



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH ANN GARGAN

October 11, 2005
Milton, Massachusetts

Interviewer
Stephen F. Knott

© 2015 The Miller Center Foundation and the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate

Publicly released transcripts of the Edward M. Kennedy Oral History Project are freely available for noncommercial use according to the Fair Use provisions of the United States Copyright Code and International Copyright Law. Advance written permission is required for reproduction, redistribution, and extensive quotation or excerpting. Permission requests should be made to the Miller Center, P.O. Box 400406, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4406.

To cite an interview, please use the following general format: [name of interviewee] Interview, [date of interview], Edward M. Kennedy Oral History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia.

EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH ANN GARGAN

October 11, 2005

Knott: How long have you lived in this area?

Gargan: About 10 years.

Knott: It's a beautiful area.

Gargan: Yes it is, very nice. My sister [Mary Jo Clasby] and Dick [Clasby] had lived here for years. I was living in New Hampshire before I came back down, so this area was familiar, which made it easier for me.

Knott: Again, thank you for doing this. Basically, we'd like you to tell us about your recollections of Senator Edward Kennedy. I know that's a lot to ask, but maybe some childhood memories might be the best place to start.

Gargan: Right. Of course, what's more familiar to me—even though it's 40 years ago—are the years I was with his mom and dad. Our mother [Agnes Fitzgerald Gargan] was his mother's [Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy] sister. Our parents died when we were little, so we spent time with the different relatives, which was lovely: some had no children, and they had nine children, and we tagged on the bottom. My brother [Joseph Gargan] is a little older than Ted, and then Mary Jo.

I didn't spend as much time in those years with Ted as Mary Jo and Joe did, as I was the little one who they'd just as soon stayed home! My aunt would let them go to dances and do things you don't let the little one do. The little one was a bit of an itch, in a sense. Now I'm old enough to know that I was a bit of a nuisance. I thought I was very important in the program, but I now realize I was the one they'd just as soon stayed home. But over the years, as I said, we spent a lot of time there.

Really, in one sense, I'd just as soon come when you're going to talk to Mary Jo, because she has more—And I'd do better if somebody says, "Do you remember?" or "We did this," or if she would mention sailing, because we did go on the boat.

Knott: Did you become a good sailor?

Gargan: Fair. But I was a very good sail carrier and sail dryer. The youngest did get to do that—lay them out to dry and all that. I wasn't a big success on board, but when they didn't have

enough people and needed an extra, I got to go and hold the jib lines. That was about the extent of my sailing ability, which was fine. At the time, you think that's the most important part, and so you do that.

And also all the normal games, baseball games, touch football games, which were just a way of life. All kids growing up, depending on where they are, play different types of games. When we were there, as I said, it was either sailing, because the older ones in the family raced mainly the senior, the *Victura*, which as you know is at the library. But then they had two smaller boats called Wianno Juniors. At one time—before my time—the first one they got was called *The Ten of Us*, because there were, obviously, 10 of them. And they got another boat called *And One More*, and that was Ted. We had access to those two boats for races, and with two boats, I generally went on one as either ballast or maintaining the jib. I wasn't much ballast in those days. I'd be a big help now.

Knott: I'm not trying to pry in terms of your age, but were you close to—

Gargan: I am four years younger than Ted.

Knott: You were four years younger?

Gargan: Well, three. He's February; I'm August—so approximately, but just that much younger that I didn't go to the 12-and-over dances. And frankly, they were delighted I wasn't there, which I understood as I got a little older myself. At the time, I thought I should be part of it.

For a lot of the programs in that era, I was a little too young. But as I'm sure you know, when there's a group, some are younger and some are older, and there are different activities at different times. Generally, the youngest is the runner, and Ted was the runner of his group. And then you pass it on to the next if you can, if there's one younger than you.

Knott: I thought maybe you had formed a special bond as a result of the fact that you both shared that status.

Gargan: No. That's why I'm saying I'd almost rather come if you're going to talk to Mary Jo, because it's easier to remember particular things that happened because it was a group—of which, rightfully so, I was the tail end.

But I probably had somewhat more affiliation with Ted in the later years, when I was staying there most of the time with my aunt and uncle and was traveling with them. It was more personal then, for some funny reason. He always kept great contact and concern for both of his parents. And really, it was at least 25 years that either his mother or his father was an invalid in the house. So I would think that was really in his life.

He'd always be available, and when he came, he just livened up the whole place for either his father or his mother—and especially his dad. He'd always go with him on the activities that he was able to do at that time.

Knott: How would he liven it up?

Gargan: Well, frankly, just being himself. He always got the singing groups going.

Knott: Oh, he did?

Gargan: Oh, always.

Knott: He loves to sing?

Gargan: Loves to sing, and oftentimes his mother would be playing the piano, and he'd do the singing. He did always very much amuse his father. He always made his dad a very important part of what was going on. At the time when he was in that plane crash out in the western part of the state—of course, that came on the news. He called as soon as—I'll say the following morning. It wasn't the first morning; it was the second morning.

He said, "Let me talk to Dad." And he did. He told him exactly what had happened, the condition he was in, and said, "You'd better get out here as soon as you can because they're talking about my back. Nobody knows more about backs than you do," having gone through it all to help the President [John F. Kennedy].

So we packed up and flew out there. They had us all in this little room, and—much to the consternation of the doctors, I think—Ted was insisting—he was flat-out, but just insisting—that his dad see the x-rays and give them his opinion. In one sense, his father was very much aware, and if you took the time and then went back over things, you got a very reasonable understanding of what he was trying to communicate. And so there we were, and he had these doctors with their little sticks showing the back and what had happened and what they were recommending—the surgery and all this kind of thing.

And every time they came up with the word "surgery," we got a very big "no." Ted said, "Dad doesn't think that's a very good idea." And so they'd try to explain it from a different point of view. And they still got a big "no."

We went back and forth with this—it seemed like forever. I'm sure those doctors thought they had the whole thing solved. But Ted hung in there with his dad, much to their chagrin.

Knott: So they did not do the surgery?

Gargan: No, they did not. As I say, the technicalities I don't remember exactly, but I do know that we left after a while, and Ted called. Everybody was very good about calling him all the time. We went through the whole thing again that night. I think we probably went out again in another couple of days. We flew out. His dad maintained his position, and the doctors maintained their position. And Ted went with his dad, stuck with his opinion—I think much to the horror of the medical profession.

But if you took your time—it was difficult, and very difficult for his dad, and that's a whole other world. But Ted did take the time, and he did process things. It wasn't a quick "That's what we'll do." He made sure that that was his dad's opinion, and that he knew what the x-rays showed, and that he still stood by that. Ted stayed with that opinion also.

Then, of course, he came back to a hospital here in Boston, and his dad was up there the first day they stood him up. They stood for a picture. It was a lovely picture. It was important to both of them that that happened. At that time, he was in that Stryker frame, a god-awful thing. I suppose I shouldn't say that because at the time it certainly did the job. And for his condition, that's what he needed.

We did all that, and at different times. Ted could walk once he started taking a few steps.

Knott: Did Joan [Bennett Kennedy] campaign for him that year as a result of his—?

Gargan: Yes. And their father was always involved in everybody's campaign. But that year, he wasn't quite as involved. Of course, he couldn't be, number one. But Ted would talk to him, and he was walking a little bit, and naturally then he was walking a lot.

Knott: How often would you say that Senator Kennedy would talk to his father?

Gargan: If not every day, every couple of days, every other day. All three of the boys.

Knott: Regular contact?

Gargan: Regular.

Knott: They would tell him what they were doing?

Gargan: Yes, what was going on. They would wait for a reaction, and according to the reaction, they'd—

Knott: He was able to communicate his reactions?

Gargan: In many ways. Especially "no." When something wasn't right, he was very clear. And as I said, a couple of scenes of him with Jack— But we're getting on to Ted.

But after he was home for a while—or was out of the hospital, let's put it that way—he was staying at the Cape, so he could come down. And when he started walking, he was uneven. That is, a piece in the shoe— He would emphasize the limp and really tilt, and he'd keep saying to him, "God, Dad! That was a great decision you made, telling me not to have that surgery, because you can see—" And he'd go on and on. Then he'd describe the guy trying to make the pants, with the one leg, and the other leg and everything. Of course, then they'd laugh forever. But I'm not sure how funny it actually was for Ted!

But he would tease; they had that kind of rapport, which he had always had with them. That was those growing-up years that everybody was into. And we probably weren't there—or I wasn't—as much. But there were some years there, with his mom and dad, we'd go to Cannes in the summer or to Antibes and that kind of thing. And there were a couple of times Ted would get in trouble up at Bobby's [Robert F. Kennedy] house at a party or something, and up at the pool. We'd get one of those calls. And a hundred years ago, when you got those calls from the States, you got a time it was coming through and all that kind of jazz. And of course, half the time—not

half, a couple of times—it would be for me instead of for him. Then we knew right away there was a problem. Ted would say, “Did Dad hear?” And I’d say, “Yes, he did, and he’s right here.”

Really, it was a wonderful spirit. I’m sure there were times to which I’m not privy when it was difficult. But I only saw them when they had—Most of the time he had a wonderful rapport with his mom and his dad. And he was great, too, all the years his mother was sick. He’d come down, and everybody in Hyannis Port must have been singing, because he’d get everybody he could in that room, and you could hear them all over. His mother was a little hard of hearing, and we were always hearing the rosary bellowed throughout the house.

Those loyalties stayed with him right through the end of his parents’ lives. He was going through hard times, as we all know, but when his parents were ill, he never let on that everything wasn’t going very well. And he’d have the children there.

Knott: We’ve heard that he was quite a good surrogate father to Bobby’s children and others. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Gargan: Well, for years, especially after the President’s death, Bobby would be like the Pied Piper. It was a scream. His little group—Caroline [Kennedy Schlossberg] and John [Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr.]—it really was great. And then we lost Bobby, and Ted really took over, almost as much as you can without—He’d go to everybody’s schools, and he tried to get them together as a group at vacation time, skiing—

He tried to keep that spirit that all of them could share. Jackie [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis] always said that she was so impressed with how he tried to keep Jack’s spirit alive with Caroline and John, and how with so many little things—the desks and the memorabilia—he always made sure that John was aware that they were his father’s, that his father did this, and his father did that. For example, he was very strong on making sure that the Secret Service men who had been with John stayed with him so he’d have a continual male presence in his world and be aware of what his father had done.

He kept the children with him. For any speech, or if he’d have something going here in Boston, he’d have them all come from their different schools so they would share each of these experiences, or hearing about why, in Jack’s case, he was being honored, or why this was being done, or at the library. It wasn’t just, “Come and share in this celebration.” He made sure that everybody understood what had been done and why the celebration was being held, and that it wasn’t just because Jack, their father, had been President. It was very important to him to go back even to our grandfather, John Fitzgerald, who was mayor of Boston.

Knott: Do you remember him, by the way?

Gargan: I do. Fairly well. Mary Jo remembers more, because she spent more time with him, but I do. I think all of us have such a feeling toward Boston (but Ted more than the rest of us) because of Grandpa, even though none of us really have lived—it just was his world. In the different campaigns and everything, we had to go to Boston Common, Boston Garden, the first Christmas tree—really wonderful memories. And I think Ted preserved a lot of those memories for this generation, who obviously never knew Grandpa Fitz.

I think he tried to pull the whole thing together, which had been done for him in our past. That's where the original ideas came from, and through his mother. As I said, nobody can sing "Sweet Adeline" like Ted sings it—and often! All those little vignettes that are outward seen on a public platform, or with the....

Knott: You've been through a lot in your life, but he has been through a lot as well. What do you think sustains him? A lot of people perhaps wouldn't have handled the setbacks as well as he has in his life.

Gargan: No, he's had horrendous setbacks, not only emotionally, but physically.

Knott: And I'm not sure that's understood, the physical part.

Gargan: Yes. As I said, he was amusing about the tilt and the guy trying to measure the pants and that kind of thing, but that isn't what he lives with day to day. But the brace and the physical pain at times, as you said, most people don't understand. And true, there probably are times he has carried too much weight—which we all go through—and that doesn't help one's back problems, either. But he just has to look at food and he puts on weight. That's what he always used to say about Grandpa Fitz: "All I got from Grandpa Fitz is fat jowls." [laughter]

But as you say, I don't think people realize how much physical pain. The emotional has been written up in every newspaper in the world. There were years in the background—saying prayers at your mother's knee or whatever you want to call it—they always had that base.

Knott: Their faith?

Gargan: Their faith and their home. Jack always used to say, "You know, if I walked across the stage, slipped on a banana peel, and went sliding, if I called, Dad would say, 'That was so graceful! You looked in charge of the whole thing!'"

They had that faith in God Almighty, and it was transformed into their home. They knew, no matter what they did, they had a support system. And I think that that has been so strong in him—well, really, in everyone—but being the youngest, because everybody looked out for Ted. Not looked out for, but he was the youngest in the family, especially among the boys. He knew he had that support system. No matter what else happened in the whole world, he had faith not only in God, but in his family unit. No matter how things went, he had his mother and father 100 percent behind him. They might tell him, "That wasn't too bright," but they never let him down. I think that's what everybody wants, and he had it, and he knew he had it, which is another thing.

But as I said, when things would go wrong, he'd say, "Oh, boy," like any of us. And you might think you were going to get a real blast, and maybe you got a real blast. But that was the end of it. Whatever you did, you could come home and have great support. I think that kind of support sustained him too, because God knows he's had more than his share.

I think a lot of people don't realize how difficult things have been for him physically at times. And now to have both Kara [Kennedy Allen] and Ted—Where did the cancers come from? It isn't something you'd say, "Oh, my mother—" because, really, his parents didn't have it. Now,

of course, Pat [Patricia Kennedy Lawford] does, but why would young Teddy at that age suddenly lose a leg?

Knott: Right. That must have been an unbelievably trying time.

Gargan: Exactly! And I think that's when, really, the family support was a big plus to him, as it would be to anybody. I mean, you're alone, but he had a lot of support, and he knew it. And along with Kara's having such—well, thanks be to God—but to have a child in that kind of trouble is just overwhelming. And to have it happen again. Really, if he gives some thought to his own life, for over 25 years he had the strongest people in his world at home with a nurse 24 hours a day, which is not easy.

Knott: No, of course not.

Gargan: And still, he'd always try to bolster his parents, and he'd always come home and ride in the car to the dentist with his dad, or take him out on the boat, or whatever. And he supported his mother tremendously through all those terrible tragedies in her life, because by then his father was already incapacitated. He came back to tell both of them, and then take his mother back to Washington after Jack's death. Then of course nobody could believe Bobby—that just couldn't happen again. But there he stood, helping his mother through all that.

There were a lot of jolly times. The more I listen to myself, the worse it sounds. But he did have some good times! I promise you, there were a lot of fun times. But I'm just trying to say that amid all that, he had tremendous compassion and love and loyalty, mainly to his mom and dad, but to everybody in the family. And he tried to pass that on to the children of the next generation. Now there's another generation. *[laughter]*

But as I said, there were a lot of good times, too. He was out shoveling snow when they had that snowstorm at Jack's Inauguration. Ted was in the car with his mom and dad, and he and my brother got out and shoveled the streets. You know Washington in a snowstorm.

Knott: Right, right. The whole city shuts down.

Gargan: The whole city shuts down, or they can't plow the streets anyway. And they were out there trying to shovel so the car could come through. That was a lot of laughs, things like that.

Knott: Could you tell us a little bit more about your life? Where you—

Gargan: Fit in the program?

Knott: Yes. Where you've lived, where you've moved over the years. What's been happening in your life?

Gargan: Well, that really doesn't involve Ted or any of that stuff. Those things just happened. I don't have much to say about that.

Knott: Okay. Is there anything else about Senator Kennedy that you would want somebody who's sitting a hundred years from now reading this transcript to know?

Gargan: You say, “Well, what did he do? How did he liven things up?” Just by being himself he livened things up. As I said, he always got the songs going. He can tell a great story. And nobody gave more pleasure to his two older brothers than he did. All through the campaigns and everything else, you’d wait to hear what Ted had done. From riding broncos to setting up different—he just always added to the spirit of any occasion. He made it fun, and I think that’s what he’s done for the grandchildren, giving them all these backgrounds which are, in one sense, overwhelming, but then he’ll break out with “Sweet Adeline” or some other songs and get everybody into a sing-along, and just belittle his own problems and make the rest of the world feel good about things, which is a great gift.

Knott: We’ve heard a lot about Vicki [Reggie Kennedy]—what a tremendous addition she’s been.

Gargan: She’s been fantastic. Fantastic. That was a tough place to squeeze into. That was a pretty strong format already in place, to establish your own position in something like that. And God knows, look at all the problems she’s had with her leg and all. Can you believe it? And I’m just saying that off the top of my head, jump out of the frying pan into the fire. They should all get a medical degree, the different physical problems that have befallen just that little unit of people, if you think about it! It’s okay to say, “Oh, a bum leg or a bum back,” but there’s a lot of physical pain involved, and emotional! To have people you love in that kind of trouble is not pleasant.

I think a lot of times, as bad as we feel for the person who’s really sick, we feel almost equally bad for the people who have to watch it. And all the years of Ted’s bad back and trying to help his father walk again—if it wasn’t so diabolical, it’d be funny. You almost can’t believe it keeps happening.

But as you say, Vicki has just done everything in human power to make life great, as much as anyone can, and make life pleasant for him. I’m sure Dick, when he was here, was telling about the Harvard games and the tailgating and all that. Isn’t it lucky that he’s able to do that? It’s one of the few times that there isn’t somebody there quoting every—

Knott: Yes, yes—phrase.

Gargan: —or taking pictures. So thank God he can go out on the boat. Vicki is so helpful in all that, because she just moved right into that routine and didn’t say, “You’re not getting me out on that boat.” It might have been smart if she’d said that, but—not really. Now that he has the *Mya* and all that, it’s a little different. But it was very different when you were climbing over—They still weren’t using the *Victura*, but I meant there’s a little difference in sailing.

She has gone with the program from the word go, and it’s been great. Everybody who knows them, either in the family or just friends, will say that she’s probably the best thing that ever could have happened in his lifetime. It makes me sad to think of all the struggles. So she has to jolly things up here.

Knott: Some people have told us that he’s probably closest to Jean [Kennedy Smith] among his sisters because they grew up fairly close together. I think they were four years apart or so. Does that sound right to you?

Gargan: Yes, because you see, they were very young when the family was in England. As years go by, as we all know, the years don't become as important. He was close with Bobby, but he did a lot more things with my brother, Joe. Of the boys, the older ones were eligible to be in the service, and even Bob joined the Navy. But you see, these two, Ted was still at home. And my uncle got all sorts of projects for the two of them: cutting the bridle paths over in Osterville and that kind of thing. Jean was home, but even Kick [Kathleen Kennedy] had joined the Red Cross, so she was in England. But it's like any family: different age groups do different things. And I would think probably Jean was around the most.

Knott: Do you think he's most comfortable when he's at Hyannis Port? Is that home for him?

Gargan: I think so. I think it's where he's the most relaxed and has sort of a private little world.

Knott: Yes. And he's probably even more comfortable when he's actually out on the water.

Gargan: Yes. I think all three—Jack, Bobby, and Ted—were most at ease out on the water. Any time the other two would come home, they'd immediately head for a boat. And that's true of Ted also. They find great comfort being out on the water.

Knott: Do you have any memories or recollections from when he challenged Jimmy Carter for the Presidency in 1980?

Gargan: Not really. Not anything dramatic. To me, any campaign before, it was the threesome, kind of, with their father, and it just seemed—He had a slogan, "They sail against the wind," and it almost seemed that that's the way it was. He wasn't on his own, but what I'm saying is it didn't have the same—As you say, each to our own thought on it, but at the time, I—

Knott: He missed that support network you've talked about?

Gargan: Yes. I think so. I don't think he ever expressed this. Maybe he didn't feel, but just looking at it from the outside, I felt that it wasn't quite the same as the past campaigns had been. There was so much interplay before, and everybody had so much to say about everything. And that wasn't there either. That was missing. But everything changes, doesn't it?

Knott: Right. Do you think he ever considered a career other than politics? Is there something that you might think of that—?

Gargan: I don't think he did. Not for a minute. Well, as I said, everything changes. But in '59 and '60, that was the whole world of that family, really. Inside and outside, everything was revolving around getting Jack elected. That was the center of the universe, so there was nothing else in the world to do except be a part of that.

Knott: Were you a part of that at all?

Gargan: Yes, because I was with his father and mother a lot through all that. So I saw it from that perspective, because his father was a very big part of that campaign. And of course, Aunt Rose was—everybody was giving speeches everywhere! *[laughter]* I was the one still at home

because, as you know, their father didn't make any public appearances at that time. That campaign was very Hyannis Port-orchestrated. That's where everybody was for election night.

Knott: Right. That must have been a long night.

Gargan: Yes, it was a very long night. Jack went home. Some of us hung out, and my aunt and uncle went home. A couple of my uncle's friends were there: a man named Carroll Rosenbloom, Morton Downey. They went back up to Morton's house. The lights burned all night in Bob's house, and I think Ted was in and out. I went back over and went to bed.

And as I say, Jack got to bed. He called over to what was then referred to as "the big house," which was their father's house—in the morning, and talked to his father for a couple of minutes, asked me if I'd come over and take Caroline riding. I think he wanted her out of the house, quite honestly. *[laughter]* So I did. I think Ted might have gone home, but by then, I think he was already back at Bob's, because as you know, the returns were still coming in that morning.

By the time we came back from riding, they were all over at the big house. And they were pretty ready to call it. I think by then they had called it. I can't remember the exact hours, but I think when we came in—yes, because by then the Secret Service had taken over. Caroline and I couldn't get back in.

Knott: Do you remember when Senator Ted Kennedy first ran for the Senate in 1962 in Massachusetts?

Gargan: Yes.

Knott: Even at the height of that campaign, would he be in constant touch with his father?

Gargan: Pretty much.

Knott: Do you recall anything from that, either the night he won that election, or—?

Gargan: I have to go back over all those years. I don't mean to be facetious, but there just seemed to be so many.

Knott: Oh, I understand.

Gargan: Not so many, but a lot of big things happened in those years. In a very short period of time, there was an awful lot going on. Yes, I know of Ben Smith. I still see his daughter.

Knott: Ben Smith's daughter?

Gargan: She just had a bout with cancer, too. Gosh! I can't mention anybody who hasn't had a bout with cancer. Well, as I say, it'll all come back eventually.

Knott: I know we're asking you to think back decades, and it's not an easy thing to do. I can barely remember what I did last week.

Gargan: Well, I can't remember last week. I remember more in that '58 to '64 period because there were so many big things that happened, some of it so good, and some of it so horrible. My aunt always said she should have titled her book *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, because there were so many fantastic moments and so many that weren't so good.

But she didn't come out with us when we first went out to see Ted after the plane crash.

Knott: Do you think it might have been too much for her?

Gargan: No! God bless her, her whole concentration was to go to church and pray for the rest of us. It was the first thing she did when the word came through that Jack had been shot, before she even knew he had been killed. As soon as anything like that happened, she would go directly—

Knott: To the nearby church?

Gargan: Yes. It was her solace, but it was her strength. She really firmly believed—and I guess she's right—that you can't do more than that. Prayer is it. It doesn't always get answered the way we want it to, but I think she prayed for the strength to go through it. And I found a little thing, a note of hers the other day saying, "I will not be vanquished." That's what she passed on to each and every one.

That was their strength. It wasn't what we ourselves were capable of. She believed that so firmly, and it got passed along.

Knott: Yes. It sure seems that way.

Gargan: In different ways, and probably not as strongly in their beliefs, but I think it's a personal thing anyway. That was always there, and each one knew it. And as I said, even though Ted, God bless him, came home on both occasions and then took his mother back with him, they always knew that that was there in that house. And you can't ask for more than that.

So as I say, I'll talk to Mary Jo, and I'll think more about some of these things. And one of these days—

Knott: We'll definitely be back. And if you're willing to go through this again with Mary Jo, that'd be great. If not, we understand. Thank you very much.

Gargan: You're entirely welcome. There's a lot of it, and there's a lot of it in your heart, and you just don't know how to express that kind of thing. But you can't deal with a better guy.

Knott: Good. We'll end on that note. Thanks.