulk of his time is spent down in Springfield during the academic year?

Helm-Renfro: I think what it did was when the off-time was, because we were usually out by May 30<sup>th</sup> and we didn't come back until November, so he has almost two periods he could teach in there. Then like if we had different times that he would have other people come in and teach that class one or two times and then he would always be back in Chicago for ... I think his classes mostly met maybe on a Monday, because our schedule was usually Tuesday through Thursday, or Tuesday through Friday until he got to the last week and then it was the whole fourteen days, weekends included.

DePue: Then you'd start doing those marathon sessions.

Helm-Renfro: (Sighs) Yes, yes.

DePue: What was your job like when the legislature wasn't in session?

Helm-Renfro: Just to maintain the office. Barack and I had an understanding that once or twice a week we would take ten minutes out and I could call him and give him all the information I needed to give him. Then he would tell me how he wanted me to proceed with something. Then I would tell him what's going on, like, I've had a couple of constituents, we solved the problem. And he'd say, you know, "Who was it?" and I'd tell him and he'd say "Yeah, I know those people." He said, "Well, I'm glad you could get that work through." And I'd say "Good." Or if I had a problem that I couldn't solve, I would say "Barack, I'm going to fax all the information to Jennifer, but I'm not having any success in solving this problem for this family. Maybe you can figure out how you can do it."

DePue: Who was Jennifer?

Helm-Renfro: Jennifer was his assistant in Chicago, his district office person.

DePue: And those were both salaried people under the government of Illinois, then?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, because each senator was allowed a district allotment that paid for the district office and their person.

DePue: Okay. Again, when we had our pre-interview session, I think you mentioned Michelle's going to the Governor's Ball?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, she went to the Governor's Ball. She came down one time for the Governor's Ball and she said "I bought this dress. Barack hasn't seen it." I said, "Okay, what's it look like?" She said, "Well, it's cut kind of low in the back. But I'm wearing it." I said "Good for you, Michelle." So the next day, after the Governor's Ball, I said "Barack, didn't Michelle look stunning last night?" He said, "That dress was cut a little low in the back. She's a mother with two kids." (laughs) Michelle said "Oh, he was just jealous." (laughs) They had such a good relationship.

DePue: And the State Fair: you already mentioned taking Malia to the horse barns and things like that. Remember Democrat Day at the State Fair?"

Helm-Renfro: Yes. Oh, yes. Every Democrat Day we'd go out there. Usually Barack would always be out there, sometimes there would be—I don't think it was necessarily him—but the Senate President would have busloads from Chicago, some of the reps would have busloads and they would bring their people down for Democrat Day.

DePue: Was that one of the places, one of the things you had to do if you had political ambitions?

Helm-Renfro: No, well, yes, yes. You should be there. Because people knew it when you're not. (laughs)

DePue: What were some of the other things that were expected of a Democrat, let's say.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, let's see. Sometimes the receptions that were available. Barack didn't go to every reception. The ones that were like for AARP or the housing projects out of Chicago, they would have receptions and he'd try to at least stop by every reception. Some he'd spend a little more time than he did at others.

DePue: You were saying receptions for...

Helm-Renfro: Lobbyists would come down and then their organization, if it was their lobby day, they would have all their people here from the State of Illinois and they would have receptions and invite the legislators. It kind of gave the people a chance to talk to their legislator or at least to meet and greet them. Then you'd have the days that they were swearing in, sworn in; you'd have a big party that the Senate President would have. He would announce all those Democratic senators that were there.

DePue: I would imagine that some of the unions were big supporters as well. Would he attend those receptions?

Helm-Renfro: Um, I didn't go to a lot of the receptions. I kind of picked and choosed the ones I wanted to go to, because I knew it was important for the people that were sponsoring the HIV legislation or they were here lobbying for more support for them; they would have a reception. They always invited me to that reception and I always made sure I went to that one. Anything for Barack, after he was sworn in; sometimes there were receptions for him that some of his friends would put on. And so I would go to that. Just various receptions. Anything that the Senate President had, you knew you were going to go.

DePue: Here's one again, completely different than what we were talking about, but I know I'm supposed to ask you about Clifford, the Dog.

Helm-Renfro: (laughs) Clifford the Dog came to the senate. I forget the agency that brought him there, but anyway, Clifford the Dog, the big red Dog, was there and Barack came off the senate floor to take pictures with Clifford the Dog because his daughters loved Clifford the Dog, so he had to have a picture taken with Clifford. (laughs) So he had his picture taken with Clifford the Dog.

DePue: I suspect that both he and Michelle had read those books to those girls more than once.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, I bet they did. I bet they did.

DePue: Okay, now I'm going to go through a list of names and ask your reflections on the relationship that then-Senator Obama would have had with these people. Let's start at the top with Governor Ryan. Because during the time you were there that was Ryan's administration—well, Blagojevich as well towards the end.

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm. Um, Governor Ryan: I think their relationship was a good working one, because Barack could, like I said, again, step across that aisle. And when it came to the moratorium on the death penalty, he was working with Ryan and all the other legislators that were entwined into that program to find a way that would be a better way.

DePue: Did you ever hear him make any comments about all of the legal and corruption issues that were surrounding Ryan in his term?

Helm-Renfro: No.

DePue: Those were things he did not talk to you about?

Helm-Renfro: No, he did not talk to me about that.

DePue: Well, here's the perfect segue into the next one: Governor Blagojevich. What was his relationship with Governor Blagojevich?

Helm-Renfro: I don't know if they really had a relationship. I know that at one time when they were going to close the prison—I'm trying to think of which prison it was—but they were going to close one of the prisons and Barack and I believe several others got a stay on it, that they did not close that prison. The corrections guards were very happy with that.

DePue: Again, do you remember him making any kind of comments that you overheard or to you to somebody else about Blagojevich?

Helm-Renfro: Well, the only thing that I actually saw as an interaction between the Governor Blagojevich and Barack was that one day Governor was walking up on our floor; he wasn't coming to see Barack he was just walking the floor with a couple of his people. Barack came out of his office; he was getting ready to leave. The Governor said, "Barack, do you want to hitch a ride back on my plane with me?" Barack said "I don't ride in them planes. I drive." (laughs loudly) That's all that was said. (laughs) And Barack left and drove home.

DePue: Well here I'm going to ask for your personal opinion about one thing. Since you grew up in Springfield, the State capitol, what did you personally think about Blagojevich avoiding with a passion coming to Springfield?

Helm-Renfro: I really didn't think, in my opinion, that it was the right decision. Most governors had at least spent some time here, especially when we were in

session so they were accessible. But by not being accessible, it just created more of a problem I think between him and the legislature. That's my opinion.

DePue: We're going to finish with some of the personalities in the senate, but there's a couple of other politicians I wanted to get your reflections on on Obama's relationship. Let's go with Speaker Mike Madigan, who a lot of folks would consider the most powerful politician in the state at that time.

Helm-Renfro: I'm not sure that he had a lot of interaction with him, but if he did, um... I'm quite sure he knew enough about him through Lisa [Madigan, the Speaker's daughter] you know. Because him and Lisa were seatmates and they were also a room apart from each other. So I'm quite sure that if he wanted to know anything about Speaker Madigan before he approached him. But I don't know of any time that he said he was going over to speak with him.

DePue: Which normally, as a senator, you wouldn't have to have those negotiations

Helm-Renfro: Right, right.

DePue: How about Mayor Daley?

Helm-Renfro: Mayor Daley. I don't think Barack had a lot of interaction with him unless it was probably when he was in Chicago.

DePue: In your position you wouldn't be privy to the kind of associations he had had while he was in Chicago?

Helm-Renfro: No, no, because you separate your domain there. Jennifer would be the person that would handle everything in Chicago. I handled all of Springfield.

DePue: How well did you know Jennifer?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, Jennifer and I are good friends. Yes, we worked well together. If she couldn't solve a problem, she'd say "Bev, who can I go to?" I said, "Jennifer, fax everything to me and I'll go to them." (laughs) So we worked very well together.

DePue: Now we're getting to the senate. We talked about Emil Jones already, but I wonder if you have any more reflections on the relationship, because that one has been portrayed, both from the Democratic and Republican side, as the crucial relationship for the Senator when he was here.

Helm-Renfro: You know, I'm quite sure that they had that relationship, but you didn't see it when you were on the floor. I didn't see Barack going all the time over to President Jones. They may have talked before, they may have talked afterward; I wouldn't have been privy to that information.

DePue: Would it have been Senator Jones' style to come down to your area and go into Obama's office?

Helm-Renfro: No, sometimes Barack would go up to his office, but that was about all.

DePue: Towards the end of the time here when he was still in the senate, before he announced [that he would run for President], there had been suggestions that Jones deliberately assigned a lot of legislation to Obama so that he could get a little bit more attention and stature. Do you know if that was the case?

Helm-Renfro: I've heard that rumor and I'm not sure that that's the case. I would think that legislation that he probably had Barack handle [was] because of his law knowledge and more about the South side of Chicago. It may be that he did. But hey, I couldn't say he said, "Barack, you handle this." I think he knew where Barack's passions were, where his commitments were and that may be why that was handled that way. If it was.

DePue: You said that you yourself saw bigger things for Senator Obama. Do you think that Jones then was going out of his way to groom Senator Obama for bigger things, as well?

Helm-Renfro: He could have been. I think that's a question that President Jones is going to have to answer because I do not know (laughs).

DePue: Okay. Well, on the other side of the political aisle was Senator Frank Watson for most of those years. What was his relationship with Senator Watson?

Helm-Renfro: Yes. I think with Senator Watson and most of the Republicans, I think there was a decent relationship. You know, they had their party affiliation, but I think that they could work together on a lot of things.

DePue: You mentioned several other senators, but there's one here I want to get your reaction to, and that's Senator Ricky Hendon.

Helm-Renfro: (Laughs) Okay. (laughs) I'm not too sure there was a relationship between Barack and Ricky Hendon.

DePue: What was going on there?

Helm-Renfro: I don't know. You know, I think that Barack just stayed clear of that whole situation. I never read either one of Senator Hendon's books and especially the first one about "is he black enough."

DePue: Black enough, White enough, the Obama Dilemma.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, and I just refused to read it. I don't see how you can determine if somebody is black enough or white enough. You know what I mean? You know you can't... He had the black side of him and he also has the white



culture there. I have that same thing, and I don't consider myself that I have a dilemma over it. I move smoothly in both worlds and I think that's the way Barack was. It wasn't that I'm coming over here as a black man and tell you what to do. I'm coming over here as Barack Obama.

DePue: What do you think was Senator Hendon's motive for writing these things and having these feelings about it?

Helm-Renfro: I think of it stems from what we talking about a few minutes ago, that they thought that President Jones was giving him choice legislation. And I don't think all of it came from President Jones. I think that a lot of it came from people that knew... Legislation is born out of several different ways. Now the president usually has... he has a ton of what I call shell bills. They have different titles to them, but there's no substance in them. The substance has to be added. If he was doing that, then maybe he gave some to Barack that were shell bills. And I'm quite sure there was. But I don't think, I don't know why they thought that...I think that if they went to President Jones and wanted those things...I just don't know. I don't know what that was. That was always there. It was there from the day I got there and I always knew that there was fine line there.

DePue: Okay, do you think there was...

Helm-Renfro: I stayed away from it.

DePue: Was there some political jealousy involved on Senator Hendon's part, do you think?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, I don't know. I don't know. Senator Hendon is Senator Hendon; that's all I can say.

DePue: Well he was one of the more colorful members of the senate.

Helm-Renfro: I know, I know. I mean I like Senator Hendon; I have nothing against him but you know, I just don't know what the motivation was.

DePue: Well you've already talked a little bit about Senator Obama's decision to run for the U.S. Senate. Apparently, when he approached you about it you weren't surprised.

Helm-Renfro: No, I was not surprised. I thought that was a next step for him. And, I told him so and he told me I was just prejudiced. (laughs)

DePue: As I'm sure he wanted you to be.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, I told him, I said "I know you're going to win it." And he said "Oh you're just prejudiced." I said "Okay."

DePue: What do you think was the rationale behind his very explicit instructions that he didn't want you to get directly involved with the campaign?

Helm-Renfro: Because he didn't want me to lose my job. He wanted to make sure I was safe even though we had talked about that if/when he won—not **if**, but **when** he won it—that I probably would go federal with him. And I wanted to go federal. That was a promise he kept. I got a call a few days before the election and he said “Bev, I got you tickets to the private party and everything and you're to be in Chicago.” I said, “Okay, no problem with that.” I just took vacation time and went to Chicago.

DePue: When you say you went federal with him, were you...

Helm-Renfro: I was going to go federal with him. I wanted to go federal and then I got to thinking afterwards, I called the retirement system to see how much longer I had before I had my twenty in with the state. They said, you've got about three and half years to four. I'm going, okay he's got a six year stint here so I could still do this in that. And I went ahead and interviewed and everything and then when Barack came down—he had stepped down in November so he could spend some time with his family and go to Hawaii to see his grandmother—and Senator Raoul had been appointed. I don't know if I should put this on record or not—but Senator Raoul came in and says “I told Barack he couldn't take you with him, that I need you here to teach me the ropes.” And Barack had told me “Don't ever bite your tongue; say what you have to say.” I told him, “I think this is a decision that Barack and I will make when he gets here.” I think that took him by surprise. (laughs) So he said, “Oh, okay, when's he coming?” I said, “He should be here tomorrow. So I'll talk to him tomorrow.”

DePue: Senator Raoul, I assume is the senator who took over in Obama's district?

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: Well, we need to back up quite a bit, and talk about that campaign year, 2004. There was a lot that happened in that year.

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes.

DePue: He did have a primary opponent, Blair Hull. What can you tell us about his primary opponent?

Helm-Renfro: He never talked to me about it. From what I could see in the debates, I thought Barack was a much better debater and knew more about what he was talking about than Mr. Hull, because he hadn't been into politics. Barack had been there.

DePue: Clearly, the Democratic public thought the same thing because he won rather overwhelmingly.

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: How about his Republican opponents? First was Jack Ryan.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah. Don't know much about him. In his debates, he seemed kind of...I don't even know if they even had a debate.

DePue: I don't think they did.

Helm-Renfro: So I didn't know that much about him, more than just what I read in the papers.

DePue: He left the campaign, I don't know, June or July timeframe because of allegations about his marital problems.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, that's why, I'm trying to think if that was him, the gentleman that was following Barack. Barack-stalker, as he called him. But anyway, at that time, he had a stalker, when Barack was running for the U.S. Senate. When it first started, there was me and Nicole Hildebrand; she worked for Senator Carol Ronen. And her and I sat catty-cornered from each other, because we had moved our offices by then; Barack had a corner office and so did Senator Ronen. This gentleman kept coming up and he had this bag with him—this suspicious bag—that he kept fooling with every time he'd come up. He'd come [and ask] "Where's the senator at?" And I'd say, "Well, he's in committee." "Well, which committee?" "I don't give that information out, because he's presenting a bill." After he came up three or four times, Nicole and I got very uncomfortable, so I said something to Barack. Barack said, "Oh, that's my stalker." And I said, "What do you mean, your stalker?" And he said well somebody else's campaign had hired him to follow him around and to listen to everything he said so that they could catch him in things; that maybe he would say some one thing one time and one thing another. And I'm going, "Uh they're not going to do that." (laughs) So anyway, he came up several more times and then we had to have our sergeant-at-arms come up and tell him that he couldn't come up to our office any more because it made us really uncomfortable. But I understand that he had a camera and a recorder in there, in his bag. He was exposed one day when the reporters were talking to him outside the Senate President's office when he was in the hallway going into the Senate chambers. He was there and he was pushing the microphone up in Barack's face. They asked him about it and old Barack put his arm around him and said "Oh, this is my stalker from the other campaign." (laughs) I think it took him by surprise. The news media, they laughed; they thought it was funny. Barack says, "No, I'm serious. They're trying to find out any information on me that they can." And I went, "Oh, my goodness, okay." (laughs)

DePue: Can you describe the stalker?

Helm-Renfro: He was a young fellow. Maybe probably about 5'7", 5'8". I think that his only job was to follow Barack around. He would drive all the way from Chicago, following Barack, and all the way back to Chicago, following Barack; anywhere in the state Barack went he followed.

DePue: Was he white.

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm, yeah.

DePue: Okay, that's interesting.

Helm-Renfro: It is and that's public record, I'm not telling anything (laughs).

DePue: Well eventually his opponent in the general campaign is going to be Alan Keyes.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah.

DePue: Well, you rolled your eyes just a little bit right now.

Helm-Renfro: (Laughs) I just felt that, to me, in my opinion—and Barack never talked about him—but in my opinion, for him to come out of state and then go and run against Barack, he knew nothing about the State of Illinois. For the Republican Party to put him up against Barack and for him to be a black man and to sit there and say, "Okay, I'll come into the state and do all this derogatory stuff against him, made no sense to me. I just felt that he was actually being used for that purpose to discredit Barack and it wasn't working.

DePue: Well part of that is a reflection of where the Republican Party in the State of Illinois was at the time, because in 2004 George Ryan had been totally discredited and with him went much of the Republican party. So, unfortunately for the Republicans there wasn't much to choose from in the state.

Helm-Renfro: I know (chuckle) so they went out of state.

DePue: Did you even consider Keyes to be a serious threat?

Helm-Renfro: I thought that he could be for the simple reason of the things that were derogatory that he always wanted to say about Barack, you know, and remarks that he would make. I'm thinking, you know, this does not look well on the Republican Party or on blacks in general that you would be able to be used like this to be brought in and to take the black vote away from him. I think that's generally, in my opinion, what they were trying to do, was to take the black vote away from Barack. But I think everybody saw through that.

DePue: That obviously didn't work.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, it didn't work.

DePue: Here's the other big event that happened in Obama's life and an important event in American history, now in looking back at it: The Democratic convention, I believe it was in Boston in August, and he gave that speech.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yeah.

DePue: Did you know that he was going to make an important speech at the Democratic convention?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, he had told me. He had told me he was making it and he was running through his mind what he was going to say and how he was going to present it and that. He said, "But, you know, I've been working on it for awhile, and I think I've almost got it done." I never saw it until he gave it. But Barack didn't need that piece of paper in front of him.

DePue: Was he the kind who would have other people who would help him write speeches like that, at that time?

Helm-Renfro: I don't think so. Now, I may be wrong but I don't think so. I think that came from Barack's thoughts.

DePue: After he delivered it were you surprised at the response it got?

Helm-Renfro: No, no, because I was standing in my living room jumping up and down and my husband was saying "Will you please sit down so I can finish hearing it?" (Laughs)

DePue: Were you surprised at the speech?

Helm-Renfro: No, no.

DePue: That was the Barack Obama that you knew?

Helm-Renfro: That was the Barack I know. Um-hmm.

DePue: Tell us about what the reaction was, as you recall it now, looking back.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, when I got back to the office—I don't know if it was the next day, or the next week—I mean, everybody was just talking about it and talking about it. I said, yes, and I've got it recorded (laughs) because I wanted this recording because I knew it was going to be something special that he was going to say.

DePue: So you understood this as a transformative event in his life?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes. I think it was transforming him from a state to a national arena. Whether he thought it or not, I thought it.

DePue: How did that change what was happening in your office?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, everybody wanted to see Barack then. (laughs)

DePue: Everybody at the state level or the national level as well?

Helm-Renfro: State. National, they never called because we always kept a separate...Barack always carried two cell phones. I think one was for whatever he needed on the national scene and one was his regular blackberry that he carried.

DePue: So he had a political office and all those calls would be going to the political office.

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes, yes. If they would come to me, I would have to tell them that this was his state office and we are not allowed to give out information. You can look in directory assistance in Chicago and they'll give you a campaign number.

DePue: I would think they could jump on the internet and be able to contact him and find the phone numbers at least.

Helm-Renfro: Right. Some of them were older people that I guess didn't have access to it.

DePue: Was it after the Democratic convention that he went out to California for a fund-raiser?

Helm-Renfro: Yes.

DePue: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Helm-Renfro: I only remember when he came back, he'd tell me, he said, "Bev, let me tell you what Michelle did." And I said, "What?" (chuckle) and he says "I told her, Michelle, they were having a fund raiser out in California with all these people. I met stars and everything else. And I think it was a thousand dollars a plate dinner." And she says, "Well, who'd they have it for?" And he says, "For me!" She says, "Barack, who was it for? Who was it in honor of?" He said, "It was for me!" She said, "Oh, get out of here." (laughs) She always kept him level. (Laughs) He never got the big head.

DePue: Did you see any changes after that?

Helm-Renfro: No, no, no. Other than he was running back and forth and I'd have to say, "Barack, slow down. Do you want me to get you some orange juice, or some hot tea, or something? Because you look really tired."

DePue: I know I've got another page of questions here, what the heck happened to it? We're going to take a very brief break here, if you don't mind.

Helm-Renfro: Okay.

DePue: Okay, we're back from a very quick break with Beverly. We're getting close to the time that I I thought we wanted to get through his election as Senator. Then we'll ask you some other questions about looking back at it today, now that he's President of the United States. I don't think there's much doubt he's the most powerful man in the world now and you had the opportunity to work with him here. So that must give you pause once in awhile, to be thinking about that.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, it does (laughs).

DePue: Let's go back to the end of that campaign. Do you remember anything else about that campaign? You're still working in his office as a senator at the time.

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes.

DePue: Anything else that really sticks with you today on that?

Helm-Renfro: Um, no more than once he was the nominee for the U.S. Senate, he did have people that came with him. Evidently from what they have said, he had started getting hate mail. So they had to teach me how to open letters; we used the rubber gloves. They'd sit with me when he was here in Springfield.

DePue: They being?

Helm-Renfro: The people that were with him, just to make sure nobody came up and to try to start anything or create a problem.

DePue: So these are people he's contracted to do this, or is it...

Helm-Renfro: I'm not sure if... Well, I know a couple of them were and they were ones that were driving him back and forth from Chicago. But there were procedures that they had started learning and I'd have to learn the same procedures.

DePue: It wasn't State Police or ....

Helm-Renfro: No, a couple of them were City of Chicago police officers, um-hm, that traveled with him sometimes.

DePue: Did that surprise you?

Helm-Renfro: No, no. It didn't surprise me.

DePue: Did it bother you?

Helm-Renfro: No, no. I mean, I got to know all of them so you know it wasn't a big situation.

DePue: Well, I asked the question in the respect to whether it bothered you that there were elements out there in society that would do that?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes. But I wouldn't let myself think about that that much because Barack never lets it bother him. If you notice him, even now, I'm quite sure he gets even more hate mail by now, and he just doesn't let it bother him. You know, I think he believes that people generally are good inside and the fanatics don't know who they are. So I think that's his philosophy; he wants to be with the people.

DePue: One of the phrases that you do hear to describe Obama is 'No Drama, Obama.' Does that sound right to you from the work that you had with him for all those years?

Helm-Renfro: No...yes, in a way, but I mean with his level right now, when they say that, it just...I kind of laugh at it because the things that Barack may be thinking within himself or discussing with Michelle or his close advisers, most people won't know about. You know, he may have drama, but they would be the close-knit people that would know.

DePue: So in other words, his public face, that sounds right, is that what you're suggesting?

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yes, and I don't think that he has that much drama anyway. Barack takes things in stride and works for the solution. That's just his personality.

DePue: It wasn't that much after he was elected in an over-whelming victory in his race for the Senate, that the inevitable talk about him as a presidential candidate started. Did that surprise you?

Helm-Renfro: No, because the night he was elected to the U.S. Senate, I was up at the private party, and I reached over and I gave him a hug and I whispered to him, I said, "And I told you this was going to happen, and this was only the beginning." And he just looked at me and said, "Yeah, okay, you're prejudiced again." (laughs) I said, "No, Barack, there's great things left for you to do."

DePue: Do you think that at that point in time he still didn't think that was in the possibility, or at least maybe not in the short term?

Helm-Renfro: No. I don't think he did. I don't think he did.

DePue: Did he stay in touch with you after that?

Helm-Renfro: Not so much. I'd hear more from Michelle. I'd hear from his people. They would call whenever he was going to be in Springfield, they'd call and say "Bev, where you at, we need to get you down there?" And I'd say, you know,



the last time he was here, “I’m in Cincinnati, Ohio, I don’t think I’ll get to see Barack this time (laughs).”

DePue: What was your reaction then when you heard that he had made the official decision to run for president?

Helm-Renfro: I was there. I was there in February in that cold, cold, day, standing out there, waiting for him to announce. And I knew what he was going to announce. And I knew that it was okay with Michelle and he had talked with the rest of the family and everybody had agreed. So that’s his leveler.

DePue: Was that one of your proudest moments in your life?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yes. Because I tried to get up to the front and they kept saying, “You can’t get up to the front.” I said, “I’m his assistant. I’ve got to get up to the front.” Well, at that time he was U.S. Senator so I wasn’t his assistant. So I finally got up there and when he came down off the podium to shake hands and everything—I’ve got a picture with me—he looked over there and he said “Bev! You’re here! You’re here! What’re you doing here?” I said “Where else did you think I was going to be?” Then Michelle came and she says, “Oh, you’re here. Oh, Bev, thank you.” I said, “Michelle, I wouldn’t have been anywhere else.” She said, “Are they treating you alright, because if they’re not, you need to tell me.” I said, “No, I’m doing fine.”

DePue: Well, that must be one of those memories that you won’t forget, ever.

Helm-Renfro: No, I won’t and I have a picture. My brother was taking pictures for here. One of the guys from—I think he said CNN—took the snapshot of Barack and I together and he says, “Can I have that picture for my sister because that’s who she is.” (laughs) And so they gave it to us.

DePue: Wow. Had he ever referred to you as his sister before?

Helm-Renfro: Oh yeah, yeah.

DePue: So that part wasn’t a surprise?

Helm-Renfro: No. No.

DePue: Do you have any memories that you want to share about the election itself, either the primary campaign where he and Hillary went for so many months, or the general election?

Helm-Renfro: Oh, I thought that was brutal (ooh).

DePue: The primary?

Helm-Renfro: The primary, yeah. There were so many crowded into that and I think that Barack couldn't actually get the things that he wanted to say out because the field was so crowded at that time. But when it came down to him and Hillary Clinton, I thought that was a good exchange. People could see him for who he was, and see Hillary and make the decision they wanted. I wanted them to make Barack the decision. Because I remember when they dedicated the museum here, President Bush was here. Barack stood up at the podium with the presidential seal on it and I had my brother take a picture of it. And I said, "When you take the picture you need to give it to me because I need to get it to Barack." I got it to Barack and I told Barack, I said, "What I want you to do is, I want you to sign it and date it, but I don't want you to put 'To Bev' on there." And he said, "Well, why?" I said because that's going to be worth money one day." He said, "You'd sell my picture?" I said, "Hm, if the price is right, Barack, I may have to." And he fell out laughing. He said, "You wouldn't do that." And I said, "You told me always be honest and speak my mind. I'm telling you." (laughs)

DePue: Did he sign it Senator Barack Obama?

Helm-Renfro: No, he signed it Barack Obama and the date. (laughs)

DePue: So people can do the math and figure out he was senator at the time.

Helm-Renfro: That's right. That's right. But he's standing in front of that presidential seal.

DePue: Very good. How about the general election, with McCain?

Helm-Renfro: Um... That one I got a little upset with (laughs) because I think that—and it's not anything against Senator McCain or Sarah Palin—but I just thought their attacks were unfounded. They would take something and use it out of context. And, to me, oh, I'd get so mad. I'd get so furious watching that TV and my husband would tell me "Well you just quiet down, will you calm down?" I said "But they're saying that Barack says that and he didn't say that." (laughs) "They're twisting it."

DePue: Anything in particular?

Helm-Renfro: I can't remember any particulars that it was. I think it was something ...

DePue: Well, that situation with Joe the Plumber.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, that one and there was a couple others when they were going back over his senate record. If people understand Illinois politics it's kind of different from the rest of the politics. If you're not going to vote for something, it's something that you can't vote for, it doesn't mean that he wasn't there.

DePue: So we're going back to the question about voting 'Present.'

Helm-Renfro: Yes, yeah. Or not voting, that he wasn't there to vote for things. And it could be that...I don't remember Barack missing too many legislative days and my thing was that he could have been in negotiations for the budget, or negotiations to keep the prisons open, and miss those votes, so they're not all that he just wasn't there and didn't show up. That just wasn't happening. And that would just upset me that they wouldn't go back and try to get the true information. Then, of course, you got to use the information; okay, if he missed that day, and there was an important vote—because there was one before I came with him, and that was because he was in Hawaii with his grandmother, visiting her—and there was an important vote on the floor. I think it was a special session they called in; it was right before I came to work for him. So he got a lot of heat for that one.

DePue: How about all the things that were flying around here in the campaign about his Chicago associations, especially Jeremiah Wright and William Ayres, and some of those people.

Helm-Renfro: Yeah, and I'm thinking, okay, we all go to church and when our pastors get to a point where they're talking about politics, you know, we all don't get up and walk out. So don't attribute this to him all the time. He may not have been there for those services, especially when he was on the road for everything else. So he may not have been even at those services, or if he had been, maybe he didn't hear all the things that were said. Maybe those were on sermons that he wasn't. I don't know if he was there or he wasn't. We didn't talk about it and I didn't ask him about it.

DePue: Do you know, when he was here during the legislative sessions—if he stayed over the weekend perhaps—did he attend any church in town?

Helm-Renfro: No. No, he didn't. The way it was usually handled is that, if they finished on Saturday and they were here for fourteen days straight, they may finish on Saturday, come in about noon and work 'til about three. Then they were gone from three to maybe one o'clock Sunday morning. Well, Barack would go home to Chicago to be with his family.

DePue: So he wasn't here on Sunday, period.

Helm-Renfro: Not usually. Not unless we had an early session and stayed real late. But, from what I remember—if I'm remembering correctly, and I think I am—on Saturdays we were not there no ten or fifteen hours. We may come in and go over some bills, move them to third so the next day we could start voting on them, get out of there about three in the afternoon, come back about one Sunday afternoon or four Sunday afternoon and work maybe from four to nine and then head straight on into the week.

DePue: It sounds like now we're talking about some of those marathon sessions that Rod Blagojevich was famous for.

Helm-Renfro: (laughs) Yeah.

DePue: Illinois is certainly an interesting state to work in. (laughs)

Helm-Renfro: Yes it is.

DePue: As you got towards the last couple of months of the presidential campaign, was there any doubt in your mind that Barack was going to emerge as the winner in that election?

Helm-Renfro: In my heart, no. In my mind, you had to still think that it could be pulled off. You just didn't know. Because you don't know in politics. But I thought that Barack had presented himself well. He had not gone for mud-slinging. You know, he stated the facts and that was it. I thought that was something to politics that hadn't been used in a long time (laughs).

DePue: What was your reaction when election night results came in, and he was clearly the winner.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, I was in tears. I was in tears. I was so proud of him. And so proud of how he had handled himself and everything. I wanted to be in Chicago that night and I thought, Bev, you're not going to even get close to him, you know. So watch it on TV and enjoy it. That next day I got a call from some of his people saying, you know, "We're putting the inaugural stuff together, so give me your address, give me who you think may be coming with you, will it be Mr. and Mrs. or that." I said "No, my sister-in-law's going to come with me because she's never been to Washington." So then we got our inaugural stuff.

DePue: Why didn't your husband go with you?

Helm-Renfro: He doesn't travel. He has two steel knees and that standing, he'd never be able to do it.

DePue: Tell us about the inauguration, that day.

Helm-Renfro: Oh, just to see the massive crowd of people, and the lines to even get into the area to see him being sworn in, and then, to get into the area and look back and see nothing but all these people. I'm going, "Oh, my!"

DePue: You were much closer to the front than the back?

Helm-Renfro: Well, I was about halfway from the front. No I was a little closer to the front, but not that much closer, because I was at the beginning of the reflecting pool. I had not asked for special treatment. I'm quite sure that if I had asked for it, Barack would have made sure it happened, or Michelle. But I didn't ask for that.

DePue: Were you telling some people around you that I used to be his secretary when he was a state senator?

Helm-Renfro: Um-hm. Yes, yes. Then they'd pass it up and they'd tell people, "Well she used to work for him when he was state senator." (laughs) So people would say, "Hold my place in line, I'm going back and talk to her." On the train to Chicago several times when I was going up when he won the U.S. Senate one, I took the train up. There was a couple on there from England and they were talking about him winning, that they thought he was going to win this election and how they really thought he would be a good U.S. Senator. My husband was sitting next to me at the train station, and he said, "Well, you know, my wife works for him." And that's all it took. The whole time to Chicago, I'd drink tea and talk to them.

DePue: You get to meet lots of interesting people because of this, don't you?

Helm-Renfro: Yes you do, yes you do. And I still have people, today, you know, I'll wear his cap or whatever and they'll say, "I've never seen that cap." And I said, "Well, I worked for Barack at that time." "Oh," "And I've got all his senate tee-shirts, his U.S. Senate ones and now his presidential ones." Um-hm.

DePue: Well I'm not going to talk about his time as president because I don't think there's enough distance from that time frame. But let's go back and reflect on your work with him while he was a state senator. What would be your overall assessment of Barack Obama as an Illinois state senator?

Helm-Renfro: Hm. He was articulate in what he did. He didn't do anything if he didn't believe in it. He had to believe in it and that would better the people that he served if he did it. Just like health care, All Kids program, those kinds of issues, HIV people, the homeless for housing and that. Those were some of his primary goals when he was in the state senate. I remember the times that he would talk to a director or anyone and have people come in that just stopped by that were from his district. He would just stop and turn around and he could just talk to them just like it was a smooth transition, just to talk to him. And to be able to talk on their level and tell them what they needed to know and hear from him. Yes, he'll support the legislation, to get more HIV research and more housing for people. That's just the type of person he was. I never saw a mean spirit in him. He always told me that if you want something, ask me, don't hem-haw around, don't question it, just come and ask me. And I'd say, "Okay, then that's they way I'll do." And I know at that time, when he first started, I started running for the school board. I went in and told him. I said, "I'm running for the school board and I'd like for you to write me a check." (Laughs) And Barack said, "Oh, that's to the point!" I said, "Yes, you told me not even mince words, to do it." And that's what I did.

DePue: And what did he do?

Helm-Renfro: He wrote me a check. He sent it to my house. He wrote it from Chicago and sent it to the house.

DePue: Did the experience of working for Senator Obama change your life?

Helm-Renfro: I think so. I think that it gave you...I can work with anybody. I watched Barack be able to work with anybody and everyone. Even though I could do that before, I think it gave me a new respect for it, to be able to work with someone and not to always be down or listen to the gossip that was going on, to make up my own decisions.

DePue: What would you say is the high point or the highlights of working for him?

Helm-Renfro: Oh... I think all of them would be. I mean, the highlight of working for him, even though I was going to lose him to the U.S. Senate, that was a high point. The speech that he gave to the national convention. The speech that he gave on the senate floor for All Kids Care, a very passionate speech. There were several others on the floor that he gave just very passionate speech. You could tell it was coming from the heart. It wasn't phony, it wasn't fake, it came from the heart.

DePue: How about on the flip side, a low point, maybe some of the criticisms or things that he was experiencing?

Helm-Renfro: People will always want to say something different, or just like the bill I was talking about, the one who obviously tried to sneak that part in, knowing that Barack wasn't for it. I mean, those to me, were low parts that people that you thought you could trust, you couldn't, because they wanted to put this part in there. Or that people would say things, or I'd go to someone's office—I'm not going to name the senators or anything—go to someone's office, and they'd say "Aren't you supposed to be down there with him?" All of us assistants were friends. I think it was just the way people perceived him. Barack was a quiet person; he didn't talk about his business, didn't talk about his family, you know, not to everybody. He just was personal and you had to respect that. But you also knew that you could go in and talk to him at any time.

DePue: We've been at this for a couple of hours today, to add to the couple of hours we had before. It has been very informative. I loved hearing stories about your dad and getting a different flavor, a good picture of what growing up in Springfield was at that time. Certainly today's discussion has been very important; it's going to be around for a long time and I'm thinking people are going to be listening to it and paying attention to what you've had to say. So I thank you for all of that. I'll give you an opportunity here at the end to make some final comments yourself.

Helm-Renfro: I think that the only comment that I'd really like to make that through my life, beginning with my family and then through with Barack, they've been journeys, they've been good journeys. I mean even with Barack, the whole,

almost five years that I worked for him, it was just like a journey because there's all different levels of him, from his state perspective, from what he liked to do in his community, from his teaching aspect, on up to him giving the speech for the national convention, winning the U.S. Senate race and then on to be our president. Those are, I think, kind of the journey that I take them with him, kind of take them with my parents. I think they gave me a good foundation to working with people and with Barack.

DePue: Well, I'll put you on the spot one more time. It's obvious that you were proud to be the daughter of Doc Helm, and obvious that you were very proud of being the legislative assistant to now-President Obama. Put those on an equal level, would you?

Helm-Renfro: I think family comes first. It always does. And Barack is my second. He's almost there at [that] level. (laughs).

DePue: Okay. Thank you again, Beverly. This has been delightful and important, as I mentioned before. So we really appreciate the time you spent.

Helm-Renfro: Well, I'm glad to be here.

(end of interview #2)