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The Living White

WHITE HOUSE

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INTERVIEW OF FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
CONDUCTED BY LIBBY SCHLEICHERT, "THE LIVING WHITE HOUSE"

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON: Hi, this is Hillary Clinton.

LIBBY SCHLEICHERT: Yes, good morning, Mrs. Clinton, Libby Schleichert here.

HRC: Good morning. How are you today?

LS: I'm just well. How are you?

HRC: Good, thank you.

LS: I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.

HRC: Well I'm glad to. And if you have any follow-up questions after you finish this, let us know.

LS: Sure, will do. As you know, I've been working with the Geographic and with the Historical Society to update the Living White House book. We were hoping that we could just take a little of your time this morning to get some of your input on those questions that I believe you have before you. I asked Karen Finney if it was ok if I tape recorded the conversation and she said yes. That way we can have a conversation and I won't be writing my brains out.

Well, let's just start then. My first question: what does living in this place mean to you personally? What of its history, magic majesty has had the biggest impact on you?

HRC: Oh, I have so many thoughts. What living here is like to me personally. Let me start with the history of the house because for years as a child when I would see pictures of the White House and as an older person when I would fly into Washington and strain for a look of the White House within sight of the Washington Monument, I have been just overwhelmed by the meaning and historical significance of the White House.

One of my favorite reminders of its history are the burn marks that have been left uncovered, both on the North Side of the house and up on the Truman Balcony, outside the door that leads on to the balcony. Seeing those burn marks, and knowing of

the burning of the White House in 1814 by the British during the last war when any foreign power really threatened the United States, just gives me goosebumps. It gives me also a great sense of humility about all that has happened here.

I also get overwhelmed from time to time when I walk from room to room and think of what I've heard that's happened in these rooms and also imagine what I think might have happened. For example, when one walks into what is now the Lincoln Bedroom, which was President Lincoln's office during his term, you can see the desk where he drafted the Emancipation Proclamation and on the desk today is one of the five originally written copies of the Gettysburg Address. It's the only copy signed and dated and that just is something that I never, ever, tire of, both seeing for myself and telling visitors about.

I also love to learn about how the rooms have been used throughout the years, particularly how each of the families that has lived here has changed the house to suite their own personal needs. You may know that until the Kennedys lived here, every meal was served on the State floor with the exception of the times when Eleanor Roosevelt, I think, would stir up scrambled eggs in a chaffing dish up on the second floor. But families, including children, went down either to the State dining room or to what is called the family dining room for all meals. And when Mrs. Kennedy came with her small children, she did not want to travel to the state floor. So she converted what had been Margaret Truman's bedroom and sitting room into a butler's pantry and into a dining room. And so from then on, the families had the opportunity to eat in this beautifully outfitted dining room that has some of the original French wallpaper that Mrs. Kennedy found, depicting scenes from history.

But when we got here, I wanted to extend the idea a step further so that we would not even have just the option of just a formal dining room for meals, but could have a kitchen. So I had the butlers' pantry remodeled and we put in a kitchen table and chairs and fixed it up so that we could not only eat there as a family, like most families in America, and certainly the way we've always been able to have breakfast and lunch or dinner together, but it really kind of added a little bit more of a family touch to our living quarters.

So there are so many things that I think about that happens in this house that have great meaning to me personally, and we've tried to make it into a home as well as the historic monument and museum that it is.

LS: I didn't know that about the burn marks, that's really interesting.

HRC: Oh it's so, it just gives me chills.

LS: Yeah, it gave me chills just hearing you talk about it.

HRC: You know and then I suppose if we're to talk about some of the magic that I think has occurred here. You know it's magic to me when I think back about the signing of peace treaties. There's a magnificent painting depicting the signing of the treaty ending the Spanish-American War, in what is called the Treaty Room on the second floor in what the President uses as his office in the residence.

And the desk that is in there, is the desk that most of the major treaties signed here in the White House have been signed on. So that for example, when President Carter had the historic signing of the treaty with Egypt and Israel, arising out of the Camp David Accords, it was signed on this desk in the President's office. When he oversaw the signing of the accords between Israel and the Palestinians, it was signed on that desk, which was taken out into the yard for the occasion. So there's a real wonder about the chain of occurrences that have brought peace, not only to our own country, but to peoples around the world that I am just struck by every time I see that desk.

We've also had the good fortune and joy in celebrating a wedding here, when my brother married in the Rose Garden. I look back at pictures of the Nixon weddings, and the Johnson weddings, and it really is an extraordinary privilege to share a kind of magic moment like that with people you love in your own family.

And then I suppose, the most magic that comes on a both personal and a public basis occurs around state visits. I don't know if you've ever been here for a state arrival, but it is so exciting when you hear the first blow of the trumpet that announces the arrival of the visitor as they drive in the back of the house. Immediately everybody present becomes part of the protocol and ritual that ties us together going back through our history. There are elements of our history that are displayed at each state arrival and the one that I love the most is the use of our military in revolutionary soldiers' uniforms. They march across the field playing music from our revolutionary war period, ending with Yankee Doodle Dandy. The symbolism of it is just breath-taking. Everyone who attends a state arrival I think goes away feeling like they've stepped into and become a participant in American History.

The same thing happens when we have the state dinner. Starting with our receiving our guests in the Yellow Oval Room on the second floor which is where the Truman Balcony is, going through the arrival of the color guard who leads the President and I with our guests on the grand stairway. It is a very impressive ceremony that again, gives me goosebumps to think that I'm actually part of it. It is just a thrill to both participate in the magic of the White House and to hear stories about it from all of the people who've been here and worked here and what you've trying to do, give it a sense of its past, present, and future.

LS: Have you had any encounters with a mythical ghost that's floating around there?

HRC: (Laughing.) Well, you know, we blame everything that goes wrong on the ghost. I don't like to call it Lincoln's ghost, because I don't want to blame our great former President for things like lights going out or funny sounds in the night. But it is a tradition that the residence staff and the people who stay here kind of keep going because it really is a lot of fun to speculate about it.

LS: Well that's very, very interesting. I can imagine it would be, sort of if you stop and think, a little overwhelming.

HRC: Well, it is. And we keep being reminded of it. Every season brings a special reminder of the magic of the house. Christmas is just extraordinary here and it is my favorite time of year. To be part of a Christmas transformation of the White House into a wonderland has been just thrilling for me. We've had the opportunity to start the Craft Collection that has meant so much to us as a family and to many people around the country. But the house itself really is majestic. The style of it, the layout of it, the additions to it, all of it has, I think, retained the grandeur intended by President Washington without going overboard in being turned into an imperial palace. It is majestic, but it is also the only house of the head of state in the world that is open to tourists. To me, that is just a stunning example of the marvel of American democracy.

So that when people walk into this house, whether as visitors or tourists or heads of state, they enter into a home but also a real statement about what our country's values are. Particularly when you walk into the grand foyer and see the high ceilings and the large crystal chandeliers and the grand columns of this immense Steinway that is in the foyer with its three large eagle legs. Then you walk a little further and maybe to the doorway of the Blue Room and seeing the Washington Monument in the distance. It does take your breath away. And the fact they we're able to share it with a million and a half visitors, both inside and on the grounds, which are also so impressive, I think is a real tribute to the continuity of tradition and the concern about using the house as a symbol of our democracy that I think is just unique in the history of the world.

LS: I didn't realize it was the only head of state home that was open.

HRC: I think that's right. You know for example, when such a big deal was made out of the Queen opening Buckingham Palace to tourists so that they could raise money to repair the damage that had been done to, what was it, Windsor Castle? You know that was just amazing to people and it was for only a very limited time and of course people had to pay for it.

LS: Well, let's go on because I know your time is squished. Number two: in what sense would you like to change the course of events by having this opportunity to live and work here?

HRC: These are easy questions! Well, as you could tell, I could talk forever about any one of them. (Laughing.)

LS: Well, how your mission has evolved and changed which of course it has over time as anyone's has.

HRC: Well, it's the most interesting position. It's perplexing being in the position I find myself in because there is certainly no instruction book that comes with it. Every woman who has been here before, I think has done what I've tried to do in her own way, which is to support her husband and nurture and protect her family and then carve out responsibilities that are suited to one's own interests and experiences. Certainly for me, I find myself constantly moving from one thing to the next.

I spend a lot of time as you might guess being as supportive as I can of the President because there isn't a more difficult of lonely job in the world I believe. He really needs as much personal support as his family can give him and I don't think he's any different in that regard from anyone who's been here. So we spend a lot of time with each other. We spend a lot of time talking about matters that are on his mind and then just having fun together. That's not really a mission but it is part of what I see as a very important responsibility that I have.

Then I also love the opportunity to work on matters that I've cared about for more than twenty-five years. I have been deeply involved in children's issues, education, and health care, particularly, and moving into the White House has given me the opportunity both to learn more and hopefully to try to help people, which I have certainly spend a lot of time doing both on a one-to-one basis through the mail I receive and visitors I see as well as on a policy basis, such as the health care reform effort or working on mammogram for older women or Gulf War disease or public television for children. The whole range of issues that I've cared about before I lived in the White House and that I will continue to care about after I no longer do live here.

I've also been just delighted at the chances I've had to travel, both with the President and alone, representing our country around the world. I also feel so touched when I am either with him on an official trip or on my recent trip to South Asia, to see how enthusiastic people are about America and what our country represents. That has been an extra, added benefit, and if there is a way that I can highlight issues that I care about such as the treatment of women and girls around the world and I hope that will influence the course of events here in our own country and in other countries.

I also really love the kind of traditional part of role which includes maintaining a hospitable, welcoming feeling here

in the White House. Developing our own style of entertaining that is both respectful of our traditions but also perhaps a little more fun and informal whenever we have the chance. So we go from the very formal state dinners where we have made some changes like for example, moving towards plated service, but where we've also observed tradition in using the protocol, particularly the role of the military in pressing upon our guests the majesty of our tradition. And then we've done a lot informal entertaining, with friends and family and visitors from all over the world, which we really enjoy as a way of sharing the White House. So the responsibility of keeping the best of our traditions in our entertaining and hospitality combined with moving us into a more modern approach towards entertaining has been very exciting and creative, for me and for Ann Stock, my social secretary and Walter Shides, our wonderful new chef, and Roland Nefnear, who is the greatest pastry chef in the entire world.

Changing the menu, trying to get them a little more nutritional and low fat but still retain the beauty of the service, the presentation of the food has been a real treat for me because you have the finest people in the entire country to work with. Everybody wants to help the White House so that has been exciting.

I guess the final thing I would say is that raising a teenager in the White House is a challenge because I want her to have as normal a life as possible so we have lots of bunking parties and her friends are in and out of the house all the time. She's entertaining them, they're swimming in the pool, bowling in the bowling alley, or joining us for a movie in the theater and just doing everything I can so that she both can learn from and enjoy this extraordinary unique opportunity but have her own life.

LS: I must say you've done a wonderful job. I mean I only say that because I have a child too and I totally relate to this. I don't have the same problem but protecting a kid in a normal, growing up setting is hard enough without the added business of publicity. When I was going through all the clips, working on the [drewbys] trying not to bother your office as much as possible so I was going through all the clips as the Geographic has a wonderful clippings file and very little on Chelsea and I thought well good, I'm really glad that this is happening.

HRC: We've really worked hard on that.

LS: The imprint that you like to sort of be remembered for, either in terms of the White House or more broadly speaking, in the role that you're in.

HRC: Well, I guess, let me take those separately. I hope that our times here will be remembered as one that brought some real enthusiasm and joy to the White House and that the specific

projects that I've worked on like the redecorating of the Blue Room will be viewed favorably by the people who care as I do about the house and its role in our life. I take my responsibilities to the house very seriously. I've very concerned about continuing to work to build up the endowment for the White House so that no matter who's in office or what the financial situation of the country is, the house will always be given the care it needs to continue to flourish. I care a lot about making the history of the house more accessible. When we moved in, the room called the Map Room was used by President Roosevelt and Churchill and Stalin and everyone in World War II was uses basically just as a storage room and so we have brought back the Map Room. We found the last map that President Roosevelt looked at before he died at Warm Springs and it is now one of my favorite rooms for meetings and functions because I've had an artist's rendering drawn from the memory of a man who was a young lieutenant on President's Roosevelt's staff who told how the room was configured during the time it was the Map Room. I just find that so important to keep reminding people that these rooms can be functional but they also have this history to be remembered.

I also hope that the work we've done in the Sculpture Garden will be continued, using the First Lady's garden to exhibit modern sculpture has been a really important project to me because we have all these tourists walking through the east colonnade every day and I think it's important for the White House to exhibit the finest art we can, both from our past and our present. That is something I have spent a lot of time on.

LS: So that will be a changing exhibit?

HRC: Yes it has. We've already had two exhibits and we'll have a third exhibit in the spring. And we've tried to spread them out geographically so that different parts of the country will be represented and I hope that the way the house has been used, as well as the changes within the house will be continued and respected for what we've tried to do.

I hope the same for the contribution that my husband has tried to make and I've tried to help him make for the country. You know this is the first time in my life, I think, since I was thirteen years old that I haven't held some kind of a job outside of my home. So as full time volunteer, it is very important to me that we do things which set examples as well as change conditions. I think there is a very important role that is played symbolically by both the President and those around him, including the person who is in my position. And so what we do and say, and how we try to influence people's thinking is important to me, and then obviously trying to actually help people and change conditions. You know, when I read the mail that I receive, sometimes there is nothing that I can do, other than offer a comforting word, or try to let somebody know that I understand the challenges they are facing. But other times I can

actually take action. I can help somebody solve a problem that they are facing, whether it is a disability pension that they are not receiving, or a student loan that they can't get even though they seem qualified under the federal guidelines for it. So on a very personal level, I hope that we have been able to help people.

And then on a broader level, to bring awareness to people about better care, and concerns for our children, our health care system, the projects I've worked on to increase awareness among older women for mammogram or to try to do something about the problems that our Gulf War Veterans have brought home from that experience in the Gulf. I also feel strongly about helping Americans appreciate other countries and cultures which is why my trip to South Asia was so important to me, on one level. There is so much that we have in common with people around the country, and the United States cannot withdraw and disengage from the world. I am also as a Mother, just terrified of the impact of crime and violence and I have very strong feelings about our need to control crime and particularly to put in responsible controls on the ownership and use of guns, which is very controversial, but I think extremely important. So on a number of these issues I try to speak out, I try to help on an individual basis, and I try to do what I can, working with my husband and other people in his administration to bring about positive changes for people.

LS: Well, I was sure behind you with all that health care reform, because my husband and I are both self-employed, and we pay one million dollars per month - I'm exaggerating, but you know how it is.

HRC: It feels like it, I know.

LS: If you have a bad month, and you don't bring in quite enough, you are scraping around trying to find that money for the wretched health insurance, and it's screwy. But it will change. You've already done a lot just in speaking out about it. You've brought it to the awareness of people.

HRC: Well, we're going to keep working on it too, because it is too important to let drop. As my Daddy, used to say, if at first you don't succeed, you've got to try again.

LS: Carry on baby! Well, I appreciate it a lot. I guess the only other question that I had was: the peak joys and frustrations of life in the White House. That's kind of - I don't know that that's, I mean we sort of already touched on that - I mean, I'm sure if you ever want to go for a walk - not that you would want to go out in this weather - it must be very tough to...

HRC: Well, you know, I wrote this column... Have you read this column that I wrote? I guess the Washington papers - let me shoot

you a column, my first column, because that is exactly what I wrote about -

LS: Is escape possible?

HRC: Exactly. And how, you know, the kind of experiences that most Americans take for granted: driving their car, going for a walk, going to the supermarket, now seem just so wondrous and unique to me. Let me send you a copy of that. Well, Libby, if you have any other questions, or, if after listening to the tape you want to clarify something, just let us know. Because we think this is a really important project and I'm sorry it has taken us so long to be, you know, responsive to you.

LS: Oh no, that's fine, I appreciate it a lot. And I will get back to you if anything didn't come out clearly or whatever, but it's been great and I really appreciate the time and energy that has gone into it.

HRC: Well, we're happy to help and just call on us in any way.

LS: Well, best of luck as things progress.

HRC: Thank you

LS: Take Care

HRC: OK, goodbye.

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