

Women of the Senate Oral History Project

DIANE SKVARLA

Office of Senate Curator

Intern, 1979

Museum Specialist, 1979–1984

Exhibits Coordinator, 1984–1987

Associate Curator, 1987–1990, 1994–1995

Curator, 1995–2014

Oral History Interview

October 17, 2018

Senate Historical Office

Washington, D.C.

**AGREEMENT AND RELEASE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
U.S. SENATE HISTORICAL OFFICE**

I, Diane Skvarda agree to participate in the Women of the Senate Oral History Project and understand that the physical audio recordings and transcripts of my interviews are and will remain the property of the United States Senate.

In entering into this agreement, I understand that all or portions of my oral history may be made available to the public in an online feature on the Senate website, may be made available to researchers and may be quoted from, published, or broadcast in any other medium (consisting of all forms of print or electronic media, including the Internet or other emerging, future technologies that may be developed) that the Senate Historical Office may deem appropriate. I also approve the deposit of the recordings and transcripts at the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and any other institution that the Senate Historical Office may deem appropriate.


In consideration for my inclusion in this project, I understand I am entitled to receive a copy of the transcripts of my interviews. While I hereby relinquish any intellectual property rights or interests I may hold in the content of my interviews, I acknowledge that the Senate has the discretion to decide whether or not to make all or any part of my oral history available to the public.



[name]

Dated: July 29, 2019.

I, Betty K. Koed, accept the interview of Diane Skvarda for inclusion into the Oral History Project of the U.S. Senate Historical Office.


Betty K. Koed, U.S. Senate Historian

Dated: 8/9/2019

Introduction

Diane Skvarla began her career in the Senate as an intern in the Office of Senate Curator in 1979. After years serving as museum specialist, exhibits coordinator, and then associate curator, Skvarla left the Senate to pursue a career in equestrian instruction. Luckily for the Senate, she found her way back to the curator's office a few years later and soon after became the Senate curator. Skvarla oversaw the increased professionalization of the curatorial staff in the areas of collections management, preservation, and restoration. Among the many projects completed under her guidance were the restoration of the Old Senate Chamber, publication of the Senate's *Catalogue of Fine Art* and *Catalogue of Graphic Art*, and the opening of Exhibition Hall in the Capitol Visitor Center. As a Senate staffer during the 1980s and '90s and as head of a Senate department in the first decades of the 21st century, Skvarla provides a unique perspective on the changing role of women in the Senate.

About the Interviewer: Daniel S. Holt is the Assistant Historian at the U.S. Senate Historical Office. He earned a Ph.D. in history in 2008 from the University of Virginia. Prior to joining the Senate Historical Office, Holt was a historian at the Federal Judicial Center (FJC) from 2009 to 2016, where he edited volumes II and III of *Debates on the Federal Judiciary: A Documentary History*.

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DANIEL HOLT: We always like to learn about people's stories and how they got to the Senate. I'd first like to ask you, did you have any notable female role models when you were growing up that helped direct your career path and your career choices?

DIANE SKVARLA: Not necessarily my career choices as far as the museum field. I did have role models, especially since I'm very active in the equestrian world, former riding instructors who were very important in terms of setting goals and what you would do when you were riding, discipline, in terms of your riding, and just enthusiasm for what I was doing. When I was in college it was primarily a few male role models who were helping me in terms of moving me along in my museum career.

HOLT: Was that what you studied when you were in college?

SKVARLA: I was actually a history major, with multiple art history classes, at Colgate University. In fact, my first two years were spent at Goucher College, and there was a professor there called Eric Van Schaack, who I'd always wanted to take an art history class with and I never got to it. I transferred to Colgate University and lo and behold, he transferred to Colgate at the same time. I finally got to work with him and he was very instrumental. In fact, he was instrumental because it was Eric Van Schaack who suggested that I apply for an internship in the Senate Curator's Office.

HOLT: What was your first position out of college? Was it here at the Senate?

SKVARLA: It was here at the Senate. In the fall of my senior year at Colgate University, I was planning on spending January—we had these very short four-week January terms—working on an archeological dig down in, I think it was South Carolina. Eric Van Schaack approached me and said, “No, no, Diane. There's this great internship you have to apply [for].” I thought, “Well, I've already got this all arranged, I've put down the deposit, but I'll give the office a call and just see what it sounds like.” I called the office and talked to the curator of the

Senate, James Ketchum, Jim Ketchum. He was just so delightful. I still remember hanging up and looking at my roommate and saying, “I’ve got to go. This just sounds like an amazing opportunity.” So I spent four weeks in the Curator’s Office as an intern. In April, I think it was around April that year, maybe March, they contacted me and asked me if I wanted to come back as a summer intern, which was perfect because I was planning to go on to graduate school at Columbia University in historic preservation. That actually was my first love, historic preservation.

I ended up going back for the summer and lo and behold, when I got there, there were three people in the office at the time. One was a woman, Mary Phelan, who was instrumental that first summer I was there in helping me in terms of understanding the ins and outs of the Senate. But Mary was pregnant and wasn’t planning to come back when she had her child. That fall, instead of going on to Columbia, I actually became a Senate employee as the museum specialist.

HOLT: What were your impressions of the Senate? That was 1979?

SKVARLA: It was 1979 when I came to the Senate. It was also a time, I think, for women where you had to feel like you had to prove yourself, even though maybe you hadn’t even started a job. Especially on campus at Colgate University that spring for job fair interviews, everybody was “dressing for success.” Everybody had bought the *Dress for Success* book and all the women were wearing these business suits. This was the way you were supposed to look. When I first started in the Senate, I very much was wearing my blue tailored suit with the white shirt and the little scarf around my neck. That’s how so many of the women were dressing during those early years, again I think, just because we were trying to not just fit in but trying to show a very professional side of ourselves, especially since being young and just out of college you wanted to try and really put your best foot forward.

HOLT: You didn’t necessarily come into contact with senators a lot, but who were the kinds of people who you were working with in that position, and were there notable women that you dealt with?

SKVARLA: At that time there weren’t that many women. There were certainly women in the Senate Library and in the Senate Document Room that I became friends with, who were about my age. But as far as other people that we were working with, just like you said, as the museum specialist, my role was more to do research. We were starting a small exhibition program, so I was putting together exhibits in a very small fashion. I was also responsible for the care and upkeep of the Old Senate and Old Supreme Court Chambers. Actually, as a woman, that was extremely challenging here at the Senate, because I was working with the custodial service people. Sometimes I used to wonder, was it because I was a woman? Was it because I was young? Was it because I wasn’t in a position of authority that maybe I wasn’t getting a reaction right away to my requests? I still remember the frustration of having to ask Jim Haugerud, who

was at that point the registrar, “Could you please make that phone call? I’ve tried three times, I cannot get them to come and help me clean the Chamber,” for example.

Actually, what I started doing a little bit there, because I just felt that maybe, again, you’re dressing for success, you’re trying to look professional, but here you’re working with the custodial services, and felt like maybe there was a disconnect with me trying to look quite that professional. So on the days it was cleaning, I would come in a more casual attire and I’d help move the furniture, I’d help vacuum with them, I’d help—trying to get them to recognize not necessarily that I was one of the boys, but that I wasn’t some snobby woman who was sort of dictating what they should do, but rather tried for them to recognize that I was trying to be on equal footing with them.

HOLT: That’s fascinating. What was your relationship like with Jim Ketchum as the curator?

SKVARLA: For anyone who knows Jim, Jim is a larger than life individual. He walks into a room and you can’t help but notice him. He’s a large individual—he’s about six foot two probably—and he just has this baritone voice that just booms out and he’s very, very friendly. At first I was—I wouldn’t say I was intimidated, but I certainly had a lesser profile and sort of, you know—Jim was the curator and we all very much respected him. He was, I would really almost say, a father figure to me. Very much. He was about the age, maybe a little younger, of my own father at the time. I think Jim really guided me through those early years. It was Jim who in his own way suggested maybe I wanted to go back to graduate school, maybe I wanted to advance. I don’t think he wanted me necessarily to leave the Senate, but I think he felt that it was important for me to continue to advance my degree and also my knowledge. He was supportive, even though funds were limited, of me going to any conferences. He always included me, as well as Jim Haugerud, who was the registrar, in anything that he was doing so we knew what was going on. I very much respected him. He had a vast, vast knowledge, having been curator at the White House under both the Kennedy, Johnson, and part of the Nixon administrations.

He really knew politics. For him, I think, the art was very, very important, but the politics were what really excited him, while for me, I was more into the art, and okay, we are in a political environment, I’ll have to deal with that. It was a little bit different.

HOLT: What were some of your most memorable projects during your first stint in the Senate?

SKVARLA: At first we started with, as I said, these small exhibits. I really just enjoyed the research in a very smaller capacity. Some of the things that are memorable aren’t necessarily good, which was, I go first to the 1983 bombing in the Capitol. That was a real eye opener for me. It happened late at night. It was a group protesting America’s involvement in Grenada. They had called the Capitol Police. They called the *Washington Post*, I think, which called the Capitol

Police to say there was a bomb. This was before we had the dog tags we now have to wear around, and it was in the main, second floor corridor of the Senate. The bomb went off late at night. Thank goodness it was Monday night, and it was Monday Night Football, and the Senate had gone out of session early. Was it for the football? I'm not really sure at the time. For our office, what was challenging was that they wouldn't let the curator, Jim Ketchum, into the building. They swept the debris under all of the paintings, where it literally flaked off the paintings onto the ground, and they swept all those fragments together, with the glass. They were trying to clean it up as best they could for the next morning so it wouldn't look as bad. We had trash cans that were sort of up to our shoulders, those really tall trash cans, probably about six of them that we set up an area in the basement where we had to just dump everything out, with the conservators trying to find these tiny little fragments of paint. There were a couple of areas that we couldn't even get all of the fragments, because it was exactly where the bomb was. The bomb went off and basically blasted forward to where several of the monumental paintings of Sumner, Clay, and Calhoun were located. If you see the pictures of what they looked like, it was pretty devastating. We worked with the conservators to find those little bits of debris. Because two of the paintings were by the same artist, they all had a very dark background. You can imagine, it was like putting together your worst jigsaw puzzle, basically.

HOLT: Had anything in your training prepared you for that level of repair on a piece of artwork?

SKVARLA: No. I had no idea how the conservators were going to do it. Ten years after it all happened, one of the conservators was in town and looked at the painting and said, "You know, I could do a better job now." But it's also, when you look at the painting, especially the one of Daniel Webster, where you can see if you look across, rake your eye across the canvas, you can see where it's uneven, it tells a story now. The important thing for the Senate was to get the money needed to restore it as quickly as possible and to get the building looking back to normal as quickly as possible.

But it was an eye opener because, you know, I was young, my parents were concerned—a bombing in the Capitol! Of course it wasn't the first. We all know that there was one earlier in the century, and there has always been a history of violence that can happen around here. But it was definitely an eye opener and something that I wasn't prepared for.

That was a more negative aspect, but it was challenging. It was still, I hate to say it, but it was exciting. Exciting in the fact that once it's done you have to deal with it. That's the history of the office. Our office tries to prepare for things, but so often we have to react to things. We're quite different. We can do all the research in the world, we can have a lot of time to do that type of thing, but suddenly you have a water leak and you have to run down and take those paintings off the wall because they are going to be damaged.

HOLT: You also worked on an exhibit to go up in the Russell Rotunda as part of the bicentennial. Can you talk a little bit about that?

SKVARLA: Yes. That exhibit was huge for us. Again, I talked about having just done very small exhibits. This one was a major exhibit. The exhibit firm of Staples and Charles designed the exhibit for us. Huge panels were created in the rotunda to house some of the larger artwork, exhibit cases to house some of the most important Senate documents and other documents that were down at National Archives. Everything had to be temperature and humidity controlled. We had to get approval to move some of these paintings, and also furniture, out of the Capitol to display for the public. One of the things that was displayed was the Daniel Webster desk that was being used on the Senate Chamber floor. So this was the first time that the desk during the Senate session had been taken off the floor, put in an area in the exhibit area, where we recreated the little corner of what the old Senate [Chamber] looked like. We took a desk from the Old Senate Chamber and gave it to the senator to use during that time period.

The title of the exhibit was “A Necessary Fence: The Senate’s First Century.” We were really focusing on the Senate and what makes it unique compared to the House of Representatives. We felt we’d focus on the first 100 years because we really had the documents, we had so many 19th-century paintings and sculpture that could compliment the story. The idea of a necessary fence is, that is something that James Madison at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 talked about. He said that the Senate was a “necessary fence” to protect the people from some of their own foibles, so that they would be able to moderate. The House was being elected, of course, by direct election by the public. The Senate was, of course, being elected by the state legislatures. Jim Ketchum came up with that title. We also created a small booklet that went along with it. It was up for a period of time. I never, during that point, had gotten very stressed about things, but I still remember one night being with my then boyfriend, now my husband, having a panic attack. I didn’t even know what was happening. He’s like, “Take this brown bag and just breathe into it! Breathe into it!” The exhibit, I think, was opening in a couple of days. Staples and Charles were concerned, they were used to this type of last minute. But we wanted to be sure everything was perfect. And it was a great success.

HOLT: Ultimately a one off—I don’t think they’ve gotten permission to do anything like that since.

SKVARLA: Nothing has ever occurred there.

HOLT: I guess we need another bicentennial anniversary. (laughs)

SKVARLA: We also did, during that time, which was really exciting, a play that we had produced in the Old Senate Chamber. It was called “In This Chamber.” Leslie Jacobson was a playwright, and also a director, that we were familiar with. Speaking of women, she was a woman who came in and worked with us, along with Staples and Charles—Barbara Charles was

instrumental in leading me through, navigating through the exhibit process. The play was actually in the Old Senate Chamber. We allowed people to sit in the reproduction desks in the Old Senate Chamber and also in the galleries. You really, for the first time, had a wonderful sense of what that room would have been like full with people. Some of the desks were reserved for the actors. One actor played Henry Clay, another one played Daniel Webster. You had another playing the vice president. It was based not only on what those individuals said in the chamber, but on the writings of Isaac Bassett. Isaac Bassett was an employee of the Senate who started out as a page, worked here for something like 65 years, his tenure, and he wrote a diary that we have in the Senate collection. He planned to have it published when he died, or just before he died, but it never happened. His writings really were the structure around which this play was written. But we also used the writings—I had done research on a lot of women commentators during the 19th century—Margaret Bayard Smith, Emily [Edson Briggs]—I can't remember the last name of her but—(long pause)

HOLT: I should know too, but—(laughs)

SKVARLA: Anyway, a lot of the different writings from women. We actually had one of those [women] represented in a crinoline skirt up in the gallery, the way women would have viewed the Senate during the time. That was another huge monumental project and a great success.

I think it took Jim Ketchum for a little bit of a shock that it was right at that time, a few months later after all of this was said and done, that I told him that I thought I would take leave of the Senate.

HOLT: I was about to ask you. What drew you away from the Senate?

SKVARLA: I never had a break from school. I went right from school to doing my summer internship with, like, two days of break, went right into the office. I had grown up in England and I felt really strongly that I wanted to go back to England and work with horses. As I said, equestrian is my first love, specifically dressage. So I decided I would go back to England and work there and see if I could make a career out of teaching riding and competing and that type of thing. I went over to England for a year. It was a wonderful experience. It was hard work physically. Little did I know that having sat in an office for 11 years I wasn't really prepared to be working out in the field with the horses, only getting one and a half days off, hardly—actually one day off a week. But it was a great, great experience. Then I traveled around Europe afterwards, with the idea that I would come back to America and start working in some capacity in the horse world. And I did. I got a job at a private school up in Maryland teaching equestrian. After three months I said to myself, "This is not what I want to do." It just was not—it wasn't fun, I was not happy, and I realized that what I really wanted was to go back to the museum field and to have horses as my other passion on the side. Make enough money so that I could have a horse. One of the things of being in the equestrian world is you don't make that much money,

you work long hours, and you don't necessarily have the time for your own horse. You're helping other people.

So I started looking for a position and I got a position as the arts director at the University of Maryland University College. They had a very contemporary collection of Maryland artists. It was fun to curate. They didn't have much documentation of the objects, so I put my registrarial hat on and photographed them and documented them. I was pretty much a one person show there. I was there for about 18 months and everything was fine. I can't say it was perfect but I knew it was sort of a stepping stone to where I was going to go next. I was starting to ride more on the side.

Jim Ketchum called me one day and said, "How's it going?" I said, "You know, okay." He said, "Why don't you come in for lunch and let's just talk and see how things are going." When I came in for lunch, he basically said that he wanted to retire and would I be interested in coming back to the Senate. It didn't take me too long to decide yes. It was almost four years to the day that I returned to the Senate. About four months later Jim retired.

HOLT: Did you return with the understanding that you would then take his position?

SKVARLA: Yes.

HOLT: Was that ability to be informal about—was that standard at the time? Like, "I already know you, this would be great if you came back?" Or was it a more formal process that took place after that?

SKVARLA: I needed to have an interview with Martha Pope, who was the secretary [of the Senate] at that time, but Jim pretty much supported me. By the time Jim left, Sheila Burke was the secretary of the Senate and I think he just went to Sheila and said, "Diane has 11 years, she is the most appropriate person." At that point the office had expanded from three to five. Now it's 10, so it's continued to expand as our responsibilities have expanded. But I think it was partially that the secretaries really respected Jim, and at that point they took his recommendation. The position was never advertised, it was pretty much that I moved right into Jim's spot when he left.

HOLT: What kind of goals did you have for the office or yourself when you took over office?

SKVARLA: When I took over the office, what had been happening in the four years I had been gone, and also in the years when I had been there, was an effort to continue to professionalize the office. When I first got there the office had only been in existence for 11 years. There was still a lot to do. The way the office came about, and in fact it is appropriate to be having this interview now, in October 2018, because it's the 50th anniversary of the Senate

Curator's Office and the Senate Commission on Art. It came into existence because Mike Mansfield saw that there were wonderful paintings and sculpture in the building when he was Democratic leader here on the Senate side, from Montana. He knew what was happening and what had happened at the White House in the Kennedy administration. He was excited about that and thought that we needed to care for the artwork here in the Capitol. He tried twice to have legislation introduced both in the Senate and also in the House that would create a Capitol curator. But it failed both times in the House. There had been a Capitol curator, but that position under the Architect [of the Capitol] had become defunct in the 1930s. There had been nobody since that time. There literally were paintings falling off the wall. Mike Mansfield said to heck with that, we are going to form our own curator's office. It actually was initially called the Senate Commission on Art and Antiquities. We changed that. I can't remember exactly when it was changed, but the reason being was we don't really have true antiquities in the sense here in this country. So it's now just the Senate Commission on Art.

When I came back, the commission at that point and the Curator's Office had been in existence for maybe 20 years, not even actually, 15 years or so. There was still a lot to do. Basically what had come under the jurisdiction of the Architect was now under our responsibility. Yes, we were able to get some of the records that the Architect had, but we had so much research of the objects to do, we had so much documentation [to do]. We really focused on the care, the preservation—and that's part of the mandate of the office—care, preservation, protection of the artwork and historic objects in the Capitol, as well as distinct architectural features, as well as some of the historic rooms that are under the responsibility of the commission. That included everything from making sure they were all registered in terms of museum standards, creating a museum standard database—that we really didn't have. We had a very simplified database but we needed to be able to make it more sophisticated now as the computer generation was much more sophisticated. We had to create the databases, we had to photograph the objects, measure the objects. We worked to get better storage, to get temperature and humidity controlled storage, first in the Capitol. Later, we were able to get it for a large offsite space. When the Capitol Visitor Center was built, we have storage space in there. We were really trying to care for the objects.

We also started looking at the objects themselves on display. Some of them we moved because they were in areas where visitors would touch them. We'd first try the first approach, put a stanchion around it. If that didn't work, we maybe had a couple other approaches. The Senate never wanted us to put a "do not touch" sign on the artwork. There is some now in certain places in the Capitol, but they were very hesitant to put a sign saying that. So we had to be creative in how we protected it. Sometimes we would move it. Sometimes we would put it in a plexi vitrine. Sometimes we'd put the painting actually behind plexiglass. So there were different ways. Sometimes we would put an exhibit panel in front of the painting so that people wouldn't get too close to it, as a way to back them off. We looked at all of those things.

We also had to do surveys of the condition of all of the paintings, the condition of the sculptures, the condition of the frames, the condition of the mirrors, the condition of the furniture. Those condition surveys then led us to recognize how we could prioritize the actual conservation. Then we started with the conservation. Slowly but surely, picking certain objects, any given year that we felt needed to have work done on them.

HOLT: All of this meant, you said the office expanded in the number of people. I imagine that all of this cost money. What was that process like being head of the office and trying to secure all of the necessary funding?

SKVARLA: One good thing with this position, throughout my tenure, I always was thankful that I didn't have to actually fundraise. Because so many of my friends working in other museums or in other historic houses, they started having to become responsible for that and it's a huge burden, a lot of work, and it's stressful. We were very lucky in that Joe Stewart [Secretary of the Senate], in his wise wisdom, realized that there was not enough money to do conservation. Five thousand dollars isn't going to conserve a piece of artwork, and not by the best conservators that we wanted to use. These were priceless artifacts of the nation's heritage. What Joe was able to do through legislation, and it needs to be renewed every year, but it's something that we call the Senate Collection Fund. What that is, is that money from unexpended secretary [of the Senate] funds—at the end of the year the secretary will always have some money that hasn't been spent. Most secretaries will often leave \$300,000 to \$400,000 not spent because there is often outstanding bills, and the last thing that they want is to have bills coming in that nobody had quite recognized were there and suddenly there's no budget. That's a huge legislative issue.

The unexpected money is put in a holding pattern for two years, basically as any last minute bills come in. The policy had been that once that was done, that money would return to the Treasury. Joe was able to set it up that that money would come into the Senate Collection Fund, and it was that money that we specifically, through legislation, could use for conservation, preservation, or documentation, I think is how it says. We were very lucky we had that money coming in. It's always an uncertain source of revenue, hopefully it will continue. When Nancy Erickson was secretary and we talked a lot about the funding, because we had done some major conservation and there is always a concern about how much money we're spending, we came up with a plan, she came up with a plan, which was fine, which was that we would try to keep a certain amount of money always in a holding pattern. I think it might be about \$2 million for example, but that any new money that came in in a given year, so say that year \$300 or \$400 was transferred in, that's how much money I could spend on conservation. It doesn't mean I spent it, but it allowed me to plan ahead on conservation.

People don't realize how much work goes into conservation. How much education the conservators have. They go to graduate school, they have master's and PhD's, that's the type of individual we want working on our artwork. One of the things I did to try to help the secretaries

understand what we were spending our money on was we would have them see the actual conservation work. Sometimes we would have them go to a local studio if something was being conserved locally, or have them come on site. Suddenly, when Gary Sisco, when he was secretary, was sort of saying, “Wow, it’s this much money to clean a piece of sculpture? Can’t we just sort of wipe it off?” Suddenly we bring him to the conservator with their little q-tips as they’re slowly taking the nicotine stain off the marble, or the oil from hands of people touching it, it really makes them appreciate the work that needs to be done.

So funding for that type of work was somewhat limited to us, but on the other hand it was a known quantity and I could plan ahead. If there was an emergency like—well, they didn’t have the collection fund when the 1983 bombing—but in something like that, the Senate would appropriate money if need be.

HOLT: In the 1990s, more women members of the Senate are finally entering. You are taking over a very important position in the Senate. Did you have thoughts about what this influx of women into the institution meant to you in the 1990s when you became curator?

SKVARLA: It was definitely—having more women was sort of comforting in a way, because you would see them around the hallways. There was starting to be more women directors under the secretary of the Senate. So that when you saw them at parties, you started feeling that it wasn’t always trying to deal with male directors, but now we had female directors in there. Our office has always, except in the very early years when there were two men and one woman—which was me—started to have primarily more women than men. It wasn’t because I necessarily was looking for that, but there were more women in the museum field than there were necessarily males coming through with master’s with museum studies or art history or whatever we were looking for. I felt that it was important for the women in my office to try to give them as rounded an experience as possible, to really support them in what they were doing. But I would also say I did it for the men in the office, so I’m not sure that it’s always something that’s gender specific. But you do realize that having women in the office, there is often a certain relationship that you have that’s different than with a male colleague or a male employee. I did feel that that was, just as I said, you get a stronger sense of the female presence in the Senate. Certainly having more women senators just made you feel more comfortable in the institution. You sort of felt like it was a white male dominated institution.

HOLT: Did that make you feel like you had a responsibility for mentorship?

SKVARLA: In some ways, yes. I have to say, it continued, especially as I gained experience. At first you are just thrown into this management job, so you’re really not sure what you’re supposed to be doing. Then you start taking some classes—the education department under the sergeant at arms, I’d take different management classes. Or you’d have some of the different ones, like sexual harassment classes or other things that you went to that made me realize that I needed to be responsible for that, for the women in the office in terms of where they

were going, making sure that there wasn't any, whether it was sexual harassment issues or any others, that they were dealing with. What I found, which was interesting, with both male and female, was that, and it was interesting because I thought it would just be the women in the office, but that we were a flexible office. When somebody in the office would come to me, say the women in the office would come to me and say, "My daughter, I'm putting her in daycare but I need to leave a little bit early on these days, but I'll work late days on this, can I do that?" I'd be, "Fine, not a problem." Then it was sort of surprising, it was refreshing, when the men in the office came to me and said, "My wife is going to work but I'd like to drop my daughter off at school, so can I come in later, or can I come in earlier?" and that was fine. I think everyone felt that we could be—it might have been something that might have been a traditional female role but now you were seeing that it was also being taken over by the males.

HOLT: The sensitivity of that work-life balance became broader, not just specifically to women in the work place.

SKVARLA: Completely, yes, absolutely. Then once I was planning on leaving, I'm very proud to say there is now another woman as curator of the Senate, Melinda Smith. Melinda I certainly felt strongly during my last couple of years of mentoring her. She didn't know that I was necessarily thinking of leaving, and I wasn't sure when I was exactly going to leave, but I realized that I needed to be thinking about who was second in line and Melinda seemed to fit the bill a lot. So I started bringing her more to the management meetings, or secretary's meetings—although I try to do this with everybody—she was definitely more of my right-hand person.

HOLT: After Joe Stewart, I think all the secretaries of the Senate—you mentioned Gary Sisco—

SKVARLA: There was also Kelly Johnston.

HOLT: Okay. Was there any difference in managerial style between the men secretaries of the Senate versus the women secretaries of the Senate?

SKVARLA: I'd say that all were interested in the artwork, but I think, and it may be just specifically for those secretaries, but Emily Reynolds and Nancy Erickson definitely took an added interest in the office. I don't know if it was because they were women, I don't know if it was because of their interests, but they definitely wanted to know more about what was going on and would have more specific questions for me regarding it. Not necessarily questioning anything, but just an interest in it. The other secretaries were very busy and so maybe just didn't have enough time to always, you know, if I said, "Would you want to come to this conservator's studio?" they wouldn't necessarily take me up on it as much. I do feel that, I know Sharon Zelaska, who was the assistant secretary, was extremely helpful to me. So it wasn't just the secretaries, past assistant secretaries, Sheila Dwyer and Mary Jones, were all very important to helping the office.

HOLT: Generally speaking, whenever there is a change in leadership, was that a stressful event when a new secretary was coming in? How did you prepare for that when that inevitability happened?

SKVARLA: Sometimes it was good, sometimes you felt like, okay, it's time for something new and maybe I can move a couple of projects forward that maybe the last secretary wasn't as enthusiastic about. But I felt that it was stressful for our whole office, not just because of the secretary but because it would mean a change in who was the leader. So suddenly you might have a senator gone and a new Republican leader or Democratic leader and we'd have to get artwork for them, because that was one of the responsibilities that we did. Or they were changing the way their office looked. We don't have a lot of extra artwork in our storage, so a lot of times a senator might be very interested in a certain individual. Like Senator McConnell is very interested in Henry Clay, so he said, "Is there a possibility of getting a Henry Clay painting in my office?" We would work with the National Portrait Gallery or others. We probably have about 60 works of art on loan from other museums that people don't realize. It was often a scramble because the secretary or the senator was there to the very end of December, if not beginning of January, and literally you had a day or two to switch everything over to the new one who was coming in.

I have to say the transition from Nancy Erickson to becoming secretary was probably the smoothest for us because she had been in Senator [Tom] Daschle's office and we had known her very closely, and then also with Senator [Harry] Reid she had been the liaison with the Senate Commission on Art. In fact, I remember at the first staff meeting she had she looked around and she said, "Well, I know one person in here and that's Diane Skvarla," because we had worked so closely together. I think she knew some others but not in such a close capacity.

HOLT: Was there ever a time when you thought being a woman in your position put you at a disadvantage in your leadership role?

SKVARLA: Once I became curator I suddenly found that if I asked for something to be done, it was done. I feel like I'm not sure it was gender specific as it was now being director and curator. I did feel that I always had to prove myself, but I think that anybody in a new position as a director in a department, or working with new staff members, has to prove themselves. I do think I had a little bit of an easier time, maybe, I'm not sure, but because I'm in the art field and not in the political arena, those individuals, whether I was going to Rules Committee or I was going to Senate leadership, didn't know very much about art. They basically had to recognize that I was the authority. But I did feel that at times when they did question it, and in a way that, were they questioning it because I was a woman? Maybe. Would they have questioned Jim Ketchum on that? I'm not so sure that they would have.

I did do something. The one thing I did, which I felt was important to have, was to start having a backup of other experts, so that I could go to the senator and I could say, "Okay, this is

this. We've also talked to the National Gallery of Art and this is their recommendation, too." One of the things we worked for, and initially it started as just ad hoc advisory boards, for different portrait commissions we might have been doing or different conservation projects. We actually, through legislation, now have the Senate Curatorial Advisory Board. This was, I think personally, it was a smart move. It was smart because each senator on the Commission on Art—and the commission is composed of the Republican and Democratic leaders, the chairman of the Rules Committee and ranking member of the Rules Committee, and the president pro tem. We allowed each of them to select one individual from their home state so that they would represent them on the curatorial advisory board. The secretary then selected about four other individuals on the advisory board who I recommended, specifically because I wanted to be sure we had a conservator on that board, I wanted to be sure we had a decorative arts curator, and maybe another two positions, a preservationist, since we had become more involved in some of the preservation at that time. So that when I went to the commission staff or a member of the commission and said, "This is what we're doing," I would have not only myself but now the backup of the curatorial advisory board. I think, again going back to your question, I think that was a little bit my recognition that maybe they didn't always look to me as the authority. Was it because I was a woman? Was it because I was younger? Was it because I was new in the position initially? I'm not sure.

HOLT: Can you think of a specific example where having that board got a project over the top that might not have otherwise?

SKVARLA: There's definitely those. I think for example, this didn't relate directly to us, but we worked very closely in the last years with the Architect of the Capitol in some of the conservation of the frescoes in the building. It's not our direct responsibility, but it's our responsibility in the sense that we are caretakers of anything that's historic on the Senate side of the Capitol. We wanted to be sure that everything was being followed well. There was real hesitation, having talked to the curator for the Architect, of getting the necessary funding that was needed. We had meetings with the Commission on Art staff, with the advisory board, to be able to show them this is very important and we need the money to be able to do it, we need the support to be able to do it. We need to be able to put scaffolding up year round to get this project done. They definitely were important on that. Would it have happened without them? Maybe, but it was not going to be in a timely fashion, that's for sure.

If a senator has selected somebody to be on the advisory board and that advisory member, when we ask them, "Can you call the senator and put a plug in for it?" and they did, things moved for sure.

HOLT: What was your relationship like in general with the Architect of the Capitol?

SKVARLA: It could be confrontational at times. This was something that I think I got a reputation a little bit as being a bit hard-nosed on things. But I felt like I needed to do that at

times. It was at times when I felt that this is what needed to be done and I was going to fight for it if it needed to be fought for. If I lost the battle, well I lost the battle. I can think of two instances. One was when Senator [Robert] Dole rightly said we need a ramp in the Old Senate Chamber. When you first came into the Old Senate Chamber, the way it was restored in 1976, you had to go up two steps to then be able to go in and see and have the full experience of the room. Senator Dole said, "Can we have a ramp put in?" [We] worked with the Architect, and the head architect at that time said, "We can put a ramp in. It's going to end right at the dais, Diane. That's what the ADA requirements are." He was adamant about that. I said, "It can't end that close to the furniture. We shouldn't be changing and modifying this room." Our office goes running back looking up all the regulations for it. Well, there are exceptions for historical buildings, and the exception was that you could have a slightly steeper ramp. We could have a steeper ramp so that it ended where I wanted it to end. You would then have to take down the rope to allow the wheel chair to turn around on the flat, because you needed a flat surface for a wheelchair, or anybody else who might need a ramp to get up. That was finally decided on, but it was some rather tense moments working with the Architect staff.

Another instance was, one of the great things about our office is that we're located on the fourth floor of the Capitol. Really, there's been times when, for example, the Historical Office had been in the Capitol and moved to the Hart Building. Well, that wasn't—I'm sure it was sad leaving the Capitol, but we really needed to be in the Capitol because we needed to walk around and see what was going on. One day I walked past a small, what we call hideaway office. I'm not sure if that's the correct term still, a small office that a senator had, and I saw that there was blue tape on the wall. I thought, "Ok, what's that for?" And it was in the most historic part of the building, 1800 original, original part of the building. I find out that they're going to channel into the wall, into the historic wall, because the senator wants to have picture lights on the pictures in his hideaway office. So I go to the Architect and I said, "Noooo." They were like, "Absolutely. This is what the senator wants." They're going on and on. I said, "There are battery operated picture lights. Could we not have a battery operated picture light?" "Ohhhh, of course, yes!" That was an easy sell. But again, it was those types of things where you just, a little bit of education and a little bit of being adamant about it that got it done. The last thing we wanted was them to start drilling into all the historic walls. Before you knew it there would be less and less of the original fabric of the building.

HOLT: That's amazing. You talked a little bit about restoration of the Old Senate Chamber. The Old Senate Chamber had been restored before you came to the Senate, completed around 1976. But you had to kind of go back and look at that one again. Can you talk a little about that process?

SKVARLA: That was a great project. I'm very proud of it. It was in 2011 or 2012, somewhere in there, just before I left. What happened was, over the years the east wall of that Chamber had always had water damage. We had fought it in terms of trying to change the actual

roofing outside. It's because as they attached the east front onto the old historic building, there had been areas where water could seep through. There was one time when snow built up, we didn't get back—the Capitol was closed for days—and by the time we got back water was pouring down the wall. The drapery had been compromised so many times from 1976. The wall, the paint was peeling and was looking bad. That Chamber is a historic room that people can see, but it's also used when there are secret sessions of the Senate—the Senate will actually meet in there because you can really lock it down. There's no electronic devices, it's very secure, it's not a SCIF [sensitive compartmented information facility] room but it's very secure. It's also used—this tradition started years ago—for a mock swearing in of the senators. After they are sworn in in the Chamber, they have it done again for picture taking opportunity with their family and the vice president. So we wanted that room to always look pristine. Of course, you want it to anyway for the public.

We talked about it and we decided that it definitely needed to be done. We worked with the Architect, we were setting up a time to do it. We were going to take down the draperies, we were going to see if they could be reused. If not we were going to start thinking about how to put new draperies up. We were going to take the portrait of George Washington by Rembrandt Peale and have it conserved—it had not been conserved in years and years. That was a huge project, both the frame and the painting. We were also going to take the eagle and shield down and have it conserved. We had to put scaffolding up there in order for the painters to start their work. And it was lead paint, so it was all going to have to be contained. It was going to be a big project and we were going to have to move things.

I started thinking about it, and everything sort of happened quickly, because you don't know when you can get into the schedule of the Architect versus the other work they're doing. I thought, "Let's do some paint analysis." There was never any paint analysis of the Old Senate or the Old Supreme Court Chamber in 1975/1976 because they just didn't do much paint analysis then. We knew that the area, that east front area and the dome area, had been changed about 1900. We knew that we weren't going to find any colors earlier than that. But the hope would be that if you got a color from the 1900s, if you could find it, it hopefully would have been something that would have been about, maybe had been the same or similar to the 1860s. You know, they didn't change paint colors every year, for sure. But what happened in the restoration of those rooms in 1976 is they took everything down to the brick in many, many places. So you no longer had the deteriorating plaster, but you also no longer had the paint layers in front to tell you the colors. Working with the Architect's architectural historian, he thought that there were a couple places where there might be original color still. So we got a conservator up there, before the project began—the scaffolding was now up, the project was about to begin—and lo and behold, we found some different colors. That room had always bothered me, and also Latrobe scholars who came in. All of the coffered area was highly gilded, it was a little bit in your face, it had some salmon colors. It just didn't seem to work well together. Suddenly what we found was a more monochromatic scheme to the walls. We looked on the walls also lower down and we

were able to document the different layers. The conservator can literally go down layer by layer by layer and show you the different layers as he goes down to the very first layer. Selecting what's the right layer that would have gone with the ceiling was going to be problematic, except that we found some research that told us, believe it or not, that the Supreme Court, which had moved into that room after the Senate left, had at one point painted the room a turquoise color. We had actually found that turquoise color, so we knew everything after that color was going to be after 1860 or the 1870s. It helped us date where we were going to select the different colors for the walls.

I went to Nancy Erickson and I said, "What do you think? Do you think we can do something?" Initially I thought, "I know this is a last-minute project. If we just start on this one side, maybe it's a start and we can down the road sell it on the ceiling." She, wonderful Nancy, said, "Why don't we do the whole room?" I said, "Do you think we really can?" She said, "Let's go for it." We got the commission staff, we showed them what we had, and they said go ahead and do it. It meant closing down the room for about six to nine months to do it. Now we needed a whole different scaffolding, and of course, we had to work with the Architect people. They were wonderful, I have to say. There's times when you want to use a professional to do certain things, but in terms of once we came up with the color scheme, we worked with the painters in the paint shop, and there were also areas where we needed what had been at one point original marble but then had been later on removed. We needed them to make it look like marble again. They had done it in 1976 but it was yellow, it was garish, it didn't even look like marble. They did an amazing job. Now when you go into the room, when you look up you think it's marble. So we did the whole ceiling. At the same time, Scott Strong in the office was doing research on the fabric. I still remember the curatorial advisory board, several of their members, coming in and helping us with the fabric. I remember one of them saying, "I hate to say this, Diane, but it's the wrong color fabric for the period, it's the wrong texture for the period, and it's the wrong pattern for the period. It's even wrong the way it's hung." I said, "So everything is wrong!" They said, "Yes."

We threw that out and we worked with Winterthur Museum, as well as some of the Curatorial Advisory Board. We knew it was red silk damask. We actually found a place in Pennsylvania that had a pattern that would have been appropriate. It wasn't actually from the Capitol but was from the period of 1860, which is pretty much the way we've restored that room, to the 1850–60 period. It looks totally different. We couldn't have 100 percent silk because it's not made 100 percent silk in this country, but it's partially silk and looks more correct. The hanging, which had been so pristine with every fold perfect, the way it was done in 1976—suddenly we are looking at research and that's not how it would have been. In fact, they would have taken the drapery down once or twice a year, dusted it out and rehung it. They sort of looped it over a rod. So when we were rehunging it I still remember looking at it and telling—The conservators were there and everybody—"Could we make that look a little more symmetrical?" "No, Diane! It's supposed to look a little bit haphazard." We also changed the

way the baldachino, the dais over the vice president's desk, was. Again, we had more documentation. They did that 1976 restoration, '75-76, of the Old Court and the Old Senate in literally 18 months. The research, everything. There was no way they could have gotten everything right. They did a great job, but since that time we've found more engravings, more documentation, that tells us more the way the room looks. We don't have a lot for either room, but it was enough to make us realize that that baldachino was incorrect. It wasn't supposed to look like some throne for the vice president. That's the last thing they would have wanted. Rather, it was to drape the windows behind and just accentuate that space, but not necessarily be this throne-like structure.

HOLT: I have to ask, did you have to break the news to Jim Ketchum about all this? That you were doing this? How did he take it?

SKVARLA: Jim was fine. One of Jim's strengths, and he was so responsible for that, was that he recognizes, just as any historian or curator will recognize, you get more information. And if you have the opportunity to change this—there are still some things in that room we'd like to change. Do they make a huge difference to the interpretation? Not as much as the colors did. More recently—it was begun before I left but it was finished after I left—we changed the seating, the color of the leather seats that the senators sat in. It's a cushion and the documentation showed—again, we went back through so many records—documentation shows, in 1976 they knew that it would have been red Moroccan leather, but for some reason they decided it should be yellow Naugahyde—Naugahyde probably because it was cheaper, the yellow because they wanted it to match the star carpet, the pattern on the floor. They just thought that would look nicer. But actually the red looks better because it goes better with the mahogany and with now the more monochromatic way the room looks. Now when you go into that room and you look at the ceiling, what had been gilded coffered rosettes that stood out, now they look like an actual stone carved ceiling, which is exactly what Latrobe meant to have.

HOLT: That's fascinating. Also in your tenure that must have taken up a lot of time was when the Capitol Visitor Center was being constructed. Now with your museum studies background, you get to help open an exhibit, Exhibition Hall. What was that process like?

SKVARLA: It was a lot of meetings—lots and lots of meetings. I think because, initially, they didn't have the designers in right away, which was fine. You wanted to define—we knew the space area, and we were just meeting with individuals from the National Archives, the Library of Congress, there was the House historian and curator, the Senate historian and curator, the Architect's curator. We were all trying to meet to see what documents we had, how best to tell this story, how far up into the current Senate history we were going to go. I feel like it was a real learning curve. I know that they are now looking at reinterpreting and redesigning the space, which I think is great. That had always been the plan, to do it after a certain amount of years. I think it's going to change, and I hope it's going to change, given the way people now learn, and

given what worked and what didn't work. I think what was hard was that the lighting in certain areas is on the lower end because we have original documents. It is a lot of work for the Capitol Visitor Center staff to change out those documents. On the other hand, in that one section where there's original documents, that section allows people to keep coming back and seeing something new versus the rest of the exhibit. As an exhibit person and having learned a lot from exhibits, I personally still think there's too much text. I hope that they will reduce the text. They did try to do it size-wise, so that that would affect it. I think that's important, but I still think that if somebody comes up to a panel and there is a lot of text, they tend to be turned away a little bit more. Hopefully they'll streamline that, but that's a learning curve.

But it was a very exciting time. It was exciting because you were also working with all of these new offices that maybe you'd worked with but not in such a close capacity.

HOLT: How was it deciding which artifacts that you were going to put on display on the permanent side? The Senate has this great collection and you have to think, what are the stars of the show that we are going to put out there? How did that go?

SKVARLA: Part of it was dictated by the size of the exhibit cases. Nothing that was large was going to be necessarily going in there. A senator's desk wasn't going to go on display there, for example, just because they are being used. There were some things that we definitely wanted to have to tell a story. I think the story of Isaac Bassett, for example, is just a wonderful story. I think the thing you learn about doing exhibits, or the thing you learn as you take people on tours, is that what people want to know is that history is about individuals. If you can get them to connect with that individual and tell that story, it stays with them and resonates with them more than ever, more than just some sort of—the 1850 Compromise, for example. Break it down to Henry Clay and what he sacrificed in terms of that compromise. With Isaac Bassett, what you have is an individual who loved this institution, who started as a page and went on to become the assistant doorkeeper, who saved things. We have his snuffbox, we have his cane, we have other memorabilia of his. We have his diary. You are able to tell that story—and his portrait that's on display there—I think you are able to tell that story that starts making people realize, “Wow, this is a person who really recognized the importance of this institution and saved those artifacts for future generations.”

HOLT: Also that the Senate is made up of more than just the senators, right?

SKVARLA: I think the people and other events that people don't realize, whether it's funerals that were shown, whether it's inaugurations that were shown, or other things that go on in this building that I think are important to understand, absolutely.

HOLT: Any other projects from your time as curator that you wanted to share with us?

SKVARLA: I guess our *Catalogue of Fine Art* was something that really took up a lot of time. In fact, I have to say, when I came back to the Senate and Mary Phelan, as I said, was pregnant and was going to have her first child, Mary was madly working on the catalogue. The catalogue at that point was going to be very brief, black and white documentation of the picture and as much as we knew about the object and that would be it. She was doing these entries. She actually was working on that the weekend before she had her daughter, Julia. We sort of date the catalogue a little bit from Julia. She was growing up and we continued to try to actually get it published. As we moved through the process we realized, boy, we need to say a little bit more. We need to show secondary pictures. Okay, so you have this portrait of this senator, but now we find a photograph showing the artist painting the senator. We need to include that. Or we find something else related to the commissioning or the acquisition or where it used to hang, those types of thing. Suddenly this small little black and white 100-page document suddenly becomes a 300-page color giant publication, which we can only really work on in our spare time, because of all the other things that we were doing. So that was a labor of love for both myself and the entire office. We did hire Bill Kloss, who was a historian, an art historian, who worked on some of the catalogues for the White House. Also an editor to help us just sort of pull the whole thing together, because we decided Bill could write some of the entries, I would write some of the entries, some of the entries were still based on what Mary had written, so it was pulling everything together. That's a great document, I feel, and something that will have a lasting history in the office.

After that we did what we've called the graphic art catalogue, which we did in the same format as the fine art catalogue. Same size, different design, but it was highlighting all of the black and white as well as color engravings that we have in the collection. We have thousands that we've collected that show room views, that show political cartoons, that show individual portraits of senators—you name it. Stereographs. One thing I sort of regret, but did not have the energy during my last years, is to do a decorative art catalogue. In fact, I always sort of thought the first catalog is red, the second catalog is blue, and I thought the other one should be white, so it was a red, white and blue compendium of all the artwork on the Senate side of the Capitol. That was something that we really worked hard on.

We did another large publication, in fact it was printed just after I left, on a reinterpretation and new findings on Constantino Brumidi. We had had some wonderful, wonderful new sketches that came into the collection that I'm proud to say—again, some of these things take years in the making. I remember contacting the family—I knew that they had the sketches and I contacted them, put a little bug in their ear. “Would you be interested in donating those or giving those, however it might happen, to the Senate?” We finally did acquire them. It was down the road after the father had died and the children had decided that it would be more appropriate to bring those back to the Capitol. These are sketches that Constantino Brumidi, who did the frescoes, the great fresco in the Rotunda and also the Brumidi corridors and elsewhere. He would have painted them as sketches before he would have done his actual

fresco. So you have the small oil sketch, [which] gets approved by Montgomery Meigs, the chief engineer at that time of the construction of the wings on the Capitol. Then he would paint his fresco. Those are now in the collection. That was something that we included in this Brumidi catalogue. We also included things like new findings. Amy Burton in the office, the assistant curator, did a lot of research. Unbelievably, as things were conserved, the new colors of the birds underneath were actually found. Amy was able to identify so many new birds. She was able to identify the source of where Brumidi got those sketches, those images. Just all that wonderful new information, we were able to do a small publication.

To go back to acquisitions, acquisitions were always the fun part in some ways. I still remember, I think it was actually through the Historical Office initially, we heard there was a large scale painting of Henry Clay. I thought, “Ok, we have a lot of Henry Clay.” It was actually the Jell-O Museum—believe it or not there is a museum on Jell-O in LeRoy, New York—and through the Historical Office I talked to them and said, “Do you have an image of it?” They said, “We can get you one.” Little did I know that they were going to take the large painting, take it outside, prop it against a truck, and take a photograph. Besides that, we got an image of it and suddenly the whole project turned into something just magical, because it was Henry Clay in the Old Senate Chamber. We only know of three images of Henry Clay in that chamber. There are very, very few images and this would have been a huge coup for us. They were willing to give it to us, but the cost to conserve it—it had been in their basement. It was covered in bird poop, had oil stains, tears in it, paint was flaking off. It had hung in a gym, a big hall in a school at one point, a private school, and they had actually hit basketballs against it, so we had the concentric marks in the actual painting. We had a conservator look at it up there. They said it could be done but it was going to be a major conservation. The frame looked terrible. It was gray and horrible. Well, it’s actually amazing Honduras wood, carved by a New York frame maker about 1860, and is just [spectacular], now that it is conserved. It hangs in a stairwell in the Senate, and it’s just a masterpiece. So something that I didn’t think was going to be much ended up to be a major project for us, but something that was well worth it.

Another time was a project that was not so good, in the sense that we were looking for some furniture to come back to the Old Supreme Court Chamber. We are always doing research. A lot of this furniture left the Court at different times, when the Court actually sold it, a lot of these things. Finally, through documentation, through the Architect, we found these pieces, two pieces that still exist, a rolltop desk and a breakfront bookcase. Absolutely from the period, about 1820 period. I call the one woman and she says, “You’ll be so pleased, we just had it refinished.” It was just like my whole face dropped. Because refinishing is not conservation. It had basically been stripped. It was disappointing that way, but we were able to get the pieces. We were able through our conservator to find some original finish still left in little areas and so we were able to restore it back to what—we were able to replicate the finish. We can’t restore the original once it’s gone.

Those were sort of disappointments, but there were so many wonderful stories. This last one I'll tell you is that just before I left, I knew of this pencil sketch that was, again, in a private collection. I thought, "You know, why not call them?" I called the individual after a lot of searching. The very first thing he said was, "It's not for sale." I said, "No, I'm just doing some research," which was true. I said, "We have that fresco in our collection, it's on the walls here in the Senate." After 45 minutes of talking he said, "So do you want to buy it?" Just out of the blue. He said, "I'll sell it to you for \$2000." I said, "Whoa, wait!" Because actually it was probably worth more than that. I had just created a rapport with him and he was willing to finally sell it. That was an exciting acquisition by our office.

But there were always lots of things, whether it was that or whether it was foreign gifts. We haven't really talked about foreign gifts that came in. Those are gifts under the Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act. If a senator or a staff person travels abroad—it's mostly the gifts that are given to senators—travels abroad or a head of state comes to this country and gives a gift, it becomes the property of the United States government. It comes to us under the Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act. We might get 50 or 60 of these a year, so there's a lot coming in. We have somebody in the office who's responsible for that. They can run the gamut. They can be beautiful rugs from Afghanistan. They can be vases, they can be lapis lazuli carved stone—you name it. All sorts of things come in. They can also be coffee, they can be flowers, they can be cameras. What we do is we work with the senator's office. If they're those types of items, we tell them, let's donate them right away to a 401(c)(3) and they can do what they want with them, and usually they will. They will give them for charity or an auction or something like that. If they are perfume, we let them keep that, but if it's liquor, I'm afraid the secretary always felt strongly about not passing that on, so we actually would just dump it down the drain. Somebody in our office has to document—two people—that it's been dumped down the drain. We would also work with the senator's office, if it was a leader or somebody important to the Senate, when they left, we would want to keep one object. We have something from Senator Byrd, Senator Dole, Senator Mitchell, that's now permanently in the collection that we felt was unique. We have guidelines—they have to be unique to that country, they have to be an important individual senator who received them, they have to be well represented in terms of the craftsmanship—there's a whole series of guidelines that we have in terms of what we're going to take into the permanent collection.

Two of the more unusual ones: one was an elephant tusk, which of course was contraband, but the senator could not refuse it from the president from Chad. So we took it in and we had it for a long time in our storage area, which was not good because you don't want animal products in your storage space. Finally we decided after looking around, we gave it to the World Wildlife Fund as an educational tool. That worked out well. Then the other one I remember were Cuban cigars. Some of the senators had gone down to Cuba and Castro had actually given them a box that he had signed of Cuban cigars. We got those. What we wanted was to keep the box of the one that the senator received. It was actually a woman senator and she had decided that her

husband's box she wanted to purchase. So they were allowed to purchase through GSA at market value the—I don't know, I think the cigars were included in that one. Our box and some of the other ones, we ended up giving the cigars to the Cuban Interests Section, which is a group here in Washington working for democracy in Cuba. We just gave them the cigars. I don't know what they did with them. That was another unusual gift. You have to be creative in our responsibilities for the disposition of those objects.

HOLT: That's amazing.

SKVARLA: There was always something going on, which makes the office and our work exciting.

HOLT: As a way to sum up, what was your favorite thing about working at the Senate?

SKVARLA: I think the diversity of projects. For me, I love the museum field but I was never going to be a registrar, who systematically has to unpack and document every single object. That's just not my nature. While I love to do research, I like to do that as part of my work. I don't want to do just research. I found that I really enjoyed the diversity of things. What I found a little bit more challenging near the end was the constant administration responsibilities that you have. Those seem to get more, I don't know whether—yes there were nine other people in the office, but I don't know if that was because now suddenly you have different responsibilities that you have to think about. How are you going to evacuate these people out of the building? That's a problem that we need to consider. Whether it's raises and review process and that whole process. Also the process of working with the commission staff. For so many years there was a continuity here at the Senate. If the person might not have been at Rules Committee you would have known them from working in another office. There's a longevity that was here that I don't know it is as much prevalent. What I found over the years was that you had to reintroduce yourself every few, sometimes every two years, to a whole new commission staff, because maybe there weren't new leaders but there was a new ranking member at Rules Committee or a new chairman of Rules Committee. That started to take up more time. What I didn't like was the administrative aspect, but I did love the diversity of working on all these different projects and having a really great team of individuals who really put it out there to do the best that we could.

HOLT: Did I miss anything?

SKVARLA: I don't think so. I think the only other thing I was going to talk about a little bit to go back, is the challenge of 9/11.

HOLT: Oh, yes. That would be great to hear about.

SKVARLA: Since that was front and center for so many people. First of all, we are up on the fourth floor of the Capitol. When the first plane hit, I called the secretary's office and said, "What do we do? What are we doing?" And they said, "Just sit tight. You'll hear. Everybody will know what to do." We sat tight and I think I even called again and, "No, everything's fine." Then the plane hit the Pentagon next, and you could actually see the fire in the distance. I said, "Okay. That's it everybody, we're evacuating." As we evacuated, we went down to the third floor and there was nobody around. We get down to the second floor and there was nobody around. We went down to the first floor and finally there were a few people and the police officers says to us, "What took you so long?" I thought, "Okay, that's it. From now on I am just making a decision and we are going to be doing things. We are not ever waiting again." And we never did wait again. So we had that to deal with.

That was stressful. I came back the next day because they wanted people in the building. I asked the staff, because they didn't have to come back. It was very stressful knowing that the Capitol was probably going to be hit with the plane that went down in Pennsylvania.

Then we have anthrax in the Hart Building a few weeks later. Suddenly our office is working with the Coast Guard strike team, with the Environmental Protection Agency, plus we brought in people from the National Gallery, Library of Congress, and others, because what were we going to do with this artwork that was in these rooms next to where the anthrax was in Senator Daschle's office? The objects in Senator Daschle's office were probably going to be a lost cause, because they were so contaminated. It was the space around them, especially when they started talking about pumping chloride dioxide into the area, what was it going to do to these works? The problem was, so many of these artworks weren't under—we hadn't gotten them on loans, the senators' offices had gotten them on loans. Suddenly we are having to work with the Architect: "What offices? Where is the floorplan?" Then we are working with the individual senator's office: "Where do you think that artwork is? Who has that artwork?" "We don't know, everything is in our files." We are getting phone calls from different museums: "Our artwork's in there. What's happening?"

Basically, we had to set it up. We actually brought in art handlers to also work with the Coast Guard strike team, because they were the ones who went in in hazmat suits, took the artwork into a containment area. We then told them how to vacuum and dust it. It then went into a clean room to sit there. Then it was going to be tested. So this took a period of about a week or so. That was stressful. Then while that was all going on, we also, for those of us who lived in the area, we also had the sniper. For so long the stress on the staff was just—all the staff of the Senate, not just the Curator's Office—was immense, because I had always felt like, "Okay, I'm at work, I'm stressed here. We've just had a possible bombing, we've had anthrax, but at least I can go home and feel safe." No, I couldn't go home and feel safe. I lived near Laurel. The sniper shot somebody in Laurel. It was a stressful time. Some people ended up leaving the Senate. They just weren't able to handle that. One of the things you know about working at the Capitol

Building, or working on Capitol Hill, is that it is a target. Now our office, an individual, Rich Doerner, in the office was our evacuation monitor. We learned how to get out of the room, out of the space quickly. I worked with the secretary saying, “How are we supposed to be, on the fourth floor, to get out at the same time as somebody on the first floor?” What they did was they put these monitors on the wall for us so that if there is a code orange, which is what senators get when they start thinking about evacuating, we got code orange. Right away. Nobody else did except for the leadership. So that we would know, go down to the first floor and wait. It would at least give us a fighting chance to get out of the building.

That’s part of working in this building that you just have to deal with. It’s always exciting. You hope that, and I feel like part of our job, is educating, educating in terms of visitors who come, but educating the senators to recognize the importance of these works of art, of the history of what’s going on. Even though new ones come in, there’s an orientation with the historian and others trying to make them really realize they are part of the continuum of the history of this building, and you hope that they will continue to recognize that. Because that’s what makes it unique.

HOLT: That is a perfect note to end on. Thank you so much for this. This was wonderful.

[End of Interview]

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