

July 28, 2004
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Interview of Josephine Burson

How did you become interested in politics?

Thru my husband who was involved. Leo, my husband, was interested in politics. When I first got involved, there weren't too many women. Frances Coe. Have to mention her name () politics and women. There was a woman who was a Republican, Gwen Ascumb. There were a few women who were involved. My husband was involved first and somehow or another I got into it. Estes Kefauver asked me to be his woman's chairman when he was running one of his elections nad he won. Just one thing led to another. From different stream of Democratic party than Kefauver and people I had been involved with, Ellington asked me to be his woman's chair. One person in our wing called me up and called me a traitor. When he called me and asked me to do it, I said I wasn't. My daughter is going to have a baby. He told me to come up to Nashville to have a talk. I left there and I was involved. I spent four years in his cabinet, int. experience. I was commissioner of employment security.

What was your husbands involvement with politics?

He was a lawyer. When I got so involved, he backed me up with everything.

How were Kefauver and Ellington Democ different?

Former were more progressive and Ellington more conservative. At one time in his career, Ellington described himself as an "old fashioned segregationist." When he asked me to join his cabinet, I said that I couldn't associate myself with anything like that. He said that was a mistake. He said I have realized it. I don't feel that way anymore. Whether he did or didn't, in his public life while governor, he was first governor he had first black in cabinet, H.T. Lockard, did some progressive things, and he gave me a free hand. I had established good relationships with people in Washington. Funding came from Washington. It really was almost like a Federal department. Gave me a free hand, could do what I wanted. We could do a lot of things that were progressive at that time.

What were some progressive things you did?

My memory isn't so good now.

I saw you did GREAT.

Yes, we did a lot of training, recruited minorities for my department, several members of my staff for the first time were minorities. We trained people for various positions in employment security. It was most closely associated department with Federal departments (Employment Security Dept.) Training for minorities and hiring htem in state government, which hadn't been done before.

Asked her about sexism or lack of respect from other male public officials. You mentioned Ellington gave you a freehand.

I didn't run into any problem. I didn't live in Nashville, lived in Memphis. So, I commuted. I think it has had an effect on my children. My daughter isn't political but my son was attorney general as state of TN.

In your position, open doors for women?

Not just for women but also for minorities. H. T. and I were the two minorities in the cabinet. Several on my staff were minorities. I think I had about 30 local offices throughout the state we encouraged the employment of minorities throughout the state in gov't and where we were asked to help fill positions.

What caused you to be racially progressive for that time?

I'm Jewish. I could not take any kind of position of being discriminatory from my own heritage and family history. It was not in me. I just couldn't do that.

It seems like a lot of Jewish people in Memphis working for civil rights at that time. Yes, Myra Dreifus and Jeannie Dreifus, her daughter in law. I don't know if Selma Lewis was involved very much. Rabbi Wax was very vocal. I don't know it was any of those people that influenced me but it was what I believed and husband's believed.

Saw in 1960 you were chair of Kennedy-Johnson.

It was the first integrated political event in city of Memphis for women. That has stuck with me and I'm very proud of it. What's happened is that Lady Bird Johnson was coming to Memphis. This has been one of the things that was on my credit list. The whole committee met - men and women - to plan for her visit here.

You mean, Democratic party?

Yes. They told her to set up an affair for black women and white women. She told them we either meet together or don't meet. I said it negates everything that I stand for and certainly this campaign. They said alright if you can find a place but they were sure I couldn't find a place where it would accommodate black and white and be an integrated affair. Well, I went to our city auditorium, Ellis Auditorium, of course, they let me have it. Something that added to it. My chair of arrangements instead of putting chairs had it be a stand up affair so that women couldn't sit in little clusters. First integrated political event for women in city of Memphis. Huge success. Since then, that's just the way you did it.

You were on the Democratic Party exec committee in 60s, involved in 50s too?

Well, I go back to 1948. Husband was active with Kefauver's election there and I became active. If Al Gore had been elected, Charles, her son, probably still would have been in Washington.

You must've been one of the few people on the exec committee?

Yes. Frances Coe. Gwen Ascumb but Repub. Ann Rickey. I don't remember if Myra Dreifus - she was very active - but I'm not sure about her being involved.

Russell Sugarmon told me a story of how Robert Kennedy called.

I probably was down and around it but I don't remember any particular event.

What was it like being on Dem Party as being one of few women? Did you feel an acceptance?

There was a lot of resentment toward me when I went with Ellington. I still remember one giant of my stream of the Dem Party wrote me a note, "Shame, Shame." I've never forgotten that. You know, people change and people grow. I like to think with some of these people I became involved with that I influenced them that time had changed and people had changed.

Obviously Ellington people was one of those people where you observed this change?

Yes. I was very frank with him when I told him that I couldn't work with a segregationist. He said I hope to tell you I changed. He never did anything but support me.

Did you see this change with other white politicians?

A few. And a few stayed the way they were. ON the surface that were nice.

Did you see as connected with electoral efforts of blacks or other civil rights activities going on?

Well, all that had to influence people. They had to realize things don't stay the same. The whole world was progressing and we couldn't be left behind. Like Ellington who one time had characterized himself as an "old-fashioned segregationist." I don't know what was deep down in his heart. H.T. and I were good friends. I said one time, H.T. people are making such a big to-do over year. I said did you know I am first Jewish person. They just took it for granted we had a whole history of involvement and we didn't. No one gave it a thought at the time. Things moved.

People were making a fuss about Lockard?

Yes, he was first black person.

So people didn't discriminate against you?

If they did, they didn't show it. There were a few little social things but didn't bother me. You know couldn't pick me up b/c it was "inconvenient."

These were people working in cabinet?

Yes.

What about with Lockard?

I didn't see it. I'm sure he did. He took it in stride.

What people were saying about him?

A lot in the papers. Nobody said anything derogatory to me about it. I was Jewish. I was aligned to H.T. Somebody maybe in their private thoughts.

It was an exciting time. Every weekend I'd go home and every Monday go back b/f.

Women's division – what did women's divisions of campaigns do?

They usually handled the mail room, to start with. When I had it, we were very effective. We spoke. We just didn't do the clerical work. We were really a force in the campaign. We were very visible in events that we had. When I was chair, we had first integrated women's event that had ever been held in the city. This was progress in this community. Changed whole complexion of political campaigns.

Gwen Ascum, Frances Coe, you, you mentioned –
Jeannie Dreifuss maybe later.

Who had kind of more traditional leadership roles but a lot of women active on grassroots level?

They responded when we called them and asked them. We had a fine corps or core of women who did more licking envelopes. Anne Shafer. I put my son in. My daughter was having his family. Charles, young people, I got together and knocked on doors and put out leaflets. That has stayed with him his whole life.

Asked her about importance SCDC, influence.

I don't know I could talk about that, because they were influential but my efforts were directed to really involving women. I was in SCDC and we had first integrated event, which is a milestone here.

Face much criticism for having an integrated event?

Yes, I sure did. I had criticism and opposition on my own committee. . . There was a time there when my husband took my telephone calls. One time they threatened to bomb my houses. My police were guarding house. We never told kids till they grew up. Ugly calls.

Asked her about 1959 election.

I saw you were a delegate to Atlantic Congress in June so you were gone most of that time. Memories have faded a lot.

Why do you think at that time there would be so much resistance of whites to having Russell Sugarmon being commissioner?

"That was environment down here. We were still in many respects a segregated society. Black people were trying to break down this wall of segregation. There were white people such as myself, my husband, and many other people who were trying to help them do that, because this was not the kind of society that we thought the United States of America should be or that we wanted our children to grow up in. The whole world was changing and we needed to change with it. It was as black and whites who were building our country and fighting when we needed to fight against a common enemy. Certainly we didn't have to be in opposition to ourselves."

Did any of your international work influence outlook you had on racial relations?

I saw involved with Hadassah and Soviet Union.

Yes, I went to Soviet Union and Israel. It did. I had wonderful contacts, made friends with different points of view. It's bound to influence--. My husband was very active as well. I'm a first generation American. My parents were not born in the United States. Many stories my grandfather and mother told about their life. That had to influence--. I'm Jewish. History is a history of persecution. "In fact, to this day, I can't see how a Jewish person could be prejudiced, and many of them are."

Where parents came from?

Lithuania and my mother's father came before them and Lived in Jonesboro AR. My father had lived in South Africa. Papa's parents had sent him out of Europe.

Because of persecution?

Yes, he had uncles who emigrated to South African, so he went there. Didn't like it after Boer War. He had a borthor in United States. He didn't like in N, ended up in S and met my mother.

Intersting settlement Southern Jewish?

Eli Evans is a good friend of mine.

What's it like being a Southern Jew? Different than being up north?

I was on board of Hadassha, national Jewish women's organization, and traveled all over country speaking on behalf. Many contacts and opportunities and spread the gospel.. Most people do think N with Jews. I think they liked my Southern accent. I think I perhaps changed a few people's ideas about what Southerners were like. We didn't all have to be put in one category. Edukcatonal for them as well as for me.

Interested in how Memphis was different politically after Crump's death and how it remained.

Big difference. My husband was one of the leaders in if you want to call it rebellion not that but supporter of Estes Kefauver in 1948, who Mr. Crump called a coon-skinned. Estes wore that cap. We were very close to him. Leo and Hunter Lane Jr. and Ed Meeman who was editor of Press Sciminat was a leader in trying to break the Crump machine. It was supposed to be a benevolent thing but in dictatorships like htat - that's what it was - not healthy for a community. Your self expression as a community and people and doing things are hindered by that kind of an atmosphere. In fact, Mr. Crump sent one of his henchmen - if you want ot call it - to see Leo and say door opens both ways, to come talk to him. He wasn't interested in doing it, being part of a machine. He aligned himself with Meeman and I think Hunter or Hunter's father, Estes Kefauver, that whole group really broke back of Crump machine?

How was politics in Memphis different after that?

After that, there was evidence that machinewas broken but still remnants of it and still I guess to this day. The strong and intelligent and bright young blacks came forward like Sugarmon, Willis, and Locakard, and began to take an active part in the community. It's been an interesting time.

What generally did people think of Sugarn, Willis, and Smiths.

People who hated them at the beginning hated them at end. Rabble rousers, called them. People who wanted community to move forward and were interested in people for what they could give and not color of the skin were people who supported them, backed them, and worked with them.

Did you in your efforts in political campaign as heads of women's division – were they integrated?

Yes, I told you about event at Ellis Auditorium. Here we were calling on black women to come up and lick envelopes and put stamps on and do this that and the other, and they were going to have one event for them and for other.

How did it go over with Jesse Turner being elected to SC Dem Party Exe. How did that go?

He was older than me, so I was not of his generation. I was closer to H. T. , Sugarmon, etc.

Side B

You said some whites stayed racist and other changed like Ellington. Did you find any whites in the middle who changed?

Yes.

What about with Kennedy-Johnson reception – a lot of change?

Some did changes as result of that event.

I described Prewitt's views and transformation to her.

A lot of people thought race war would break out. Hot heads on both sides, but fortunately reason prevailed.

A lot of people said that peaceful and harmonious.

You can shut your eyes to it, of course they did, they wanted to keep status quo. But things changed.

Did you find newspapers were influential in politics?

Well, they tried to be. I do think Meeman had a strong effect on his city, on its political climate and influencing people like Lucius Burch, Hunter Lane, and other people. In fact when my husband first wanted to involve himself, he went up to see Ed Meeman and talk to him, tell him to count him in his camp. When Estes Kefauver ran down here, of course, Meeman was a big supporter of his. Leo and I were close to Kefauver. He was running against the Crump machine.

Kefauver was progressive.

Oh yes. I chaired his women's campaign. I've forgotten the year.

He sounds like a really unique Southern politician for that time.

He was. He was in our home many times. We were very, very close to him.

When do you see rise of Republican party in Memphis?

It was sort of a rebellion. When populations begin to shift, I guess after the war or during the war, a lot of people were stationed in this area and stayed here, I think that's when you see a shift and Southern Democrats came to be Republicans.

Me – comment about Ike.

Even before Eisenhower's time, there was some Republicans here. Because of the segregation issue and progress being made and Democrats were trying to foster, the Republican Party began to strength down here. Some of the old time Democrats began to find refuge in Republican Party.

How important were civic clubs in electoral politics in the 1950s and 60s.

They were more imp't than they are now. I wasn't really involved with them. I spoke to the civic clubs but I never really was involved with their politics.

Seems like they held meetings where X.

They would invite political speakers. Some including people with both sides and others didn't.

What were some of the other major influential groups at the time?

Labor unions played a big part. They were just coming up in the South, mainly on the Democratic side of the fence. The leaders of labor were also leaders in party politics.

I know Crump's strangehold in 1948 and he died in 1954 – what effect?

By that time, too many individuals and groups doing their own thing. When Crump died, really the end of the Crump machine.

Asked her about DCA.

She didn't remember it.

When Ellington asked me to be in his cabinet, it was a step forward for women and I was a Jew. A lot of reasons I took it. One was personal. My son was coming up, going to law school. I thought the people I would meet, he would meet through me, would help him. I got a lot of flack from it and also received a lot of praise.

GREAT pgm – become permanent?

Not in that form. Existence when she was in cabinet but then didn't last.

What did you think of Mayor Orgill?

He certainly was a leader in the progressive movement against the machine. I thought he was weak.

How so?

I don't know how to express it. Weak is probably the wrong word to use.

Ineffective?

Yes.

What's an example?

I don't know if I can give you one, it's just an overall--. I don't know if I'm using the right terminology or not. He saw his own point of view and his constituency, I don't think he was as open to listening to the other side.

He seemed to be quite racially progressive.

He was.

I did see statements that he said that in favor of segregationist. Could a politician at time been elected if come out for integration?

Well, he was the most progressive politician around at this time.

One year they wanted my husband to run for mayor but he decided against it. I don't know if it was 1959 or before that.

Why decide not to run?

Many reasons. He didn't think people who he aligned himself with would stand with him.

How do you see Memphis politics now similar and different as back then.

Well I'm not as involved now, so I don't know if I can speak to that. It's very different. Now, much more of an intermingling of races in the political system. Willie Herenton, AC Wharton. I have a great deal of admiration for Wharton. I know Mayor Herenton very well.

One of striking things is the rise of black public officials and continues to present day.

In the 1960s do you remember what reaction was to blacks coming into positions of power

Well AW Willis and HT Locakrd. When Ellington appointed him to cabinet, a lot of coverage and comment. He was first black man ever in cabinet.

How were you able to juggle responsibilities of mother and in politics?

I had a wonderful husband and very cooperative kids. By that time, they were... I think it was right before Linda got married or about that time and Charles was finishing up with college. They both went to U of M, as did my husband.

When you were involved as head of women's division of campaigns, were you accepted by men as full partners in campaign?

Not at first. But then I think I opened their eyes. It was during those years that men realized the importance of women's campaigns and what a women's campaign could add to a total campaign. It was not that we just licked the envelopes. It was so many other

things that we did and that we brought to a campaign that made it effective. We did staff () mostly. So there was somebody knowledgeable answering the telephone and giving information and things like that. We helped organize Youth Corp, young people. We had a lot of young people involved, who went out and knocked on doors and () personal contact. It was just. Now the years have gone by, I can't pinpoint all the various things we did. I was in the office everyday. There were women in the office everyday, doing things, setting up things. When I say things, I ought to be more specific. Sending out speakers to various organizations. Various organizations, groups would send speakers or seeking those engagements so that we would reach those groups that might not voluntarily ask for us so that we could have influence on the thinking and the voting.

Were speakers mainly men or also women?

Men spoke in those days. Men spoke to men's organizations. There weren't too many women's speakers.

Did women speak more to women's organizations.

Yes.

Did women ever address men's organizations?

I don't remember that.

But sometimes men would address women's organizations?

Yes.

Were the people mainly housewives who were doing this?

Housewives were the ones coming up to HQ and some women who had never been involved in political campaigns before and were caught up in it, in the movement.

How widespread was city wide interest in local campaign?

From my point of view, the city was pretty much – they were involved. But to this day there are people not involved in political campaigns. Politics are dirty. I don't want to have any part of it. It was during this period of time I think there was a surge and involvement in interest of politics.

Mid to late 1950s and early 1960s.

Yes.

After Crump's death more of a surge?

Yes.

During this time you said men didn't recognize role of women as much as should have. This was when women began to be recognized.

When there was this surge.

Yes.

How were you able to open men's eyes.

Performance. They saw the results and what it meant to have women involved. I think too it was maybe part of the whole movement or times that men saw women in a different light.

In terms of feminist movement?

It was the beginning of the feminist movement.

If there's something that comes to you, you can always call me.

Did you participate in meeting with head campaign officials when you were head of women's campaign?

Yes.

Did you feel they respected you?

Yes.

Were you only woman?

No, you know, when Frances Coe was active.

She seems well respected.

Everyone respected Frances, unpretentious, bright. There were some other women.

You said Gwen Ascumb?

Yes, in later years she was strong Repub like I was Demo so I wasn't so active with her.

Was radio influential at that time?

More than TV, b/c TV wasn't as widespread. Whenever we got on radio program we did.

Ads to support candidates.

Yeah and programs. Of course, now with TV it's the best thing. In those days, radio and TV to some extent.

You've seen beginning and rise of feminist movement? What did you think of it in the 60s?

It was something that was bound to come with women coming out of shell of house? And women with educational experience being more widespread. It was something that just had to happen. Public opinion became more receptive toward that. They didn't see women sitting in the kitchen all the time. Women began to assert themselves and want to take an active role.

A lot of people don't make that connection – housewives not just in house but politics in 1950s.

Then, too, the wise politician saw the potential of the women's force in campaigns. What they could do, not just at headquarters licking stamps and envelopes, that this was a potent

force in this community with what they could add in their thinking, their ideas, their creativity.

Did you see women get more a significant role and plan strategy in campaigns?
It was slow but it came. At first the men would have a meeting and decide what to do and we'll let you know.

You said it was slow.

During my time there was a beginning of that – saw what women could do and would listen to them. Just like with Lady Bird Johnson event. We showed them that it didn't have to be segregated. The thinking was that it had to be segregated.