

INTERVIEW WITH CONGRESSWOMAN BARBARA LEE

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Chapter 1

Question: What prompted you to enter public service?

I met Congressman Dellums when I was a student at Mills College which is a great women's institution in Oakland, California. I was president of the black student union and part of what I wanted to do was have the student union students get more involved in community affairs—not necessarily politics but volunteering and community service projects. It was then I met that I Congressman Dellums. I was working with Bobby Seale and Huey Newton and the Black Panther party, and Ron was a very progressive, very interesting member of Congress who I thought made a lot of sense and who I should get to know because I felt that he reflected many of the values and much of the agenda that I thought I could work on as a young African American woman raising two children on public assistance, and so I met Ron and got involved in his campaign.

Chapter 2

Question: How did you transition from grassroots activities to working for Shirley Chisholm's presidential run?

My transition from working as a grassroots organizer to working with Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm who I deeply miss, was very easy because Congresswoman Chisholm was running for president. And I was at Mills College and had a course where I was required to work in a political campaign. During that time it was McGovern [Sen. George McGovern], Muskie [Sen. Edmund Muskie], and Humphrey [Sen. Hubert Humphrey]. Well these individuals didn't speak to the issues that I felt were important to myself as an African American woman trying to raise tow kids, a single mom. So I was going to flunk the class. I just did no field work for Barbra Lee she doesn't believe in partisan politics, no way. But I believed in working in the community. I was working with the Black Panther party on their survival programs. I helped put together the community school, I worked with the clinic. So I worked on a lot of the community oriented ten point programs of the Black Panther party; but I was not a party member but I felt this organization was so important I needed to work in the community through that vehicle. Well politics was not for me, but I invited Shirley Chisholm to the campus and she spoke and she was the first African American woman elected to Congress. But she announced she was running for president and so I went up to Mrs. Chisholm and said you know I loved what you said, you're against the war in Vietnam, you understand what it means to eradicate poverty, you're an immigrant and she spoke fluent Spanish. I mean she was a very progressive African American woman. And so I explained to her this course I had, I

was about ready to flunk the class, because I didn't believe in any of the other candidates and she took me to task and convinced me I should register to vote. But then she said—no I actually told her I would reconsider flunking that class if she would let me work with her. And so what she said to me was that I had to register to vote of course and become more political, that my community work was great but I had to understand it in the context of a political system that we all had to be part of. And so I asked her who do I contact so I could work in her campaign, and she looked at me and she said my dear I don't have a lot of money, this is a grass roots efforts you have to figure it out for yourself, it's up to my local supporters. Well lo and behold I looked around in the community, talked to people, there was no one working for Shirley Chisholm. Hardly anyone knew who she was, there was no campaign, so I went to two friends, current assemblyman Sandry Swanson who was my first chief of staff, and the student body president Sandy Gaines. We talked, told them about my class, and went and talked to my professor and she said fine you can pass the class as long as you work in any of these campaigns. So what happened was I ended up organizing the Shirley Chisholm Northern California presidential primary campaign for my course at Mills College. So I passed the course and got an A in it, so I was very proud of that A, but the transition for me going from community work and working as a volunteer to working in public service was very easy, it was seamless, because it evolved as it related to my work as a volunteer for Shirley Chisholm on to working as an intern for Congressman Dellums and then on to working as his Chief of Staff.

Chapter 3

Question: What did you learn from your experience working for Rep. Shirley Chisholm?

She taught me so much but I believe now in looking back as a member of Congress, she said to me you got to stay involved in politics and you got to work in this political system but it's not about a job and it's not about conforming to the status quo. She said once you get on the inside she said understand that you're there not to play by the rules but to change the rules, because these rules were not made for us. And when you see injustice and when you see inequality, then it's your job to break down those barriers and forget what the rules are change those rules and don't accept the status quo. And that's what she taught me, which to this day she has been proven to be right in my life.

Chapter 4

Question: How did your background in social work prepare you to enter politics?

I majored in psychology as an undergrad and went out to the University of California at Berkeley and majored in psychiatric social work. My goal then as not to work in public service—that was least in my professional goals—I wanted to be the best psychotherapist in the country. And consequently I was a major in the clinical track and so I really am by profession a psychotherapist but what happened was when I was at the University of California I realized in my clinical practice as an intern that the mental

health system was not a system that was responsive to women, single mothers, the poor, the African American community and I started my own community mental health system out of that experience. It was called Change Incorporated, Community Health Alliance for Neighborhood Growth and Education. And I started that community mental health system because I wanted to have a new model of mental health services to be delivered to primarily then the black community in south and west Berkeley. But I put together that clinic when I was in graduate school and I realized in doing therapy that a lot of the problems that I saw in my practice—depression, acting out, anger—a lot of it had to do with not having a job, not having any money to pay a baby sitter, not having a place to live. A lot of it stemmed from the socioeconomic system and the political system that created a lot of the havoc that my clients were feeling in their lives. And when Ron offered me the position after working as an intern I said you know I might think about this, and it took awhile, and all my friends said girl how could you take time to even think whether you are going to work for Ron Dellums in Washington, D.C. Why didn't you just say yes? I said well I started this Community Mental Health Center and I don't want to abandon it. And I want to have a new way of delivering mental health services so people can become empowered to take over and make sure that they don't fall into these traps anymore. I thought about it though and I said no, after a period of time maybe I can make an impact into changing some of these laws and these policies that are creating the negative environment and the havoc that the people have to live within their lives. And so the practice of social work to me is really a wonderful practice because you can do many things either direct service which is what I was doing with people in the community, with patients, with community organizing, with psychotherapy or working from a policy perspective which tries as I'm doing today to change these laws to create some justice in the lives of people so they don't go through all of these changes that we see so many people going through. And so the social work code of ethics is a wonderful code of ethics to follow. I cite that to many of my colleagues in terms of why we're here. I think lawyers, doctors, whomever, teachers, they need to read that social work code of ethics because that code of ethics I think is a standard that all of us as elected officials should use when we work on legislation that will affect people's lives. We have to understand that our values of people first of putting our funds into human services and to programs and policies that put people first that is what we should be about as members of Congress regardless of where we come from.

Chapter 5

Question: How did working for Congressman Ron Dellums prepare you to be a member of Congress?

Ron Dellums is still one of the greatest social workers I think in the world, even though this unbelievably bright human being chaired the House Armed Services Committee. He really taught us a lot. He taught me a lot. And that is if a constituent has a problem, if there is an issue in my office—mind you it looks like and seems like it's sort of a Community Mental Health Center because people come to my office to this day who are suffering, who have nowhere to go but to the congressional office—so Ron always reminded us whenever we saw a constituent and if the constituent needed help the only question we should ask is "Is this the right thing to do?" and so I try to encourage my staff to not take constituents through a whole bunch of changes if they need their food stamps or Medicare, or Social Security, or are

having problems with the IRS. It's our duty and responsibility to just say is this the right thing to do and if it is then you help that person. And 95% of the work that we do especially in my district office is case work, it's social work, it's constituent services, and that's part of this job that is so rewarding to me is to be an advocate for people. I remember one case, for example, a woman who had been homeless for many years, well she had money that was owed to her, the Social Security Administration had just been jerking her around like you would not believe. I was able to get thirty thousand dollars for this woman back pay and she finally got a place to live. And that to me, that took a few years, but she finally received the just due that she deserved. She never would have gotten that had it not been for myself and my staff being her advocate, and so that's social work in its best, at its best.

Chapter 6

Question: What were your thoughts the first time you took the oath of office as a member of Congress?

When I first took the oath of office when I was elected to congress this was April 21st, 1998. It was quite a magnificent awesome moment for me. My family was there with me, my sons, had no grandchildren then, my mother, my dad who has since passed, my sisters, it was a family affair and I was very proud of the fact that they were there with me and that gave me which always they give me is the inspiration to do what I need to do. But I was elected in a special election, so I had the entire floor to myself that day. And I'll never forget meeting with the then I believe was the Dem[ocratic] caucus chair who talked to me early on about campaign finance reform. And there's such, there's a procedure on the floor called a discharge petition where if you get to 218 you can discharge a petition from the floor and then it can come to the floor for debate. Well I'm a supporter of public finance for campaigns, we've got to get money out of politics, and so this was very appealing to me even though it didn't go far enough but it at least it was a step in the right direction and so he suggested to me that I sign that that day and be the eighteenth person to get it off the floor, so I did. So I gave my speech on the floor and at the end of my speech, and again this is such a moment for me because I'm the only one there my first day of congress, nobody, everybody sitting there and here I am, whereas generally now we're sworn in with everyone, but because of a special election it was me. And so at the end of my speech I said something about campaign finance reform and I said because of this I'm going to be the two hundred and eighteenth and I'm going to sign the discharge petition. I turn around and I sign it and everybody started clapping, I didn't realize this was such a big deal, makes sense to me. But that's how it started, and I was thanking Shirley Chisholm that day, and Ron was sitting there watching me and he was right on the front row, and I said I hope Shirley knows that I'm going to try and carry this mantle and challenge the status quo and not be one who compromises and sells out and forgets the fact that I've got to change the name of the game for people who have been shut out historically in this process. And so it was quite an exciting moment.

Chapter 7

Question: How do you campaign for office and has it changed over the years?

In my district I campaign the same way Shirley Chisholm taught me to campaign and that's grassroots organizing. Of course we have new technology, we have social media, but I think knocking on doors, my direct mail, my phone banking, and all of the wonderful volunteers I have is what keeps my percentages high. And of course, my staff, my staff does a phenomenal job in providing the constituent services that people remember come election time. And so constituent services really is a part of one's, you know, victory on election day. So I do it the same way I've done it for many years with the new technology and that's phone banking, knocking on doors, and of course I go home almost every single weekend and so I stay in touch with my constituents like you would not believe, because they need to know what I'm doing, that I'm on their side, that I'm working for them, and I need to hear from them because they have so many ideas that I've really been able to incorporate in many of the bills that I've been able to pass. And many of the public policy initiatives that I have developed

Chapter 8

Question: What are your thoughts on the role of partisanship and compromise?

There's always been partisanship here in Congress, I mean some of us are Democrats and some of us are Republicans, some of us Independents. So, I don't think that's a problem, I mean, that's the nature of this democracy. I think what is a problem is the inability to work with the other side and to find some common issue and some way to move forward. We all must not give up our principles and our integrity. I mean, we all know what our bottom lines are, but within our bottom lines there's a lot of wiggle room. And I always say as a progressive, first of all, there's no way I would have been able to get all the legislation signed that I've gotten signed into law. And, that's because I don't start in the center in terms of negotiating when I know I have a far right that I've got to bring along. You know, I have to start way out there and then negotiate somewhere and they generally come half way. And so I think, you know, a lot of members just really don't know how to negotiate. And they start, where in the center, and a right winger is not going to start in the center and a progressive or liberal should not start in the center. So, I think we need to learn a lot about how you negotiate before we can come to some sense of bipartisanship. But, you know, the public really needs to understand that in a democracy you're going to have debate, you're going to have that. I think what's important for us to remember though is that we should not hit below the belt. These debates should not be personal, they should be about policy, they should be about ideas, and they should be about the country as a whole and who can champion the best ideas. But when it comes to, and I think this is part of the problem, when it comes to taking personal shots, you know hitting below the belt. I think that's what the public does not want to see; I hope the public does not want to see a congress that or at least me as a democrat, agreeing to everything, all the time because then what has happened to our democracy. To me that means it's eroded or there's no room for descent or no room for debate and that's not what the Constitution really is about.

Chapter 9

Question: What are your thoughts on the legislation for no permanent military bases in Iraq?

One of the most significant pieces of legislation that I authored was the legislation that said that we should have no permanent bases in Iraq or Afghanistan. There were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; this war did not need to be fought. We lost many young men and women and trillions of dollars. And I decided early on that, you know, minimally, we should let the rest of the world know and our own government know that the Congress is not going to appropriate any money to build permanent bases in Iraq. It was an up hill battle and I had to bring it fourth many times, but I finally got it signed into law. It was in several appropriation bills and also several authorization bills and I was very proud of that because at least now if any administration decides to build permanent military bases in Iraq or Afghanistan, they will be violating the law and we will have the basis to sue them.

Chapter 10

Question: In addition to the Black Caucus, what are some of the other Congressional Caucuses on which you serve?

I co-chair the Congressional Progressive Caucus for four years with another great woman, Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey. And that caucus was a caucus that even now is that largest caucus in Congress. It is the progressive caucus; we come forth with a progressive budget every year. And it's a caucus that I believe reflects the values of the American people. Every year we try to cut the military budget, which needs to be cut in our budget, and we're building more support for that. We want a strong national security, smart security, but we know that there's waste, fraud, and abuse in the military budget, and we also know that there are Cold War era weapons systems that are costing billions of dollars that we do not need to build and we're wasting that money. And so, as co-chair of the Progressive Caucus, I have been able to lead that effort and that is a very important caucus that is building and building and building. I also founded the Out of Poverty Caucus. Now this caucus has approximately thirty-nine members, and it's well known that not too many people talk about poverty. You know, poor people don't vote. And so, I decided that while we have to focus, yes, on making sure that the middle class does not fall further into poverty. That we have millions of people, forty-four, forty-five million people now and it's growing in poverty. Children living in poverty. And so I want our democratic caucus to take the lead to focus on issues around poverty reduction. Actually, my legislation to cut poverty in half in ten years passed with a bipartisan vote. And so, the Out of Poverty Caucus which I have founded is a very important caucus because it really fills a void that no one, that has given space to people who really want to be advocate for the poor when nobody else is.

I am also a member of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, and I'm very proud to serve as the chair of the Health Task Force. In my district, we have many constituents who are Asian Pacific

American, and I have a large Latino population. And I think it's very important to have this tri-caucus perspective and involvement in all of the caucuses. And so, as chair of the Health Task Force for the Asian Pacific American Caucus my job is to make sure that all of the provisions of the Health Care Reform Bill which were included last, well, which was included in the health care and law remain and we don't allow them to take away those provisions. And the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus is a caucus that's growing there are, it's chaired by Congresswoman Judy Chu, a phenomenal woman from southern California. And we work as a tri-caucus with the Congressional Black Caucus, Congressional Asian Caucus, and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus to try to make sure that all of the issues around immigration, health care, jobs, all of those issues, are seen as issues that we work on together so they don't divide and conquer us. And so far we've been very successful and this is over a hundred votes that we have so I'm a very proud member of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus.

Chapter 11

Question: What legislation are you most proud of?

There are many legislative achievements that I'm most proud of but I think that one that probably stands out is the global HIV/AIDS initiative. I actually wrote the legislation that established a framework for the global fund for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. I actually wrote the legislations that established the bill for the President's Emergency and Response to HIV/AIDS. That's better known as PEPFAR that President Bush really did champion, but it was our legislation, it was my legislation, that pushed that forward. I wrote the bill and it was signed into law by President Bush, the Orphan and Vulnerable Children's bill that is really helping orphans and vulnerable children around the world receive the type of U.S. assistance that is possible in this day and time. And also, very recently, I wrote the legislation and we finally got this incorporated into the last PEPFAR bill that lifted the travel ban. You know, since the mid-nineties people living with HIV/AIDS couldn't really come to the United States. As a result, we've never had an international AIDS conference here, and I decided I was going to try to do that. No one believed we could do it and I said yes we can. So we were able to do that. President Bush actually signed it into law. President Obama signed the regulations that lifted this travel ban. And I was able to convince, along with others but primarily I led the charge to convince the International AIDS Society to hold the next AIDS conference, International AIDS conference, in the United States, and that will be held in 2012, in Washington, D.C. So, I'm very proud of that effort, because we have to make sure that the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the African American and Latino and communities of color are given the same recognition. And the rest of the world understands we do have disproportionate rates here and we really are in unity and in solidarity with the rest of the world in trying to stamp this disease from the face of the earth.

Chapter 12

Question: What would you say your greatest success has been?

It's hard to say what greatest success is because I, you know, your constituents have to let you know that. I mean I enjoy the work I do; HIV/AIDS has been a huge success, although we haven't yet stamped in from the face of the earth. My work on eliminating poverty, we still have more people falling into poverty. I'm trying to end the wars, you know. I was the only one to vote against giving then President Bush or any subsequent President a blank check to use force. This was right after the terrible events of 9/11. I took a lot of heat, a whole of heat. It was a horrible time, first for the country and for those who lost loved ones. But for me personally, it was unbelievable. I still have to deal with a lot of the fallout. But that was the right vote, you know. And it was a vote that now many are saying, that was the right vote. So, I going to work with President Obama; we're going to end this war in Afghanistan and bring our young men and women home. They have served this country valiantly and well, but it's time now to come up with a smarter security strategy that ensures our national security and focuses on our domestic priorities. We're spending billions of dollars in Afghanistan, and we don't need to do that. And so I think on of the, it's not an accomplishment, but one of the efforts that I've been consistent with since 2001 is seeking peace and justice. I'm very proud of the work I've done around Cuba and Granada and the Caribbean and Haiti. But again, this is all of us working together: my staff, my constituents, members of the Congressional Black Caucus. I chaired the Congressional Black Caucus for two year and we had a very successful two years. But again, that wasn't me, Barbara Lee; this was the entire Congressional Black Caucus with forty-two phenomenal members. We made a lot of progress. We were bold and Congressman Cleaver is continuing to get the Congressional Black Caucus in a position to where the entire country recognizes it is a conscious of the Congress. And so that was a major, major time in my life that I'm very proud of.

Chapter 13

Question: How would you like to be remembered?

I helped someone along the way. Tried to change the world and maybe the world's a little better place because of the work that I did in my life. And that our children have a future that's more secure and that the world is at peace.