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Oral History Interview of David Carreiro (OH-023)

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Oral History Interview of David Carreiro

Interview Date: September 29, 2004

Interviewed by: Beth Anne Bower, Moakley Archivist.

Citation: Carreiro, David. Interviewed by Beth Anne Bower. John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project OH-023. 29 September 2004. Transcript and audio available. John Joseph Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

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Interview Summary

David Carreiro, a member of Congressman John Joseph Moakley's congressional staff in his Boston district office and his Washington, DC office from 1988 through 2001 recalls his experience as a congressional aide. His interview explains how he came to work for Congressman Moakley; different kinds of issues Carreiro worked on while in Boston and Washington; how important constituent service was Congressman Moakley; Moakley's role as a senior member of the Massachusetts congressional delegation and how his legacy sets an example for public service and political leadership.

Subject Headings

Boston (Mass.)

Carreiro, David

Moakley Center for Technological Applications

Moakley, John Joseph, 1927-2001

United States. Congress

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This interview took place on September 29, 2004, at the Cannon House Office Building, Room 441, Washington, D.C.

Interview Transcript

BETH BOWER: —this is Beth Bower, and we're doing an interview with David Carreiro, who worked for Congressman Moakley. And it's September 29, 2004.

David, thank you so much for doing this interview. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to work in Congressman Moakley's office?

DAVID CARREIRO: Well, I'm originally from New Bedford, Massachusetts. I went to work for Mr. Moakley's campaign in 1986. I was hired right after the primary. It was supposed to be a seven week campaign job. I took it because it was the first time anyone had ever paid me to do campaign work. I'd done campaign work for years, but never been paid.

After the campaign was done I thought my job was finished. We had actually just bought our first computer for the campaign, an old IBM XT. That was start-of-the-art at the time. So we started computerizing our volunteer files, our fundraising files. And they kept me around to do that. And then the spring of '88 we did the yearly fundraising. About that time I started to think this job may be ending. But, in September of '88 they offered me a position in the congressional staff.

BOWER: Great.

CARREIRO: So, it was like, Would you like to come and work for Joe? And it was like, Is that a question? So I started working for the federal government in September 1, 1988. And was with Joe until he passed in May.

BOWER: And did you initially work up in Massachusetts?

CARREIRO: I was in the Boston office until we [the Democrats] lost the House in 1994. My wife wanted to come to Washington and go to grad school, so I came here. And someone on the

D.C. staff went to Boston, Sean Ryan.¹ So we kind of just traded spots, which is kind of funny because Joe thought that—because when we lost the House, he had to let go of a lot of people because he was no longer chairman of the Rules.²

So when I was coming to D.C. I think he actually thought that I was leaving him. And when he saw me in early '95, it was like, “Hi, how are you? How things going?” I said, “Fine, I’m across the street in your office.” And he’s like, “How did that work out?” I said, “Well, Sean and I just kind of swapped.” He said, “Oh, good. I was so sad you were leaving.” (laughter)

BOWER: So when you worked in the Boston office up until '95, what kinds of things were you doing for the congressman?

CARREIRO: I did veterans work, housing, just a lot of—answered the mail, answered the phones.

BOWER: Sort of constituent type of work.

CARREIRO: Drove him to various meetings. Spent a lot of time with him.

BOWER: Tell me how he worked for his constituents.

CARREIRO: This may sound like a cliché, but Joe really cared for his constituents. If people would call and ask for something, he would do his level best to make that happen. Through finding someone a job, or getting someone’s kid into college, or helping out with chasing financial aid. You know, the old saying, Mrs. O’Leary’s Social Security check. It was that level.

¹ Sean Ryan was a member of Moakley’s congressional staff from 1993 to 2001.

² The House Rules Committee is responsible for the scheduling of bills for discussion in the House of Representatives. According to the Rules Committee website, “bills are scheduled by means of special rules from the Rules Committee that bestow upon legislation priority status for consideration in the House and establish procedures for their debate and amendment.” (See <http://www.rules.house.gov/>) Congressman Moakley was a member of the House Rules Committee from 1975 to 2001 and served as its chairman from 1989 to 1995.

I think the really good politicians understand that you're supposed to serve the people who elect you. That's what he did. And he did it with style and federal effectiveness. He was good at it.

BOWER: He was on the Rules Committee, so he had a lot on his plate. But, he still was able to do the constituent work as well.

CARREIRO: His constituents sent him to Washington. Without his constituents he couldn't do his work here. So he understood that taking care of their needs came first. And I think he did that.

BOWER: Great. When you were doing the campaign work, did you hear, had you met him, did you hear about him?

CARREIRO: I actually met the congressman briefly in 1984. He was campaigning in Bridgewater, at Bridgewater State College where I went to school with Fred Clark.³ And I held a Moakley sign in Bridgewater. I remember meeting him and liking him instantly because he was just extremely outgoing, very friendly, even if he didn't know who you were. I mean, that was my first real exposure to Joe.

And then in '86 Fred calls me and asks if I wanted to join the campaign, and it was like, "Yeah I'd be happy to." And that was the start.

BOWER: Now, when you moved to Washington and started working in the office, what issues did you handle there? Were you doing different things than you had in Boston?

CARREIRO: I did some of the same things. Made sure that the mail got answered. Developed his first congressional website, and instituted e-mail. Joe was very proud that he was the first, Massachusetts congressperson to have both the website and e-mail. Not that he completely understood how it worked, but he was damn proud that he was the first.

³ Fred Clark was a member of Congressman Moakley's district staff from 1982 to 2001.

BOWER: Is that because he saw it as a good thing for his constituents?

CARREIRO: He saw it as another tool to provide his constituents with information, and to give his constituents another way of contacting him. And slowly we started out with a little bit of e-mail and then a little more e-mail. Towards the end it was quite a bit of e-mail.

BOWER: Did e-mail replace a lot of the hardcopy mail you received?

CARREIRO: E-mail is an interesting tool. People will send you a quick e-mail to express their opinion. If they need work that's a little more substantive, they'll sit down and write a physical letter. But, if you wanted to make sure that Joe supported various issues, it's quick and it's easy. And I think that's how mainly his constituents used it, which was to make people make him aware of their thoughts.

BOWER: Now, when you were working on veterans' affairs types of issues, what were your observations about how Congressman Moakley worked in that area, and how he—and what were some of the things that he worked on for veterans?

CARREIRO: Joe worked to establish the Causeway Street Clinic, which was across the street from the old Boston Garden. He had helped get funding for both the West Roxbury and Jamaica Plain VA [Department of Veterans Affairs] Hospitals. We also had the Brockton VA in our district later on. Joe was very active in VA issues.

He handled them in his congressional duties, and I'm sure he heard a lot of VA stuff from his brother [Robert F. Moakley], who was the head of the VA in Boston. It was a subject that was very important to him. And we did a lot of casework involving veterans.

We had an old gentleman in the Boston office who used to handle most of Joe's veterans' casework was Marty Carter⁴ who passed away in the early nineties. Marty was an old friend of both Joe and Bob.

⁴ Martin Carter was a member of Moakley's district staff from 1978 to 1990.

One of the big issues we worked on with the VA is the proposals to close the two hospitals. There were proposals in the late nineties to merge West Roxbury, Jamaica Plain into one facility. Joe never thought that was a great idea. And wanted to make sure that both of them remained open, and both of them remained strong. One particular group of veterans were very good at getting to Joe on this issue were the paralyzed veterans. And Joe had taken a particular interest in them. And they had a facility, if I remember correctly, in West Roxbury. And one of the proposals would have moved that facility to Jamaica Plain.

It didn't make sense to Joe that you would move a perfectly good functioning unit somewhere else and have to pay to build a new unit at Jamaica Plain. He fought that proposal with Senator Kennedy tooth and nail.

BOWER: And were they successful?

CARREIRO: No, I think both hospitals are still open, and there's now the CARES review, which is taking another look at all the various veterans' hospitals across the country. I'm not sure what the recommendation is for Massachusetts. But they'll probably end up consolidating some of their services.

BOWER: Do you still work on those kinds of issues in your present job?

CARREIRO: I do veterans issues, yes.

BOWER: Interesting—If you step back and you look at Congressman's Moakley's career in Congress, I'm going to ask like two sides of the question, what do you think were the issues that were most important to his career? And what do you think were most important to him? They may be the same.

CARREIRO: I think they are the same. Again, Joe was very constituent-oriented. Whatever the concerns of his constituents were, were things he wanted to make sure were addressed. He

was tremendously proud of the work he did in El Salvador.⁵ And he used to joke, you know, had you put up an advertisement for someone to lead the investigation four-hundred members would have raised their hand, and he wouldn't have been one of them. But, it was an issue that just struck him as just wrong. And with Jim McGovern as a very active staffer who had been following the issue for years. And Jim moved Joe along on the road. And the two of them took great risks, and it moved their lives to accomplish what ended up happening in El Salvador.

I don't think history understands Joe's role in El Salvador. I think people in El Salvador do, but I'm not sure history does. But, he was very proud of that.

Early on, when he was a state rep in the state senate he was very proud of the work he did on housing issues, which is kind of constituent related. He was very proud of the legislation for the Boston Harbor Islands.

BOWER: Let me go back to the housing for a minute because you said you worked on that. Could you tell us a little bit about some of the things he did around housing, because I know that was one of the things that he was very effective on.

CARREIRO: He wanted to make sure that Boston got its fair share of federal housing money, and that there were adequate numbers of units available for people who needed them. Many times people would call or write saying, I'm on the waiting list to get in to such and such an apartment. Is there something you can do to help me? And Joe would contact the Housing Authority and say, "This person is on the list. They've been on the list for a long time. Can you give me a sense of, is this going to happen, is it not going to happen?"

Sometimes if they were in public housing and had a problem, and were facing eviction, Joe would want to make sure that the process was fair and they had a chance to explain what had

⁵ Starting in 1983, Congressman Moakley introduced legislation to protect Salvadorans in the U.S. using the "Extended Voluntary Departure" provision that allowed a temporary stay of deportation and work authorization. Moakley was finally able to pass legislation that granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Salvadorans in the Immigration Act of 1990 (PL. 101-649). Also, in December of 1989, Speaker of the House Thomas S. Foley appointed Moakley as chairman of a committee to investigate violence in El Salvador, specifically the November 16, 1989, murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter at the University of Central America in San Salvador.

happened, be treated fairly. That's what Joe wanted. Joe wanted his constituents to be treated fairly.

BOWER: You mentioned before that he was proud of the fact that he was the first congressman in Massachusetts delegation with e-mail and a website. Could you talk about him as a member of the delegation and then the leader of the delegation? Are there any observations you might have about that?

CARREIRO: Joe was the leader of the delegation. He had served the longest. Came into Congress in '72 with Congressman Studds.⁶ But, even at the time the two were sworn in on the same day, but Joe was the dean. Joe was a natural leader. People gravitated to him, and he was always willing to help. He was always willing to offer his advice and his counsel. And I don't think it took much effort for Joe to be a leader.

I remember when he passed, a lot of the Massachusetts members said that was one of the things they were going to miss, was just being able to go to him and bounce an idea off of him, or say, This is happening, what do you think I should do? So, it's not surprising that Joe was a leader of the delegation. And he was.

BOWER: Did you work with him at all around the Rules Committee,⁷ or was that other staff?

CARREIRO: It primarily was other staff. He had great Rules Committee staff. And most of them are still here in other positions having developed professionally.

BOWER: Do you have a story or a particular constituent issue you remember that sort of is an example of how Joe Moakley would have handled something?

CARREIRO: I remember the Mike Barnacle story about the woman with the electric bill. There was a woman who had a high electric bill because she had had I think a dialysis machine

⁶ Gerald R. Studds (1937-2006), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Tenth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1973 to 1997.

⁷ Congressman Moakley was chairman of the House Rules Committee from 1989 to 1995.

installed in her home. And one of the things about a dialysis machine is it uses a tremendous amount of power. And Boston Edison was trying to foreclose on her home because she couldn't pay the bill.

And this was an older woman who simply lacked the means to pay that bill as they wanted her to, and it just struck Joe that Boston Edison was being a bit of a bully. And we all know that Joe detested bullies. And I could close my eyes and picture him picking up the phone and calling someone at Boston Edison and saying, "How are you? Joe Moakley. Can we talk about so and so's bill out in Jamaica Plain? I don't know what you're doing, but you've got to stop it. You can't kick this poor woman out of her house." And eventually there was some payment plan developed, and that went away. That's the kind of work that Joe did, and that's the kind of work he enjoyed. Just defending the little person. This is a woman who couldn't afford to rent a lobbyist or get an attorney to defend her rights. And she picked up the phone and called the one person she thought who could help. And Joe said, "Yeah, I'll help." Those are the kinds of stories that I remember of him. And he was very proud of that stuff. But, I remember just a lot of the work that we did with getting the technology center down in Bridgewater.

BOWER: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that. I didn't realize that you went to Bridgewater State with Fred.

CARREIRO: I did. Fred and I took Joe to Bridgewater State College to meet with the college president at the time. Joe had not been to Bridgewater in a while. And they presented him with this plan for a technology center, which very much intrigued Joe. Not so much because I think he understood the impact of what the technology was, but I think he understood that this was about the unique first state school. And it had tremendous potential. And I think he also understood that he was going to have to be the person to get the money to do it. It was a ten million dollar grant. It was the largest federal grant ever given to a state school up until that time. And I'm not sure if that record has been broken yet.

And I remember leaving the meeting, and we were driving back to Boston and Joe said, You know, I'm going to try to do this. And I'm going to do it because this isn't MIT or Harvard or

BU where they can tap their endowments. If someone doesn't help them get this money, this won't happen. After he got the money, there was talk about naming it after him. And he didn't want it named after him. Fred was a little devious.

BOWER: Oh really. (laughter)

CARREIRO: He had had conversations with the administration. And the administration wanted to name it after Joe. Fred conveyed Joe's reluctance to the school, but the school named it after him anyway.⁸ And Joe was proud—Joe was extremely proud of it. But, I think he didn't want people to think that he got the money for this place because it was going to bear his name, because that's not what Joe was about.

BOWER: I don't know whether you were still in the Boston area then, but my remembrance is that when it opened he was ill? Or, was that the groundbreaking?

CARREIRO: No, he was ill for the grand opening. It opened in September of '95. Joe had just had his transplant in the summer, and wasn't able to go to the opening. Senate President Bulger filled in for him quite well. The two of them had a great relationship.

BOWER: Can you comment on that at all?

CARREIRO: Yeah, they had a fabulous relationship. They grew up together. Joe Moakley respected Billy Bulger;⁹ the senate president respected the congressman. And it was always a pleasure to listen to the two of them talk to each other. Joe would put his big hand on Bulger's shoulder and say, "Billy, how are you? What's going on?" Or, "Mr. President," or "my president." That was a great relationship.

⁸ Moakley helped secure funds for the John Joseph Moakley Center for Technological Applications, which opened in 1995 at Bridgewater State College.

⁹ William M. Bulger (1934-), a Democrat, served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives from 1962 to 1970 and in the Massachusetts State Senate from 1970 to 1996. He was Senate President from 1978 to 1996.

And when the senate president talked about Mr. Moakley, he was very—the words were genuine. It wasn't just a speech that he was giving. It was quite genuine. And I remember the Senate President joking about Joe really wanted to be there, but Evy¹⁰ wouldn't let him out of the house. It was pretty funny.

BOWER: That's great. How will you personally remember Congressman Moakley?

CARREIRO: It's funny, he's been gone for over three years. I still think about him; I think about him a lot. It's easy working here. I don't spend as much time in the Capitol Building as I used to when he was here, because he had an office in the Capitol Building. But, whenever I'm in the Capitol, I remember walks that we took in that building.

Joe Moakley was a great teacher. After he announced that he was ill, we talked, and he asked me, What are you going to do? What are you going to do for work after? And I'm like, "I don't want to have this conversation with you." But, I said, "I'd like to stay on the Hill, but I just don't know who I'd go and work for." It's a long time with one person. And I stayed because I liked you. It wasn't just the job. I mean, there are hundreds of job on the Hill. A lot of them pay a lot more money than what I was making.

But, Joe was unique. If you look at the roster of people who worked for Joe, not a lot of them left. They stayed for years and years and years. I mean, Congress is kind of a changing place for staff. You come in for a few years, you learn your craft and you go somewhere else. But, people who worked with Joe stayed for a long time. And they stayed because they respected him, and he respected them. He treated you very well.

What I liked about working for Joe Moakley, if I went to a meeting representing Joe Moakley, there was a tremendous respect given to you, because you were representing someone, that whoever you were meeting with most likely knew and most likely respected.

¹⁰ Evelyn (Duffy) Moakley (1927-1996) was Congressman Moakley's wife. They married in 1957.

The other thing I liked about working for Joe was that if I went to a meeting and I said something on his behalf, I didn't have to worry about whether or not he would back me. Usually he trusted your judgment, as long as you didn't say something incredibly stupid. He had that ability to be very blunt. And it was helpful.

I've been with another member now for two and a half years, and a week doesn't go by where I don't run into someone who knew Joe. And when I tell them that I had worked for Joe for fourteen plus years, they shake their head and they go, Hmm, you must know this or you must know that. But, I think they expect more from you because you trained with someone who was very good at what they did.

Joe used to joke that working for him was kind of like going to school. The problem was people didn't want to leave school. They stayed and stayed.

BOWER: That brings me to his legacy. What do you think will be remembered about him as a congressman?

CARREIRO: First and foremost I think his decency. This is a person, depending on who you ask, was one of the top five, ten members of Congress in terms of power, in terms of position. But, you wouldn't have known that. He never took himself too seriously. Was the first person to crack a joke at his own expense, because that's how comfortable he was with himself.

Professionally, it's difficult to walk in downtown Boston and not be able to pick out a building, or a place, that Joe Moakley didn't influence. Look at the Customs House, you look at the Old State House, you look at Faneuil Hall, you look at City Hall, you look at the O'Neill Building, go to most of the universities—most of the universities have some facility that Joe Moakley helped get the federal funding that either built or ran it. The old joke was Joe Moakley's favorite bird was a crane. There were all kinds of cranes in Boston. And a lot of them were there because Joe had gotten the money to help build whatever was being built. That's the stuff he was the most proud of.

I used to love going for a ride with him in Boston because he would point out to me, “I got money for this. I helped that get started. I kept them from closing.” And it was great because no matter how many times you heard it, it was impressive. I think he gave a sense of the importance of Joe Moakley, somehow Boston reacted when he died. Very difficult days personally. But, I remember the parade route, you know the procession. I remember the people going and standing in long, long lines at the state house.

I remember standing outside the church waiting for the mass to start. Joe would have liked to have seen the kids with the flags and the signs, and the grandmothers teaching their grandchildren about this man who the kids didn’t know, but the grandparents did. I’ll never forget the procession.

BOWER: Well, you actually have helped me segue into my last question, which is that the Moakley Institute’s, one of its missions, is to continue his legacy of public service and political leadership by encouraging young people to pursue a life in public service. And what advice would you give to young people thinking about a career in public service when you think about what Joe Moakley brought to that?

CARREIRO: Joe Moakley proved that public service is a noble effort. And it is. You work on behalf of other people. That’s noble. There are other careers that may be more rewarding, may be more financially rewarding, but you can’t take rides in downtown Boston and say, I helped work on this building. I helped get this program started. I kept it operated. I prevented it from being closed. The rewards are personal.

It is very easy to run down public service. And I think a lot of politicians, and some journalists, kind of make careers out of that. But, you’re working on behalf of your neighbors, your family, your friends. Joe Moakley would say to young people, and I’ve heard him say it many a time, “Public service is a noble pursuit.”

I would hope the Institute is a place where people who have a slight interest in public service can go and learn more about it. Kind of the wonks and the policy freaks can go and learn more about the craft.

This will sound like a cliché, but I don't care: Joe Moakley was a very unique person. There are lessons in his life that we need to learn. Lessons in how he died that we need to learn. This man was resolute in how he approached his coming death. He joked that he never missed a meal and didn't lose a night's sleep; he's not kidding. I ate dinner with him two days after his announcement. A big plate of pasta and he was like, "Okay, this will happen. I can't beat this one. But, so be it."

I'm glad that Joe had a chance for people to show him how much they loved him. Most of it made him pretty uncomfortable. He kept saying, "Enough, stop." But, most people don't get that opportunity. And I think that was kind of God's reward to him. You've been a good servant. You've done whatever people needed you to do. Sit back for a little while and suck up some of the admiration.

He is a unique individual, and the Institute is a place where I hope people will go to learn more about him and who he was, and what he stood for. Who he fought for, who he liked, who he disliked. Suffolk has a challenge. I'm sure you'll do well.

BOWER: Well thank you and we thank you for your thoughts on that, and I am going to end the interview right here.

END OF INTERVIEW