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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Patti Solis

Campaign Position: Hillary Clinton's Scheduler

Little Rock, Arkansas

November 19, 1992

Overview

Diane D. Blair was an assistant professor of political science at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, when she took a leave of absence to serve as a senior researcher in Governor Bill Clinton's presidential campaign. Approximately one month before the November election, Blair obtained permission from the governor to conduct interviews with participants in the Clinton/Gore campaign. In her own words, ". . . I had two major purposes in mind: first, simply to preserve for posterity an accomplished campaign organization that would essentially disappear on election day; and second, through discussions with campaign workers from all departments, to see what those on the inside believed to be the key ingredients of the campaign's success." She prepared a list of questions and began interviewing people as schedules allowed.

After Blair's death in 2000, her husband, Jim Blair, donated her personal and professional papers to Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries. Patti Solis reviewed this transcript and granted permission to make this interview available to scholars, students, and researchers. The final document may contain edits requested by the interviewee. This transcript was processed as part of the Diane D. Blair Papers and prepared for publication by the editorial staff of the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History.

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[Beginning of Interview]

Diane Blair: What were you doing immediately before you joined the campaign?

Patti Solis: Immediately before, I was working for the city treasurer in Chicago, working as her scheduler. Then I came on board with David Wilhelm.

DB: And did you immediately begin doing scheduling for Hillary, or did that evolve?

PS: As soon as I arrived—the way that David told the story, he had just arrived from the management meeting and they were talking about all the people who were working for Bill Clinton.

DB: And that was when?

PS: I arrived here November 1, right when we moved from the paint store. And Hillary asked, “Who do I get?” And David said, “Well, Patti Solis is coming and so she will be your scheduler.” So when I got here, it was done.

DB: What was your first meeting with Hillary? Had you known anything about her? No preconceptions?

PS: None whatsoever. To be perfectly honest, David had a political consulting group in Chicago that I really wanted to work for. And I knew that he was going to come do this campaign, and so I thought, “I can get on this campaign, and I can show him that I’m really good, and I can work for him when I go back to Chicago.” So Wednesday he said, “Yes, I’d really like for you to come. I’ve developed a staff for Bill Clinton, but none on Hillary.” So when I got here they told me, “You have to go meet Hillary at the mansion. Not only do you have to be her scheduler, you have to travel with her, you have to be her advance person—you have to do everything.” And I said, “Okay.” Of course, I was just very, very nervous. I went over and I

said, “I am Patti Solis and I will be doing you scheduling. Is there anything that you need me to know? Is there anything you need to know about me?” And she said, “You will be doing my scheduling, and that is wonderful. You will be going to Texas with me; that’s great.” And she was—she was wonderful, she just completely accepted me from the bat and helped me along the way. I mean, I immediately felt at ease with her.

DB: Now, as her scheduler, walk me through what you did in that capacity, because surely that schedule had to be coordinated with the governor’s.

PS: Well, during the primary it was much different, but basically we had certain states we had to be in, and the governor could not be in all of them, so Hillary was really acting as the running mate, because wherever he couldn’t go, they sent Hillary. So basically the way we worked, every morning we had scheduling meetings—every morning and every evening—and we’d plat out the monthly schedule for the governor. I could not do Hillary’s schedule until his schedule was arranged and we knew which areas were being covered. And then, of course, it changed weekly depending on our numbers and ups and downs. Once he was going to North Carolina and we got to go to Texas. Once that it was decided she was going to Texas—and this was decided maybe two to three days out from the actual day she was going—I would talk to our field director for that state and let them know and then I would talk to the state director. And then the three of us would come up with ideas for her events. And back then, she would do anything from day-care centers to high schools to political rallies, to just wherever she could gather the most people. Once we got the event set up, we’d ship out the advance people, and unfortunately,

the governor's advance people had about five days' lead time to put their events together, and about a team of five. In the primary, Hillary had one advance person and one day to put it together. So, considering that, I think they did a great job.

DB: In the general election you had a somewhat larger staff, a separate plane, et cetera.

PS: Well, what we found during the primary—she was traveling commercial—so that made scheduling very, very difficult because, you know, flights out of Little Rock—there are no direct flights out of Little Rock. It takes six hours to get anywhere, so we lost a lot of valuable campaigning time. So it was decided to get her—she was so good at this, motivating people and getting them motivated to work for us—so they decided to get her her own plane, which helped incredibly. So we got a large staff, because she was now campaigning in the general, the last two months, she was campaigning six out of seven days a week. During the primary, I was not only the scheduler, I planned the long-range schedule, but I also desked every day—desking means working out every single detail of every day. And you know, from the moment she gets up, who gets in the car with her, who greets her curbside, which entrance she goes into, where the microphones will be—every single detail of every day. So I was doing all of that. But during the general, it was just impossible for me to do every day and schedule the long-range planning. So during the general I'd do the long-range planning and I had to desk on the alternated days. In the general she was doing six days out of seven.

DB: I know in the primary she was trying to come home every weekend and spend the weekend with Chelsea.

PS: Now just toward the end—toward the end, we just had to do it. But again, she insisted. Sometimes the schedule would keep her from home on Saturday or Sunday, so I would bring her home on a Wednesday or Thursday. But she had to come home to see Chelsea, she just had to. And of course, when Chelsea had school plays or ballets or conferences, she had to be home for that—and so did he, for that matter—but for some reason they just did not understand that he had to be home, too. “You don’t understand, he is going to cancel it, you might as well back it up now.” So then sometimes during the really exciting events, she took Chelsea with her.

DB: I remember she took Chelsea to New Mexico with her.

PS: She went to New Mexico for the Navajo Nation parade. It was 150,000 Native American Indians and it was just wonderful; crafts, parades and shows. And she took her for that and she took Chelsea on the final bus tour.

DB: The debates?

PS: The debates.

DB: All three or just two of them?

PS: She was just there for two of them. I think she missed the last one. And she went to New York with her often, just because Chelsea loves the museums and wants to go see them. And when she did go, I would give her some down time during the day, so that she could just get herself together. But in the general, the schedule was very, very well run. Susan came in for the general. And basically, instead of two principals, we have four principals now. It was very interesting because they targeted states and they divvied up the states. And we had Stan, our pollster, telling

us which principal was better in each state, so we were really able to plan. I hate to say it, but in the primary it was so haphazard because we had to just send her.

During the general, we researched it, we looked at our numbers, we knew she was popular there, we knew where she wasn't popular, we knew where he was popular—

DB: Give me an example of the kind of place where she was popular and where she wasn't.

PS: She wasn't very popular in Tennessee. We had a rally there. It was an all school day, which means that each of the four principals was in a state doing a school rally—a college campus rally. We chose Memphis State, because she had to be home that day and it was close. It was an easy day trip and we needed a presence there. But the politics of it wasn't great. But we thought that Gore had taken care of that; unfortunately, he didn't. So when we got there, there were protesters and that was probably our worst event. But, for example, she was extremely popular with African Americans, so when we did an African American rally, they would just cheer for her and applaud. Actually, in the same state we went to Knoxville. We did the CMC—the Christian Methodist Convocation—and she just brought tears to people's eyes. We went to Spelman College where she brought tears to people's eyes. She is genuine. She was also very popular, of course, with women—young women; their role model. Children's events were always a special success because of the message, the pictures in the paper we got in return. She is great at this stuff.

DB: In the outside world's view, it would probably be considered second rate, working for the candidate's spouse rather than for the candidate himself; but I have a feeling here at this campaign, that there was a great spirit among Hillary's people.

PS: She is just powerful and so impressive. I may be biased, because from the very beginning I worked for her. I never knew what it was like to work for him. But at the end there were maybe twenty “Hillaryland” staff. Each of us got to know her in our own way. We talked to her and got to know her and she was so impressive and she taught me so much. And it was never second rate.

DB: Who named it Hillaryland? Do you remember where that came from?

PS: It was in the primary and there were two people in Hillaryland at that point, myself and Lucy Naphin, who was helping me schedule. And we had this tiny little corner in the campaign office, where the scheduling and press area was—this huge scheduling area and this huge press operation.

DB: I remember, you were way over there in the corner.

PS: Right. I had a Hillary hotline. I always had a Hillary hotline, so whenever she called me she could come in automatically. I wasn't there, but Stephen Rabinowitz was sort of sitting in my area and he didn't know what the Hillary hotline was. He just thought it was a Hillary-allotted phone and he answered it. Whenever it rang, it was Hillary. He answered it and he said, “Hillaryland.” She goes, “Ah—is Patti there?” That is when it became Hillaryland. Then when we moved into the general, we dubbed it, but we really didn't know that she knew about it. I didn't know that it would take that well, so we just made a big sign saying “Hillaryland” and put big pictures up of her, and suddenly it became Hillaryland and everybody refers to it now as Hillaryland.

DB: From your perspective, Patti, what made this campaign, this organization, so successful?

PS: I think that it was the most inclusive campaign. I have only worked for two local campaigns, but it was the most inclusive organization I have ever seen in my life. George and James were in these “War Room” meetings and everyone was allowed to attend. Everyone knew what was going on, so whenever we talked to anyone outside the campaign, we knew what we were talking about. Each and every member of this campaign was able to communicate the message. The structure of it—the clusters we thought were just wonderful. Each region had a cluster and each cluster had a press person, an issues person, a field person. And so we knew just where to go to get things done. If you had a problem in Texas, you knew where to go. If you had problems in Illinois, we knew where to go. And then the top level of the campaign, again, I just thought that they were so accessible. There just wasn’t a time that I couldn’t go walk into David Wilhelm’s office or George’s office and say, “Hillary needs this,” or, “Hillary is having a problem with this,” and it is easy—there was no level of bureaucracy. It would get done. And I just think we all got along so well. We all became friends so they were easy to work with and it made it fun. Working together is so much easier than working at different purposes.

DB: What, for you, was the low point of the campaign?

PS: Well, the whole primary was such a roller-coaster ride. We were doing really, really well, then came Gennifer Flowers. And then we just dropped. I thought Hillary was the star. Without her, I don’t think we could have survived it. I just don’t. Which is when I just fell in love with her. And then, you know, we overcame that and we were doing really, really well and then that draft came. I think just a culmination of all of that—the ups and downs—it was very, very stressful. The primary season was

just a pain. Just a pain. Then, we got over the draft, and we went to New York and that was a big mess; that was awful. And then the cookies and tea comes up and there were just so many scandals, and it was just a roller-coaster ride. The general, I thought, was a piece of cake. I cried on so many nights. I gained so much weight and—it was just awful, it was an awful time. But I knew after New Hampshire that we would win.

DB: You did? Because that was going to be another question. Let me come back to that in a minute. Okay, so I got your low point. What, for you, out of all this, has been the high point?

PS: The high point has to be the friendships in this campaign. I can honestly say I will be friends with these people until the day I die. The other group of friends is your college friends—you work hard with them for four years and you go through a lot. But this has been the year of turmoil and exhilaration and I will just never forget this. That is the high point, the people I have met here.

DB: When were you certain that Clinton would get the presidential nomination?

PS: In New Hampshire. Seriously, I was planning on packing my bags, getting on the plane, and going home. I thought, “Okay. It was a wonderful experience, I met wonderful people, but, okay, it is over. It’s over.” But when he named himself the “Comeback Kid,” I knew that not only was he going to get the nomination, he was going to win.

DB: You knew at that point he was also going to be president?

PS: I knew he was going to. I knew that if he got the nomination, beating Bush was going to be easy.

DB: What is it that you want to make certain that the future understands about this campaign?

PS: That Hillary Clinton was a major contributor to this campaign—a major strategist. She contributed in the strategy, she contributed in the campaign—she worked so hard for this. And I just want the country to know she’s not just the spouse, she really is a partner.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]