



# JOHN JOSEPH Moakley

ARCHIVE & INSTITUTE AT SUFFOLK UNIVERSITY

## **John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project**

### **Oral History Interview with**

### **Deborah Spriggs**

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

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#### **Interview Summary**

Deborah Spriggs, a member of Congressman John Joseph Moakley's congressional committee staff from 1980 through 2001, discusses her experience as his Washington, D.C., office secretary, office manager, and scheduler. Her interview covers Moakley's ability to develop strong working relationships with staff and colleagues; his role as a member of the House Rules Committee; his love of constituent service; and his legacy of public service.

**Subject Headings**

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

**Spriggs, Deborah**

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

**Table of Contents**

<b>Working for Congressman Moakley (1980-2001)</b>	<b>p. 3 (00:04)</b>
<b>Relationships</b>	<b>p. 5 (03:12)</b>
<b>House Rules Committee</b>	<b>p. 5 (04:57)</b>
<b>Constituent service</b>	<b>p. 8 (09:58)</b>
<b>Congressman Moakley's legacy</b>	<b>p. 10 (14:05)</b>

**Interview transcript begins on next page**

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

**Interview Transcript**

**BETH BOWER:** It's September 29, 2004. This is Beth Bower, interviewing Deborah Spriggs.

**DEBORAH SPRIGGS:** Hello, how are you?

**BOWER:** Good. Why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself, and how you came to work for Congressman Moakley?

**SPRIGGS:** Well, as I tell everybody, I was in the right place at the right time. I moved to Washington in 1978; I originally started out with Congressman Harold Ford, Sr. in his district office in Memphis, Tennessee—that's where I'm from, Memphis, Tennessee—and I moved to Washington, D.C., in 1978, and I left Mr. Ford's office in 1980—without a job. So I was just kind of doing temporary work for a couple of months, and a friend of mine said to me, "I know of a temporary job on the Rules Committee for two months; would you be interested?" And I said, "Absolutely."

So I interviewed with Jack Dooling, who was the staff director at the time of the Sub-Committee on Rules—Mr. Moakley was the chairman at that point—interviewed with him, and he hired me on the spot. And what was a temporary job turned out to be twenty-four years (laughs), so that's how I came to know Joe Moakley. But interesting enough, it was during January—it was the beginning of the new Congress, and they didn't come in until the end of January, so Mr. Moakley and I had a telephone relationship for about a month.

And during that time, he thought I talked funny, and I thought he talked funny. So we had to get to know each other a little bit. (laughter) He had the Boston accent, and I had the Tennessee accent, so we had to come to a happy medium there. So that's how I met Joe Moakley.

**BOWER:** And at that point in time, you said he was the sub—chairman of the Sub-Committee on Rules—

**SPRIGGS:** He was the chairman of the Sub-Committee on Rules, right.

**BOWER:** And where was he—

**SPRIGGS:** At that point, Mr. [Claude] Pepper<sup>1</sup> was chairman, was the chairman of the Rules Committee at that time.

**BOWER:** And what did the Sub-Committee on Rules do? What were your responsibilities, and how would you go about—

**SPRIGGS:** Oversight. Sub-Committee on Rules was basically oversight, and maintaining order of the House of Representatives. Those are the types of things that they kept up with.

**BOWER:** So everything came through that committee?

**SPRIGGS:** Through the—right, right.

**BOWER:** And so how did you work with Congressman Moakley? What were you doing?

**SPRIGGS:** I came in as a receptionist/secretary, I guess for the first half of that career. And then the latter half, about fifteen years, I became his scheduler. So I was receptionist, secretary, then scheduler, office manager, towards the end of the career.

**BOWER:** Okay, and were you in the Cannon Building, or were you someplace else?

**SPRIGGS:** Always in H-152, in the Capitol, the whole time I worked with Joe Moakley. So my office was always in the Capitol.

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<sup>1</sup> Claude D. Pepper (1900-1989), a Democrat, represented Florida in the U.S. Senate from 1935 to 1950, then represented various Florida congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1963 to 1989. He was chairman of the Rules Committee from 1983 until his death in 1989.

**BOWER:** Okay, and that's how—you kept his schedule over there. Okay. Tell me a little bit about how he worked, first with his staff, and then with the sort of wider circle of staff, Massachusetts delegation—

**SPRIGGS:** He treated his staff like family. We were all like a little family, and he was like granddad, actually. (laughs) And he would always say to us, “Stay as long as you like. Use my office as an internship. Learn as much as you can, find out what you want to do while you're here, and move on.” And he would always tell us all that, but we all stayed (laughter) because he was such a nice guy to work for, and he had that grandfather attitude about things, and you just didn't want to leave. Most of us stayed a long time, but he would always say to us, “Learn as much as you can, use this as an internship, and then move on.”

And then, as far as the Massachusetts delegation, I think he had a very good working relationship with all of them, and of course when I first came along, Tip O'Neill<sup>2</sup> was the Speaker at that time, and they had an excellent relationship. They were very, very good friends, the families were friends, and I think the core at that time was so great. It's changed a little bit now, and you've got the younger members coming in with new and brighter ideas—at least they think they're brighter ideas, but with newer ideas—but he had a very good working relationship with the Massachusetts delegation, also.

**BOWER:** You then saw him go from being the chair of the Sub-Committee on Rules to being the chairman of Rules, and then becoming the ranking member. And can you talk a little bit about how he grew into that role, and then the transition—what you saw there?

**SPRIGGS:** Mr. Moakley became the chairman of the Rules Committee in 1989, after the death of Claude Pepper. That was a very exciting time, because that was something that he aspired to do—was to be chairman of the Rules Committee, and he was very good at it. And he was chairman up until 1994, when the House changed to Republican, and then Mr. [Gerald]

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas P. “Tip” O'Neill (1912-1994), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts' Eleventh and, after redistricting, Eighth Congressional districts in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1953 to 1987. He served as Speaker of the House from 1977 to 1986.

Solomon<sup>3</sup> became chairman of the Rules. It was difficult, because he was used to being the boss. He was used to being able to control the schedule, and what legislation came through the House.

And as the ranking member, you really didn't have a say. Now, although he had a little bit of a problem, I thought, with being a ranking member, he was always lively. With Joe Moakley—because he kept us laughing all the time. But I just think he did have a little bit of a problem with it, because he didn't have control of what legislation went in the rules committee, and what eventually went through the House.

**BOWER:** The sense that I get, and what I wanted to ask you about, is that he was a student of the rules. That he enjoyed the process of legislating.

**SPRIGGS:** Absolutely. He very much enjoyed the process of the Rules Committee, but I think more importantly, it was the constituent services that he enjoyed most. Because he liked bringing home projects to Massachusetts, he liked having his name associated with things—the transportation infrastructure and all that. Although he was a student of the rules, I just think bringing it back home to his district was really more important to him.

**BOWER:** So as a means to an end?

**SPRIGGS:** A means to an end, absolutely.

**BOWER:** Did you get involved with the constituent work at all, or were you—that's just something you saw in the other aspects of the office?

**SPRIGGS:** No more than having to deal with constituents for a scheduling. There were—every now and then, a case may have come to me where he said, "I want you to follow up on this," but the constituent services—because you had two different entities there; you had his personal

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald Brooks Hunt Solomon (1930-2001), a Republican, represented various New York congressional districts in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1979 to 1998. He was chairman of the Rules Committee from 1995 to 1998.

office, you had the Rules Committee office, and we did separate things. So not really did I—I didn't really get involved in the constituent services.

**BOWER:** It's my understanding that he was voted the Most Popular Member in the House, in the 1990s. Is that correct? Or he was—

**SPRIGGS:** I don't really remember that, but it was—

**BOWER:** Or the Most Respected—

**SPRIGGS:** It may have been the Most Respected Member of Congress. He had a way with members, and they all seemed to just—he'd come to the floor, and they'd gather around him. Because he knew—they knew that he had a friendly story or a funny story to tell them. Although he loved his job, some of these—he would always say, "You know, some of these guys are too serious."

He just didn't let it get to him to that point. You know, he took his job serious, but he didn't. He liked to have fun, too, tell jokes and keep you laughing. And I think that's what members really liked about him. And he was also a man of his word— If he promised to do something, he carried it out. And they respected that.

**BOWER:** I mean that's a real challenge, to be able to do that across party lines. Especially as the leadership changed in the nineties. What was it about his personality that enabled him to do that? Do you have a sense of that?

**SPRIGGS:** Well, I just think people knew that he was just an honest person, and they knew that if they talked to Joe Moakley, he would be frank and honest with them. He wouldn't try to tell them one way, and then it would be another way. Even with Speaker [Dennis] Hastert<sup>4</sup>—they

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<sup>4</sup> J. Dennis Hastert (1942- ), a Republican, has represented Illinois' Fourteenth Congressional District since 1987. He served as Speaker of the House from 1999 to 2007.

had a cordial relationship. I don't think there was anybody in particular that he could not get along with.

**BOWER:** He traveled with Speaker Hastert, didn't he? To the Vatican?

**SPRIGGS:** Yes, he did. He did. When was it? I can't remember what year that was, though. But I think he did travel with him. It may have been his last trip.

**BOWER:** Really?

**SPRIGGS:** Yes.

**BOWER:** Yeah, I think I remember some pictures, and they were giving the pope a congressional medal, perhaps?

**SPRIGGS:** Congressional medal, right.

**BOWER:** Well, that's interesting. What was most important to him—you mentioned the constituent work—what other aspects of his career as a congressman, if there were particular issues that were of interest to him, or things in his career—

**SPRIGGS:** He loved South Boston. I think historic preservation was a big issue for Joe Moakley. Transportation was big with Joe Moakley. El Salvador was huge—was a huge issue with him, that he followed very closely. Constituent services, I think, is just the meat of—and his thing was, if you didn't go home and connect with your constituents, there was no point of you being here. So he was a guy who would go home every weekend, and he would connect with his constituents.

And most people in his district called him Joe, instead of Congressman. Most of his staff called him Joe; I always called him Congressman, but most of his staff called him Joe. And he just had

that relationship, with—even little kids would call him Joe, and he liked that, because he felt that he could connect with them.

**BOWER:** Great. There's also a leadership structure within the party that he was a part of as well. Can you comment at all about that?

**SPRIGGS:** Being chairman of the Rules Committee, he was chosen by Speaker O'Neill to be—for that position as chairman of the Rules Committee. And as chairman of the Rules Committee, which is the vehicle of which legislation gets to the floor, he was part of the leadership.

**BOWER:** And so there were—that was something that they met and discussed—

**SPRIGGS:** Absolutely. They would meet and discuss, and decide what particular legislation would come through the Rules Committee, how it would be structured, and how it would be carried out on the floor.

**BOWER:** How will you—what is it that you remember about him most?

**SPRIGGS:** I guess that the one thing that I think about him, every day, is I miss his laughter. Even when he didn't feel well, he would always come by with a story, with a joke, with a tale of some sort, to make you feel better than he felt. And I think that's the main thing that I really, really miss about him. He was just a grandfatherly type, that you just felt comfortable with sitting down, carrying on conversation, sharing a problem with. And he was just the easygoing, teddy bear type of guy. So that's what I kind of miss about him.

**BOWER:** So he was not only helpful to his staff professionally, but also personally.

**SPRIGGS:** Absolutely, absolutely. He was always there for us. Always made it a point on holidays to either organize a staff dinner, present that Christmas gift—always. You could always depend on Joe Moakley and the staff getting together at least two or three times a year. It was

wonderful. And I think that's what made us feel so much like a family, because we could always depend on that outing. You know that staff dinner, or that gift. He appreciated us, and I think everybody appreciated him for that. Oftentimes, you don't get that—that "I appreciate what you do." And he would tell us that.

**BOWER:** What do you see as his legacy? There were so many things that he touched, but are there particular things that he'll be remembered for in Congress? And then maybe, you can answer that towards more his district.

**SPRIGGS:** I think in Congress with his colleagues, he was the guy who could bring everybody together. And I think his colleagues knew, if Joe Moakley was involved in it, then it's aboveboard, you can depend on it happening, or you can depend on it being the truth. So he was the guy who would pull the sides together, I think. And I think he was in his district and with the delegation—he was the guy who could bring home the bacon.

And he'd also share it, too. (laughter) So I think the people in Massachusetts will remember him for bringing home the bacon, the projects, jobs—was big with Joe Moakley. And with his colleagues, I think he was the guy that they could depend on, with pulling opposite sides together.

**BOWER:** From the other interviews that we've done in other things and have read, even his interview, I got the sense that he felt that he was a very lucky man.

**SPRIGGS:** A very, very lucky man. He would always say, "You know, I thought I would have been gone so many years ago." Because he had so many issues along the way, but he managed to beat the odds every time. And he was just quite thankful and humble to have had the extended time that he did.

**BOWER:** The Archives and Institute has as its mission to take his legacy of public service and political leadership, and encourage young people to think about a career in public service. Do

you have any advice for young people having known Congressman Moakley about a career in public service, or any advice for the Institute in how to reach out to young people?

**SPRIGGS:** Now, that's a difficult question. Because young people these days want it so quickly, and they want the big money so quickly. And most people know, in public service you don't really make the big money. And that was one thing that he would always encourage interns—intern program—all the time in his office. He would say, "Make sure the interns go to the different programs at the Library of Congress," so they would know what it's like, or the process of being a public servant.

And even with his scholarships—with the Moakley [Charitable Foundation] scholarships—he encouraged going to trade schools and into public services, so he was very big on that. But encouraging young people to do it nowadays is just a difficult thing. I think we're dealing with a different group of young people now, and it's tough. It really is.

**BOWER:** It's a different time.

**SPRIGGS:** It's a different time. You've got very difficult issues to deal with now, and I just—people are just moving in different directions, I think.

**BOWER:** Do you have a remembrance or a story of the Congressman that you think illustrates Congressman Joe Moakley that you'd like to tell us, or—?

**SPRIGGS:** I'll tell you this story. My firstborn was born in 1980—1990, I'm sorry, September of 1990. I went on maternity leave, and I wasn't quite ready to come back, at the end of that time. And he would call, "When are you coming back, when are you coming back?" "Oh, I'm not ready to come back." Because at that point, I didn't have babysitters lined up, and he said to me, "Bring the kid in." (laughs)

So I brought my son in to work every day, I used Mr. Moakley's office. I had a playpen set up, and he enjoyed it, so you would have thought it was his own grandson. He made me feel like I

was not imposing, that you could do this as long as you wanted to. And that's the one thing that I'm going to always remember him for, and to be grateful, that he allowed me that extra time to spend with my first child.

**BOWER:** That's wonderful. What a great story.

**SPRIGGS:** Yeah, it was great.

**BOWER:** Does your son remember any of it?

**SPRIGGS:** I have pictures, so he remembers the pictures.

**BOWER:** Because he was pretty young.

**SPRIGGS:** He was pretty young; he was four months—two months old. Two months old when I brought him in. So we took pictures at the time. I have pictures with the Congressman holding him. So I often—I even had an ID made at that time; he had his own ID with a little tiny baby on it. (laughter) So he had his own congressional ID, so that's the one thing that I'm always going to be grateful about. And that he allowed me to grow.

There were oftentimes when I felt that I was being passed over on certain things that I wanted to do, but he allowed me to grow. And then, the other thing was, when he knew that he was not going to run again, he said to me, "listen pal, I want you to decide what it is you want to do. Let me know, and I'll help you get there." And I said to him, "I'm in this for the long run." So I will always remember him for it.

**BOWER:** Has your experience with him helped you in your current job, in the Leaders' office<sup>5</sup>?

**SPRIGGS:** I think so. I was there for twenty-four years. I matured a lot. You know, you learn to deal with different personalities, although Joe Moakley's personality is so much different from

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<sup>5</sup> Ms. Spriggs worked at then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi's office.

the average member. You just learn to deal with people differently, and I've learned not to take things so seriously, that life is just too short. And so I enjoy myself.

**BOWER:** That's good. Is there anything else you'd like to say, or tell us about—

**SPRIGGS:** The only thing I would like to say is, I wish he was here, I miss him. I miss him very, very much.

**BOWER:** Yes, I think that sentiment is shared by many, many people.

**SPRIGGS:** Absolutely .

**BOWER:** Thank you so much, Deborah.

**SPRIGGS:** You're welcome.

**END OF INTERVIEW**