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Interviews Kathy Kiely

FLOTUS Interview with Kathy Kiely USA Today

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White House

KK: I'm astonished. How can you possibly... here's a book that celebrates the most traditional aspect of the first lady's role of being a hostess? You do it on the... you publish it on the heels of doing the most revolutionary thing a first lady has ever done. Are you doing this to confuse us? (laughter)

HRC: Well I think it is good to remind ourselves how many different roles most women play in our lives today. But I... you know I'm ending this chapter of my life and it's something that means a great deal to me. I had hoped that the book would be out last year but I just couldn't get it finished in time. And then the senate campaign intervened. But it's important for us to be reminded of our history and all the traditions that bind us together as a nation. Certainly over the last eight years I have tried to make the White House even more American to reflect American food and style and culture. So it was really a labor of love and I also wanted to give people who would not otherwise have the chance to come to an event at the White House. A look behind the scenes about what it is like to celebrate Christmas here or to attend a State Dinner.

KK: A theme of yours for the very first day I remember when you came to the White House that was a concern. You wanted to make sure that people got in and so was that a big motivator in you doing this book.

HRC: Yes it was a very big motivator. You know. Because you know I have loved being able to welcome people to the White House. It's a joy to help design a new china pattern like we did for the bicentennial celebratory china that the Clinton china represents. It's been a pleasure to participate in refurbishing the rooms and acquire new pieces of art for the collection.

KK: Was there ever a part of you, and I ask this as somebody who is from the same cohort, was there ever a part of you that ever said "well by God, you know, I want to show people that women can do more than just be hostess" and how did you make peace with that aspect of...

HRC: Well I... I have an enormous respect for women who are great hostess, who have an eye for making a room beautiful and alive. Who understand far more than I ever will about how to, you know, meld together the domestic arts in a way that just make you happy to be there. It's something that I have a deep respect for and I wanted to make sure that during our tenure here that the White House was in excellent shape, physically, that it was constantly being refurbished so that it reflected the best of America. And I wanted, also, to put an emphasis on things American. I'm by no means an expert. I'm still to this day you know it is something I love to do but I'm not good at. (laugh) To tell you the truth, I don't really don't know how to do it myself but I know what I want and what I hope I can achieve and convey that sense of hospitality to people. I'm from the school who believe that there are many different talents that we are blessed with and I'm particularly impressed when somebody can transform a room into a welcoming place of beauty. So this has been a joy for me it really has.

KK: How did you actually do this? You said you had hoped the book would come out a year earlier. When did you start and how did you get it all done?

HRC: Kathy, I don't remember when I started. It feels like I've been working on it for years. I think I started in ninety-seven or ninety-eight, I just don't remember.

KK: Did someone suggest this... say to you...

HRC: Oh people. Yes. Lots of people have suggested it to me over the years. And it's something that I wanted to do. The proceeds all go to the White House Historical Association.

KK: Which adds to that endowment you mention in the book.

HRC: Yea it adds to the endowments it provides funds for the furnishings and upkeep that tax dollars don't pay for. And it was a real joy for me to look back at old photographs and to think through, you know, the book could have been 1,000 pages long because they are some many things we've enjoyed doing. So to sort it all out and make decisions about what to write about became, you know, kind of a walk down memory lane for me.

KK: the one thing I wanted to ask you is that you talk about bringing things out of storage and choosing what to put where. Where is all that stuff kept? How do you (inaudible) do people suggest to you "you ought to look at this?" How does that work?

HRC: Well there's storage space in the house. I mean there are 132 rooms. And there are some places that we can store things. But there is a huge Federal Presidential Warehouse where things are kept. And in fact when we got here there was a wonderful book that had just been published, Art in the White House that Mrs. Bush did the introduction for. And I got a copy of that and I was looking through it and I wanted to see a lot of the pieces of art and portraits and painting that were in storage to see if there were other that I wanted to add to being on display. So the curators were very patient and generous with their time and keep bringing thing out and we just kept looking and looking and looking and trying to find the right places for all of these paintings to go and other objects of art. You know my husband is a also a great connoisseur of White House history and he got a particular kick out of seeing all the different ways that presidents were portrayed, how all the different portraits were carved and painted. It was like an ongoing history lesson everyday that we took something out of storage.

KK: I have to ask you about the cover photo on the book. Is that one of *the* pantsuits?
(Laughter)

HRC: Well that is certainly one of my dark pantsuits.

KK: It's a little dressy to be one of the pantsuits

HRC: Yeah I don't think it is one of the day in day out campaign pantsuits. But you know..

KK: I suggested to Lissa and Ann Lewis that you donate one of those pants suit to the Smithsonian.

HRC: That's a very good idea. That's a great idea.

KK: and they should stipulate that they display it next to the inaugural gown.

HRC: That is a great idea I hadn't thought about that.

KK: If you do it give me the scoop

HRC: You get the credit. (to Lissa) Remember that Lissa.

Lissa: If we do it, then she gets the scoop.

KK: We get the scoop

HRC: That's not a bad...that's a very good idea because it is kind of a historic moment I guess.

KK: Absolutely is. It is a historic moment.

HRC: Yes

KK: Have you started actually to pack up?

HRC: We've started to get organized. It's a huge undertaking. I really didn't have any idea how much work there was to do in the remaining two months after the election. I have to get an office started I have to fulfill all of our obligation here at the White House for the holiday season. I have to pack and inventory and move somewhere, I have to continue all the work I've been doing in New York. It's just over whelming.

KK: I know. That's why I say it's astonishing.

HRC: There's more than I can even list on my lists of lists.

KK: What's your next week look like? You're doing book signing and book promotions this week. You must have some holiday parties starting soon.

HRC: Sunday night is the Kennedy Center Honors. Monday is the Congressional Ball and Tuesday I start Senate orientation. It is just an amazing challenge of a schedule but I want to do everything I don't want to miss a thing in the White House and I'm working hard on my Senate transition trying to understand all the ins and outs of that. I want to do everything.

KK: Have you started putting together a staff?

HRC: Well I have been receiving countless resumes and so we are sorting through all that and trying to make sense of it.

KK: What about housing have you started looking for Washington house here?

HRC: Well I have been looking I have not found anything I've begun to look. I've got so much stuff. You know a lot of it is going to New York. But even with a lot of it going to my house in Chapaqua there is still going have to store. You know it's just the typical moving story multiplied maybe, I don't know, a dozen times over.

KK: You mentioned... I saw a couple of the television interviews before I left this morning... It sounded like you have another book in the works.

HRC: Well not in the works but I'm thinking about it.

KK: Is it going to be more like a memoir?

HRC: Well you know people ask me questions all the time and write about me all the time. This chapter of my life is coming to an end and I'm thinking about writing something about it explaining it from my perspective.

KK: Some of what? I mean you talked about it a little you said you would (inaudible) from this experience?

HRC: Yes. Talk about my life from this point. What that includes?

KK: How do you do your writing? How will you get that done? I mean writing is hard. I tell my editors all the time.

HRC: It is very hard.

KK: You have a very very busy life with a lot of public obligations. Do you have a routine? Do you make notes? Do you keep a diary?

HRC: No I don't keep a diary? I keep stacks of stuff to remind me what I did, like schedules, clippings and things that happen little momentos from events.

Lissa: You don't want to know how much stuff she keeps.

HRC: Yeah unfortunately that's one of the problem I have with moving is where do I take all this stuff I have accumulated over all these years. You know with this book for example, are you coming to the party this afternoon?

KK: I have jury duty, I'm doing my constitutional duty.

HRC: But it's at five o'clock

KK: Oh well then maybe I'll come

HRC: Come Kathy come. Yeah. We're doing a book party and a lot of the people on the staff who make the housework. But I had a lot of help on this book because, you know, I would write things and pass it around and people would say "that's not how I remember it, here's what I think" and "why don't you write about this... this is a much better story over there." So this really has my name on it but it was a collective labor of love by a lot of people.

KK: I thought one of the nicest things in it was the amount of staff pictures you had?

HRC: I wanted that. People don't know I mean I didn't know before I came here that the staff is really the backbone to this place. That they stay here. There is that famous story Barbara Bush tells about how one of the butlers said to her "well you know Mrs. Bush, Presidents come and go but the butlers are always here." (Laughter) And there is truth to that and it is reassuring because they keep everything moving and they are so much a part of your extended family after you've been here a while.

KK: you know you are going to go down in history as the first First Lady ever to win public office, a praise I've written myself a few times, but, uh, what about your tenure as First Lady per se would you like to be remembered for?

HRC: Gee, well you know I will have to leave that to the people who look back. And part of the reason I wanted to write this book was, you know, to add to the public record about what I have done. I've worked on a lot of issues and traveled the world speaking on behalf of democracy and woman's right and I have worked hard to make the White House a gracious symbol of American democracy, and style, and culture. And I can't pull one out and say this is what I think I will be remembered for because I have invested so much of myself in each one of them and I will have to leave it up to others to sort through in some future time.

KK: Is there any thing from this experience that you want to... some of the issues, I'm sure, that you'll carry though as Senator.

HRC: Yes. Absolutely, from the beginning when I got here and worked on Health Care and improving the vaccination system for children. And lobbied on behalf of my husband's economic plan and worked on improving access to health care, education, and many of, what I call, tools of opportunity that make a difference in people's lives. The Save America's Treasures program I started to draw more attention during our millennium to the various historic and cultural monuments and artifacts around our country. There is so much I have done that I have cared deeply about and will continue to work on. Certainly, issues involving economy, education, health care, and the environment. But also the arts and historic preservation. This house I will always be a great champion and advocate for because I know how important it is. International issues that effect women and children that I think do effect America's role in security. There is much that I will take with me from this really rich experience to the Senate.

KK: Do you talk to your future colleges yet have you had much of an opportunity to...is there caucusing going on or is it just welcome wagon.

HRC: I think it is mostly informal relationships right now. The formal orientation starts next Tuesday and I will be eagerly attending every minute of that to learn everything I can. I'm really excited about it I think it going be a very important moment to pull together as a country to reach across party lines and try to tackle some of issues that need to be.

KK: You may have to make cast a vote on who the next Vice President is going to be.

HRC: It's a part of the role of the Senate.

KK: Have you thought about that and have you though about would you vote for a Democrat even if we have a Republican president .

HRC: I'm not going to think about it and not talk about it hypothetically. Let's wait an see how the challenges and contests in this election play out and then when I'm sworn in on January 3rd I'll face what ever I'll have to face.

KK: You're part of...really it's sort of the year of the women serial here. Have you thought about what that might mean? Have any of the republican women members of the Senate reached out to you?

HRC: I've talked with Olympia Snowe whom I've known for a number of years. And she and I talked about getting together and working on issues that are ones we both care deeply about, effecting women and families. But I'm looking forward to working with all of them and the Dean of the women Senators, my dear friend, Barbara Mikulski has a get together for all the women Senators shortly after the Senate convenes. Which, I think will be a great way for all of us to find common ground.

KK: Is there a spouses' gathering that your husband's going to be attending?

HRC: He will. He will be going to the dinner that will be held for new Senators, Senator-elects, and spouses.

KK: Oh great, great, terrific, have you thought about what if we ever had a first husband in the White House? Do you think that that first husband could do the job that a first lady has done in terms of what you have done here?

HRC: I think, as I have always said, about the First Lady roles I think it really depends on the interest and concerns of the individual and that's the way it should be. (Inaudible) But you know I prefer to refer to that person as the First Mate. (Laughter)

KK: That's good. Thanks.

HRC: Thank you. Thank you so much.