



# JOHN JOSEPH Moakley

ARCHIVE & INSTITUTE AT SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY

## John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project

### Oral History Interview with

**Robert Kevin Ryan**

**Interview Date:** September 29, 2004

**Interviewed by:** Beth Anne Bower, Moakley Archivist.

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### Interview Summary

Robert Kevin Ryan, a member of Congressman John Joseph Moakley's congressional staff from 1983 through 2001, discusses his career on the House Subcommittee on Rules staff, on the full House Rules Committee staff, and as acting chief of staff for Congressman Moakley's congressional office. His interview covers Congressman Moakley's leadership position as a member of the House Rules Committee; the importance of constituent service to Moakley; South Boston residents' feeling toward Moakley; and how Moakley's legacy is a model for public service.

**Subject Headings**

**Moakley, John Joseph, (1927-2001)**

**Ryan, Robert Kevin**

**South Boston (Mass.)**

**United States. Congress. House. Committee on Rules**

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

**Interview Transcript**

**BETH BOWER:** This is Beth Bower. It's September 29, 2004. We're in the Cannon Building in Washington, D.C. with Kevin Ryan, who was chief of staff for Congressman Joe Moakley.

Kevin, I wanted to start with you telling us a little bit about how you met Congressman Moakley and came to work for him.

**ROBERT KEVIN RYAN:** Well, actually I met Joe, actually early, as a teenager working on some campaigns, but never really had a sit-down with him until 1982. It was July, and I remember going up to thank him. He was at a post office visit, and I had applied for a job with the Capitol Police. And I did not get the job. I went up to thank him for helping me. He was in this post office. Took over the backroom of one of the post office facilities. A line of probably twenty-five people all waiting to see Joe for a number of reasons, all asking for something. I was frankly there to thank him for helping me. And I was actually on the way to the lagoon at Castle Island.<sup>1</sup> So I walked in with a bathing suit on, a ripped hockey shirt, and my lounge chair for the beach. And everyone else was there with suits and ties, and mothers and fathers and all.

When I went into see Joe, he kind of looked at me and [was] trying to figure out what was I doing there. Told him who I was, and just wanted to thank him. And I got up to leave, and he said, "Hold it, don't leave so quickly." And we talked a little bit, and asked me what I was doing. He just said, "Are you interested to come to Washington?" And I was. And I didn't know to do what. And he said, "I can get you down there working in the post office if you want to try it."

So when I left—I went in there to thank him for helping me. I left with a job, not that I was looking for a job. In September of '82 I moved to Washington. And that's where I started in the

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Ryan is referring to a man-made lagoon at the Castle Island area of South Boston that is popular for water sports.

House post office under Joe's patronage. He was in charge of the Patronage Committee.<sup>2</sup> Worked there about three months, and Joe put me on the House floor as a doorman, which was basically dealing with members of Congress for press related issues or any kind of—kind of an errand type of boy. It wasn't really security as it is right now. It was just letting members know that somebody was either outside of the chambers looking to talk to them. And it was a great job.

And then after about a year after that, he asked me if I wanted to work on his subcommittee, Subcommittee on Rules of the House, which I had no idea what they did. And I said, "Sure I do." And that was my—that was '83, October of '83 I went to work for him on the subcommittee.

**BOWER:** On the subcommittee. And how long did you serve on this subcommittee with him?

**RYAN:** Until '89, actually, I worked as his legislative assistant. And then I worked as his—actually, his Rules Committee<sup>3</sup> associate when he was a ranking member on the Rules Committee. And when he became chairman in 1989, I went up (inaudible) upstairs—we had an office on the first floor of the Capitol. And when he became chairman his entire operation moved to the third. And that's when I moved to the third floor with the full committee and became a professional staff person on the Rules Committee. And then that was to 1996 when I became his chief of staff in his congressional office.

**BOWER:** So tell me about how your job changed on the Rules Committee from when you first started to—how did your responsibilities change?

**RYAN:** Well, it went from helping this kid out to trying to—I had no idea. And I remember when Joe asked me if I wanted to work on his committee, which not knowing at the time that that

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<sup>2</sup> From 1973 to 1975, Moakley served on the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, which was responsible for issues relating to government employees and is sometimes referred to as the Patronage Committee.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

was probably one of the biggest jobs from a standpoint of a staff person. Everyone down here, at least the people I was dealing with, wanted to work for a member of Congress in their office or committee. I was not looking to do any of that. I was just trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I basically had a job that I worked the congressional schedule. When they were in late, I worked late; when they were out, I was out. And it was a good job.

There was one instance when I told him absolutely would love to do it—I went to what they called at the time a document room, and I got a copy of the House rules, which is a book of about three inches thick. And it is just—you cannot read it. And Joe saw me on the House floor looking at it, and he came over and tapped me on the shoulder and told me, “Don’t hurt [yourself]; put that away.” He said, “We have people on the staff that will help you out.”

So, what I did as a legislative assistant was more or less dealing with issues that were from the Rules Committee. And at the time, and still today—right now, today the committee may deal with one or two issues at a time. When I was there, we would deal sometimes with seven or eight bills at a time. So I would summarize those bills in kind of one paragraph, concise—and that was very difficult for me to do, because frankly you had to read the legislation, understand it, comprehend it, and then put it in language that you could—to give to this icon of a member of Congress in my eyes. And here he is reading stuff that I wrote.

After a year or two into the legislative assistant [position], he bumped me up into his, what they call, Rules Committee associate, which I basically was his person on Rules Committee that dealt with groups. People wanted to come in and talk legislation. Whatever the issues of the day were, I would sit and talk with them along with the counsel. But that was a training for me where I went from dealing with bills to dealing with people, and being associated with Joe within kind of the small little community of Capitol Hill where I got to meet other people, other lobbyists, other staff, other committee members, the committee staff people. There were members of Congress who, after awhile, would see me with Joe. And that was something that was always a thing that I always felt pride about, that I could walk around, and I’d be walking next to him, or behind him, frankly. But it was always a neat thing for me to be associated with Joe.

And that was into the—for a few years doing that as his associate. And then when he became chairman of the committee, I went up as a staff member on the full committee dealing with issues, dealing with—basically dealing with the committees. I had five, six different committee responsibilities. And my responsibility was to make sure that not only Joe Moakley knew what was going on, but also the nine other—the whole, eight, nine Democrats on the committee. And that was again a whole different level of learning of how to put out a document to that—knowing that the leadership was reading. It was summarizing bills, it was summarizing issues, Rules Committee position or the Democratic committee position. And my name was on those documents. And that was another, again, a growing thing.

That was up until—did that until '96 when I became the chief of staff. And then that changed completely from dealing with this minutia of legislation and rules, which not many people know about, but obviously down in D.C. it's a very powerful and influential committee. And to have that kind of knowledge and connection was such a great thing for me to go over to his congressional office in dealing with issues that were important to the district and to try to help people understand the legislative process of how to get things done. And knowing that you could; I understood the committee process as much as I thought I did. There's a lot to it, but I could at least explain why a committee did what they did, and what they had to do afterwards. It wasn't just you finish the committee, where you have another process. And that was the Rules Committee.

And that was always Joe's mantra to me was always, "Just keep on learning, learning. Learn these rules and you will be valuable down here." And, of course, my goal was to get back to Boston. Every year was, "I'm getting out of here, I'm going back home." And Joe would bump me up in pay and give me more responsibilities. He would always tell me, "This is where your career is going to be." And it was twenty-two years later, I still—still don't know if I want to stay down here, so—. (laughter)

**BOWER:** So he gave you an education.

**RYAN:** Not only an education in process down here and how to deal with people, members of Congress, staff people, but also on the side—I came down here without a college degree. And he instilled in me the importance—and he’d always tell me, “What are you doing? Are you going to school?” And I wasn’t at the time, because I didn’t think I need to; I had the job. And he would always tell me, he said, “You know, you give them one less reason to say no with that degree.” And I got the undergrad, finished it down here, and just finished my masters at Johns Hopkins, but it was—August of 2000 I was at the convention [Democratic National Convention] with Joe in L.A., and we were having breakfast and I just found out that I got accepted into the Johns Hopkins masters program. And I told Joe at breakfast. And it was like telling my dad. He was so proud and it was great.

**BOWER:** That’s great.

**RYAN:** So on that side, he stressed the importance of the education. And I do that down here now with interns and people that we have working. It’s, “Go to school if you can do it. And you have to do it.”

**BOWER:** So you saw him through a lot of phases of his tenure on the Rules Committee. What were his strengths? What made him successful?

**RYAN:** You know, I think his ability, frankly—even when he was not chairman—when I came on I think he was probably fourth from the chairman’s slot of the seat. But, the Rules Committee is a very influential committee. And he had the ability—and members on both sides knew that you go to Joe, you’d help him. And he would help members—the stories are out there of [him] helping Democratic members, but also helping Republican members. And that was, I think, one of his things he looked as a successful legislator, that he put aside, at times when he wanted to, or when he needed to be partisan, arguments. He was very partisan. I mean, he was a Democrat, but he saw the need, and other people need help, and he would try to help other members of Congress.

I think they had the sense that they were going to get a fair shake. And, you know, when I was here—again, this is mideighties with the Rules Committee—I think there might have been 148 Republicans. And we had 270—the difference in ratio from Democrats to Republicans was amazing. And Joe didn't have to do that. But he did.

**BOWER:** Did that pay dividends after things changed?

**RYAN:** Oh absolutely. I remember in '94 and '95 when the Republicans took over. And one of the things that we'd always—particularly in Rules Committee, was appropriation bills. And all the members, all the chairmen coming up when the Democrats controlled the House, they knew they had to come in front of Joe. And they made sure what was in the bill had—Joe was very conscious what was in each bill. And it was one of those things as a staff person, we report back to Joe. Either his requests were in, they weren't in, why they weren't in.

And in the early years of the Republicans controlling Congress, Joe was successful in getting projects still in the bill—in the appropriation bills. And I think it was a testament to the kind of guy that Joe was, was that the Republican members who took over as chairmen were the same members that Joe would try to help. And they remembered that. Again, from the ability to cross, at the time different political climate—a lot of crossing over. Socialization was key. A lot of golfing, cards with both, both Republicans and Democrats, but you don't see that as much now.

But now as I think, one of his things that he succeeded in, [was] that he could put aside political titles, and he'd see through that and see the person, and would try to help him.

**BOWER:** Was he—he chose Rules. In other words, did he see the power of that? Is that why he chose it? He'd already accomplished what he wanted to accomplish?

**RYAN:** Yeah, he was on there before I came, he was on the committee. But, Tip O’Neill<sup>4</sup> had the seat before. And Tip O’Neill became Speaker of the House. And Joe is a very astute politician, and he saw I think what the Rules Committee could do. With members outside, [it’s] really difficult when you go home to your district and try to explain to someone what the Rules Committee is, compared to Transportation Committee or Banking Committee. They can see what that—but the Rules Committee was such that you could do a lot within the House. And you could help a lot of people, meaning the members of Congress, as well as his constituents, which because for the most part, most of those issues have to come up in Rules Committee. And the chairmen of the committees or the subcommittee chairmen, they knew they were coming to Rules Committee, and they knew how to answer, not only for Joe, but those other members who were on the committee. If there’s a request in there, if there’s an interest, they better—I shouldn’t say better put it—when they don’t put it in, chances are the Rules Committee will put it in.

And when Joe was on the Committee, Speaker O’Neill was the Speaker, so Conte<sup>5</sup> was the ranking Republican member on Appropriations. So the delegation itself was a very powerful delegation. It was to his advantage to be on the Committee. And frankly, I think, what Speaker O’Neill did, Joe Moakley did, was to place members of the delegation on influential committees.

**BOWER:** So that was part of his leadership pact from a Democratic side.

**RYAN:** Without a doubt. Because as his position as chairman of the Rules Committee he was automatically on the Steering and Policy Committee, which places members of Congress on committees. Again, this is inside the operations of the House, but it’s a very powerful committee and at the time—it’s probably now, probably somewhere fifty to sixty members. At the time it might have been twenty members that decided where those members were going on committees.

**BOWER:** So each party has that committee?

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill (1912-1994), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts’ Eleventh and, after redistricting, Eighth Congressional Districts in the United States House of Representatives from 1953 to 1987. He served as Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Silvio Conte (1921-1991), a Republican, served in the Massachusetts State Senate from 1951 to 1958, then represented Massachusetts’ First Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1959 to 1991.

**RYAN:** Yes, each party has. And when the Democrats controlled, we had probably two-thirds of the seats, and the Republicans had one-third of the committee slots. So there were a lot of slots to fill. And when Joe was in the majority, Joe got members on those exclusive committees like Ways and Means, Appropriations, Commerce, Rules Committee. So he placed members—other senior members who—and again, it’s a voting process, so it was always—you know, you get behind those closed doors and you can trade off a lot of things where somebody has to put somebody else on. “I’ll vote for your guy, you vote for my guy.” But Joe was always looking to do what he had to do, but for the state itself to make sure that members of the delegation, the Mass. delegation, were on these influential committees. And to this day, we’re covered on every one of those committees.

**BOWER:** Interesting. And how did that change in ’94?

**RYAN:** Well, obviously, it changed because we lost a lot of seats. Immediately switched over to the Republicans now two-thirds of the seats. So the members—like, for instance, John Olver,<sup>6</sup> I think he was elected in ’92, and he was appointed to the Rules Committee. I’m sorry—Joe got him on the Appropriations Committee. In ’94 the Republicans took over, and because of seniority, Olver was at the bottom of the list, so he got knocked off the committee.

As vacancies open up, members go back on those committees. Well, you’re not guaranteed of going back, and Joe fought to get him back on that committee. That was the thing that was a big thing for those members to go back on those exclusive committees. And so up until the end where Joe was instrumental in placing Jim McGovern<sup>7</sup> and Mike Capuano<sup>8</sup> on committees, Rules Committee for Jim and Transportation for Mr. Capuano, that was—Joe actually had this idea that you’ve got to take care of the people. And so he still had that ability, even as a minority party, or minority rep, he still had that ability within the democratic caucus to place members.

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<sup>6</sup> John Olver (1936- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts’ First Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1991.

<sup>7</sup> James P. McGovern (1959- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts’ Third Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1997. He was a member of Moakley’s congressional staff from 1982 to 1996. OH-013 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Congressman McGovern.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Capuano (1952- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts’ Eighth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1999.

**BOWER:** What do you see as being the things that were most important to him as a congressman?

**RYAN:** You know, I think from—and I saw it frankly when I became his chief of staff, was how much the district meant to him. You know, when I was with his committee staff we dealt mostly—we dealt with only legislative issues in trying to get a rule through, in trying to get those 218 votes. And then when I became his chief of staff it switched where [we're] dealing with the district, and how important it was from Joe Moakley's standpoint to take care of the people back home. And there were a number of times when he did things from a phone call that I probably didn't have the opportunity as a committee staff person to see it. But a phone call to someone either whose wife was sick, or a husband was out of a job, to assure them that he's going to try to help them, things like that. I think that was important to him that they knew that they could come to him. He would always say, "When they call us, they're calling us for help. They're not calling us to bitch and complain, which they will do. But, we're basically their last resort on some instances. And we've got to make sure that we help them."

And he kind of lived that way, where—it's a famous story, but on Sundays he'd love to go to Castle Island to read the newspapers, the Sunday papers. And I would always get calls from people, from friends of mine on Sunday night or Monday who would say, Hey, we saw Joe at the island, and he was sitting up there reading the papers. I said, "You should go over and talk to him." And they're like, We don't want to bother him. I said, "Go talk to him."

And he would tell me, he'd always come out—I'd either pick him up at the airport, or I'd come in, he'd say, "Hey, I saw B.L. I saw Franny, he was asking for you." He loved that kind of stuff where he was approached. He was approachable. And that was I think—

**BOWER:** Actually, that's something that we sort of skipped over at the beginning. I mean, you talked about how you met him, but you're actually—you were born and raised in South Boston, correct?

**RYAN:** I was born in South Boston, correct.

**BOWER:** Talk a little bit about that and about Joe Moakley, how Joe Moakley is perceived in South Boston.

**RYAN:** Well, the thing with Joe is he actually was very good friends with my mother through high school. And he didn't know who my mother was until about seven or eight months after I was working for him. And he was just flabbergasted. He said, "Why didn't you tell me?" "Because my mother would say, "I knew Joe when—we'd hang the beach together and he just—." That was what, from my mother's standpoint, from that age group, they all knew him as Joe. Everyone knew him as Joe. I remember the pictures that my mother had of them hanging out together when they were kids. And people just didn't see him as this big politician. They knew him as Joe from Southie.

And one of the nice things for myself going to work for him, and being associated with him in South Boston, was I know it made my mother and father very proud to have my name associated even in the same sentence with Joe, was a great thing. They loved to hear it. Of course, they also got phone calls all the time to call Kevin to get to Joe, or to call Joe. "We need Joe here." Or, "Can Joe help get this done?"

But I think from the standpoint of the neighborhood, he was a neighborhood guy. He'd go to Brigham's [Restaurant] for ice cream. I mean, the famous story with the stadium. When the Patriots [New England Patriots football team] were planning on going to South Boston with the stadium, he was in Brigham's on West Broadway and he had people coming up to him and saying, Joe, this is deep rooted here, we don't want it. And that was what he kind of relayed to Bob Kraft,<sup>9</sup> that this is not just this deeply—this is at the level they said at Brigham's, people having ice cream—very upset. And that was Joe.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Kraft has owned the New England Patriots since 1994.

I have stories of people seeing him shopping, hardware store shopping, and they're saying, This is the chairman of the Rules Committee. And that was—he was a neighborhood guy who just liked to be in the neighborhood.

**BOWER:** What do you think others will remember him for in terms of his legacy?

**RYAN:** Well, I think from a standpoint of, he was a blue collar politician that really wasn't interested in kind of foreign affairs. It was more or less jobs. Jobs to take care of the people back home. And the story of how he got involved with El Salvador and Central America and Cuba, you know that led him to there. But I think his legacy, at least in D.C., as a really, just a great guy. A guy who said if he would help you, he'd help you. And his word was his bond here. And that was very important to him, when members knew that if Joe said, "I'll see what I can do," or, "I can't help you," they knew that's where it would end, but he always—and still meeting members who I introduce myself, or I tell them—I always put in that I worked for Joe Moakley. And you see the smile on their face and people just miss him. They loved the guy. Legitimately just thought this guy was kind of like one of the old timers, when it used to be fun. Joe would always say it just wasn't as fun as it used to be. And that's where I think a lot of people just think of Joe, and they smile. They think of a good guy who took care of his people. And his word was solid.

I think frankly—I think Joe enjoyed having that reputation. I mean, his reputation as a fair man, but as a strong man also. He had this tendency sometimes to—he'd like to tease other members because of his Southie roots, and they always had him as a street fighter, and he was. But he never showed that side. But he certainly let it be known that—

**BOWER:** Is that how he was known in South Boston to a certain extent?

**RYAN:** Not really as a tough guy. I think he was a good athlete. I think he was known as—again, from the standpoint of my family, they knew him when he was an attorney and he helped a lot of people as a state rep. But, again, it ranged from—and I would walk the Saint Patrick's Day parade with him, and you would go from people out the window at twenty years old

thanking him, thanking Joe for the job, or thanking him for the interview, to eighty years old. I mean, just up and down, the whole range of ages, everybody just—it was a sense of comfort knowing that as long as Joe’s there we’re going to be okay.

**BOWER:** That must have been quite a thrill for you to walk in the parade.

**RYAN:** Oh my God, yeah. It was at one time, my second or third year I think walking with them, and we walked by a group of about fifty people, who were friends of mine with some out-of-towners, and they just cheered me on. Joe, I remember, he said to Roger Kineavy<sup>10</sup> who at the time was his district director, something to the effect of, “I hope he knows he’s not the candidate.” So he kind of subtly put me in my place. (laughter)

But it was great. In fact, I still march with Stephen Lynch.<sup>11</sup> But that first time without Joe was—I was thrilled to be there for Stephen, but boy, it hurt knowing that Joe wasn’t there. Again, this was—Joe passed away in May of 2001, and the following year, 2002, there was still pictures of Joe on the street in the windows. And there were signs, “We miss you, Joe.” It was still a great tribute. And still to this day, there are still pictures of Joe’s funeral program still in people’s windows.

**BOWER:** I think you know, the mission of the [Moakley] Archive and Institute is to continue his legacy, particularly in public service and political leadership and sort of targeted to young people. And one of the questions we’ve been asking people is, what advice would you give to young people, and also to the Institute in terms of trying to encourage people to go into public service?

**RYAN:** That was what Joe—I would go to schools with him or with groups, and he’d always talk about how proud he was to be a public servant. And the politicians always get this bum rap, some of them rightly so. But Joe always had this—he would tell kids, one, to really stress the education, but to look to go into public service because it’s a very honorable profession; you can

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<sup>10</sup> Roger Kineavy served as Moakley’s district director from 1973 to 1994.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Lynch (1955- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts’ Ninth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 2001, when his predecessor, Congressman Moakley, passed away.

help a lot of people. It's not the blow dry, makeup type that some would make it; at least it wasn't for Joe. Joe was proud of what he wanted.

There was talk awhile back—I know when I first started with him in the mideighties, there was talk. And when Speaker O'Neill announced his retirement, then there was some talk about Joe being Speaker, and whether or not he'd do something else. And he just was always—he'd say, "I'm happy to be a congressman." And he probably could have made the shot at Speaker. I think there was the natural expectation by some people that he's on the Rules Committee, he's senior in the sense that he can move up. But he chose not to. I just think that was his way of saying, "I can do a lot more." Maybe I'm just reading too much into it. But I would always see him—and he would light up when he met the kids. He liked talking with them and just hearing the questions. And just would always talk about—just doing some things for the community. And that was very important to him.

**BOWER:** I know this is the tough question for everybody. Do you have a personal story, or how will you personally remember Congressman Moakley?

**RYAN:** I have a lot of personal stories. I was fortunate to be with him a lot during the end, in the sense of we both lived in Alexandria [Virginia] when he was in D.C., and I would pick him up. I remember the *Today Show* did a profile of Joe. And I was there when they came into the office. I think it was in March, because he was scheduled to receive an Irish humanitarian award. And so the producer called me up and said, "It's going to air March 16th," or whatever it was, "and it's going to be around the 7:20 time."

So we had to be at this breakfast at eight o'clock. I pick him up at the house; I'm outside of his house at 7:30. And I knew this was the day that this was going to be on. I did not see it because I had to leave to pick him up. And he came down, he was kind of smiling, and I said, "How was it?" And all he said was, "It was great." He said, "They had good pictures of my mom and dad."

So we went to the breakfast. And that's what got me was, he's in front of probably two hundred people, and he's just talking about Joe Moakley as a politician, as a person, and it was a very

friendly audience. But he knew then, which some of us knew, that he was—he didn't have much time. But to watch him up there entertaining the people, it was just amazing. And that was always to me was—they showed a picture of his mom and dad. And I still have not seen the piece. I have it on tape; they sent it to me, the *Today Show* sent it to me, but I still haven't seen it.

**BOWER:** Well, Kevin, thank you very much.

**RYAN:** My pleasure.

**BOWER:** We really appreciate it.

**RYAN:** Any chance to talk about Joe.

**BOWER:** I think we may call on you again.

**END OF INTERVIEW**