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Diane D. Blair Papers (MC 1632)

1992 Clinton Presidential Campaign Interviews

Interview with Kathryn F. (Kate) Frucher
Campaign Position: National Student Coordinator
Little Rock, Arkansas
November 3, 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. Kathryn F. Frucher 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?

Kate Frucher: I was a student. I was in school at Harvard University.

DB: And you came officially with the campaign when?

KF: I began to work in late July.

DB: Can you please describe what you do in your position?

KF: The real job is to mobilize the youth vote, and that's taken a number of forms. I think my main job here has been to organize a national grassroots network of students, which means getting state student coordinators in place and campus coordinators in place. And at this point we pretty much have coordinators on every campus across the country. We have, I think, the largest student network in the nation.

DB: How many?

KF: My count with all the lists from the different schools is above 200,000 people volunteering on campuses for us. And these are students who are directly mobilizing the youth vote. I think a lot of them, late in the election, have been drawn into the larger volunteer pools. But one of the unique things about the campaign to me is the way in which we've really targeted young voters as a block themselves and gotten information out to them through this network. And, also, just making sure that we're getting to people who aren't in schools, through widespread media.

DB: You have responsibility for that, as well?

KF: I work hand in hand with Ethan Zindler. One of the nice things about our network is that we get feedback from the field about what people are concerned about, and we can use that information to help us formulate our own broader publicity campaign. And working with Governor Clinton and Hillary Clinton has been terrific because their commitment to young people is just amazing. I've never seen anything like it in my lifetime—I'm twenty-two—and they've gone way out of their way to talk to young people face-to-face, which is something they are really concerned about. None of the other candidates have done it. Ross Perot, who says that he's a populist, has never gone out and spoken face to face, as opposed to Bill and Hillary. And their commitment—going to campuses and Bill on MTV, going into these forums which George Bush calls un-presidential or the teenybopper network. He did call it un-presidential until he thought the youth vote was important. I think that this is going to make a real difference for his presidency and also for the future of young people, because what I've seen by working with young people is really that we are at a time where we need to define ourselves. We don't have a definition. I think the group which came before us defined us as apathetic and alienated and uninvolved, and I think this is a new generation of young people who are ready to do things and just need a little bit of guidance and direction. And the mobilization we've seen around this candidacy is amazing. So it's been actually a really fun job.

DB: To what extent do you feel you were the passenger on his train?

KF: This was ready-made. I mean, to tell you the truth, I think that regardless of what we'd done, young people really would have spoken up and voted. What I think is

great is that we were able to get out to them where we stood, who we were. I think, going into the summer, a lot of young people didn't know who Bill Clinton was. I think that we've served a great function just educating them and giving them more of a sense of hope than they had. It's really depressing to look at some of the newest data about how young people are feeling. There was a poll by MTV which said something like 86 percent of young people feel alienated from government, and that's higher than it was after Watergate, which means it's going to take a lot. People really don't trust politics and politicians.

DB: To what extent do you have to advocate for youth within the campaign?

KF: Well, there was a gap. At the very top, starting with Hillary and Bill Clinton, there's a real commitment. And George Stephanopoulos has been incredibly supportive, as was the whole senior staff here. I think most people in this building have really been committed to mobilizing this group. Down on the field level and out there, most people aren't used to this approach. Most people in the past have been told not to bring out the youth vote because they have been voting Republican and don't think that they are responsible enough to participate. So that was kind of hard to overcome. I think, in a lot of ways, we had to run a network very separate from the field in some states.

DB: Was a lot of that getting young people registered to vote?

KF: Yes. The first leg was registering and the second leg was just maintaining momentum and enthusiasm to bring us through the election.

DB: Do you have data yet to indicate that your efforts have been bearing fruit?

KF: Voter registration was just amazing. We broke records all over the country. We

had two national student days. One was September 18, in which over two hundred campuses launched voter registration drives. I remember because I never received New Mexico, and in about a three-day period after that, they registered nine thousand people, which is just amazing. There were so many people who wanted to register and get absentee ballots in California that they had to go back to the printer, and, supposedly, since February, they've registered six-hundred thousand, which has been wild. So we really tapped into a sentiment that was there and directed it, and it was amazing. And I think we'll see today that it's going to be a real margin. People are excited. And people are scared. On one hand it's a scary time for us because people sit back and think about it, and I don't think many people have ever come into contact with a leader in this country who speaks to them and who they trust to actually have government work for them. I can't think of one in my lifetime. And why should we now think the government will work more for the concerns that we care about? But if we lose heart at twenty and twenty-one and twenty-two, we're not going to go anywhere. And I'm really heartened by the fact that young people haven't lost that hope and are still willing to try and have come out for this.

DB: Did you have any voice in shaping of generic commercials or targeted commercials?

KF: We did a lot of free media. The main thing we did was free media, and that was Bill Clinton himself shaping that. And Al Gore, too, participated in some of the forums. There were a few spots run. I didn't have as much of a role in that as I would have liked. But at the same time, I was given so much autonomy and so

much freedom to shape the youth network and the youth movement and come up with literature and just really rally the troops out there, that I was very, very busy with that. And actually quite amazed at the amount of responsibility and trust that was put in me from the beginning. It was one of those things where they'll trust you unless you do something wrong, and I think that that's the American way.

DB: This campaign is now being described as the most effective presidential campaign in recent American history. What, from your perspective, made it so effective?

KF: A lot if it is the fact that people are respectful of each other. It was a very moving moment in the "War Room" yesterday when James Carville talked about the ways in which the second and third floors aren't divided. And there's no sort of assumption that because of your age you aren't going to be an effective participant in this campaign. And you can go upstairs, you call people by their first names, it's casual. And the best argument wins. There's not an assumption that one person, because of their status or their past, is more equipped than anyone else and other people are silenced. That's why it's been best. Because the best argument should win. And because if they're all thrown into the pool, you're going to come out with a better one because your argument is going to be made stronger. It's been interesting working with counterparts who have worked in other national student organizations, or even in the past at the DNC or my counterparts in the Republican Party. I've never worked in politics before, and one of the reasons is because I know you go up and you say Mr. and Mrs. and you pretty much do the work that no one else wants to do. And I was nervous about that coming down.

DB: How did you happen to get this job?

KF: It really fell out of the sky. I had never worked in politics before. I've done a lot of work with emotionally disturbed kids—Children at Risk in New York City—for five years. Worked at a refugee camp doing AIDS education and in India with house building, and was much more issue oriented. I feel very strongly that, at my age, you need to be out in the field rolling up your sleeves, feeling and tasting and experiencing the issues that our leaders are talking about. And if you don't, you become like George Bush, who is so out of touch with it that you lose the passion and any sense of how to shape it. Deborah Sale has been a good friend of my family's for a long time, and I've had an ongoing dialogue with her for many years. I remember spending New Year's Eve with her one year and just talking about politics. She's always encouraged me to get more involved in the political process, and I've always chosen to stay out of it. And she came to me and said, "Look, here's an opportunity. I think, if you give this guy a chance, he's really going to be a different sort of politician."

DB: So he was not, particularly, your choice at the outset—you had to be opened to him as a possibility?

KF: Yes. I mean, I definitely see myself as one of the many young people out there who felt incredibly alienated from government. Even though my parents have been involved with it, the young people I've known who've been involved in it before are not passionate about issues. They're passionate about advancing themselves. That really turns me off. Even now, I think that it's still going to be important to spend a lot of time out there seeing it first-hand. The older you get

the harder it is to do that. And if you don't do it soon, I don't think you can do it at all. I think it's great to see this perspective as well, and I do feel that Bill and Hillary Clinton go way out of their way to actually get that first-hand sense of things, which, I think, is the most essential thing. And what young people are always talking about is the out of touch, the out of touch. And I really hope that after this election they continue to do that. It makes an incredible difference.

DB: I'm counting on them.

KF: Yes, I am, too. And a lot of young people are, too. Another one of the things that has really amazed me is the amount of interest there is in something like the National Service Trust Fund and actually giving back to the country. The problem is that up till now it's been a privilege because people can't afford it, because people have to worry about surviving. I'm privileged to have been able to do it because I have the financial backing to do it. And I think the more our leaders talk about their experience doing that and the role models, the more room they give people like me to just give us responsibility, let us help shape this country. Everyone has a sense of ownership and is much more committed to it. Within the campaign itself, I do feel a tension. It's a huge mix of people, and there are a lot of different voices, and it's been interesting to me. Some people do treat you with respect, other people don't as much. It's incredibly overwhelming for students because some people want to use them as that labor force—some people want to target them. There's everything from throwing us into the advance pool and building crowds and throwing us into the media pool and just doing that. I was caught in this huge war between field and political. As a result, not only did

I develop a thick skin, which, I think, is a positive thing, but I was given a lot of autonomy to shape it according to what the students were saying they needed.

DB: So there was this internal struggle?

KF: Absolutely.

DB: At first, it sounded like everything was incredibly wonderful and everybody was open and responsive to good ideas. Where there low points in this operation for you?

KF: Yes. The first month here was very, very hard, and I really lost confidence in myself, and it was one of the lowest points in my young life of organizing. It was this tension between different views.

DB: What was the tension between political and field?

KF: Well, the tension was really how much of a role the established College Democrats were going to play in shaping this, and how much of it was going to be Clinton/Gore. When I was brought on by Stephanie and Mike Lux, I sat down and really agreed philosophically with the fact that there are two kinds of young people out there. There are young people who are impassioned about a variety of issues, and there are young people out there who have been involved, but not necessarily for those reasons. I feel very, very strongly that there has to be a coalition between the two. At the same time, when I tried to work with the group in Washington, it was hard because they've invested a lot of time in building a very large national organization and, I think, felt like this was their appropriate role and sort of coming in on equal standing with a lot of other groups. Having me as one of those outsiders come in and say, "Okay, we're going to move this in

a different direction” was very, very hard. And I don’t think that tension was ever resolved, and it still is going to be an issue. I think that when we figure out in this new administration how the White House is going to stay in touch with young people—not just through mass media but through a network where we can get feedback—it’s going to be hard. The insiders, those who always sort of—I don’t want to generalize. There are good people everywhere.

DB: Some people in the Young Democrats are there because of their passion about issues.

KF: There’s no reason to generalize at all, but it really is important to get people who have had a wide breadth of experience. I think part of the sense of newness is building groups—not necessarily ask everyone to join the same group. That was my challenge on campuses when I decided to present it. It worked in some places; it didn’t in others. But what I wanted was a new Clinton/Gore group. I didn’t want to just work through the choice groups, although on campuses that probably was, other than the economy, the biggest issue. I didn’t want to work through just environmental groups. And I didn’t want to just work with college groups, basically, because all of them had different types of people with different agendas, but all had valuable energies to bring to this. And to go through one of those groups is to ask other people to fold their organizations into it, which people are reluctant to do. And I think that same strategy has to be applied here, where we can find a group where people can come together almost on a steering committee to share their ideas, but not necessarily be asked to change themselves to fit somebody else’s. And that was hard. And it also brings a larger

understanding because people have to be able to see beyond their own issue, whether that's choice, environment, or the Democratic Party. And that's been hard. When I came, it was funny—there wasn't as much of a student organization from here as I'd expected there to be. I was handed a folder which basically had in it a couple of memos, but it was like, from scratch—figure it out from the bottom. And I guess that's the way campaigns are and that's basically what was so fun. A student movement should be led by students. We've got to figure it out with a little bit of direction here and there. And that first stage of putting that plan down and figuring out the tension with Washington was hard. And I feel badly. I think that there still may be some hard feelings in Washington over the way this was run, and I think that certainly needs to be talked through. And If I were to do it again, I may do it a little bit differently in terms of inclusion. But it's a balance, and it's hard to figure out that sort of balance when you have to build a national network in two months.

DB: Now, you've told me some of your low points; has there been just one particularly shining moment for you?

KF: The first National Student Day, which was September 18, really was the watershed for a number of reasons. One of them being that all four candidates went out to campuses. I think that's unheard of. And that actually happened twice. That, to me, really showed the commitment on the part of this campaign to young people. And at the same time, the response we saw back from young people to really mobilize and do this—and to us the strategy behind it was to act right after schools got in, so it sort of forced people to get going fast. And they

did. I think that the College Republicans on campus, or whatever group they have, just didn't know what hit them. I mean, lately it's really tickled me. At least three or four college newspapers have quoted the heads of the College Republicans saying, "I just don't think it's cool to be a Republican this year." Republicans at UC Irvine actually endorsed Clinton, which was a great feat on our part. The California students were absolutely wild. And just the creativity—students in New York, by themselves—you get something going, you show that you're committed to them, and they just run with it. The first student day they had students going into high school civics classes teaching about the process or waiting to register voters in senior citizens homes or outside of factories. When they're given support and a little bit of guidance and positive reinforcement, pretty much they just go so far. And I hope we keep feeding this. That, to me, was the boost I needed. Up to that point, I thought that it was very shaky. I was actually given the opportunity by this campaign to go on the *Today Show*.

DB: On which you did us all so proud. We could not have had a better spokesperson.

KF: It was the experience of my entire life. I remember when George brought me in his office—it was like, "Just talk about your friends and your own experience and it's simple and easy." I got on there and it was a face-to-face debate with this guy. It wasn't just talking about my friends. But I was amazed on every level that people were trusting me to do this. And, you know, that was without much reason because I hadn't proven myself yet. So that was really a high point. And since then, it's been great.

DB: I've got one last question that I like to ask everybody, which is, what would you

really like the future—what would you really like history to know about this campaign?

KF: That you don't need a huge hierarchy. That people here have gone way out of their way to include people in discussions to respect one another. And it's really felt like a team. It's actually going to be hard for this to end because you just don't get that same sense of a shared experience very often in your life. And feeling part of something which is bigger than yourself, and you don't even have a sense of it because you're in this building and you see it on TV. Just the way in which people listened to each other was truly amazing to me. And the young energy and the commitment here. I think people really sensed that we were at a turning point in history. This is something new here. I remember talking my first week to Stephanie Solien and Mike—and they are people who have been involved in this for many years—and just saying, “If we don't win now, I don't know what I'm going to do.” To be a young person and hearing that—the people who have been in this a long time, you know, “This is it, I just can't take it anymore,” is a real sense of desperation. And at the same time, working together and supporting each other, people held strong. The nerves here—people have nerves of steel, like I've never seen before. And it's just been great. It's been great.

[End of Interview]

[Reviewed and edited by Pryor Center staff]