

Lillian Dudley Owen Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 10/03/1977
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Biographical Note

Lillian Owen Dudley (1910-2001) was the founder and president of The Hospitality and Information Service [THIS]. This interview focuses on discrimination faced by African diplomats along Route 40 in Maryland and the efforts of THIS to help diplomats and their families adjust to life in America, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

Of

Lillian Dudley Owen

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Lillian Dudley Owen– JFK #1
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Oral History Interview

with

LILLIAN DUDLEY OWEN

October 3, 1977

Georgetown, Washington, D.C.

By Betty McKeever Key

For the John F. Kennedy Library

KEY: Howdy. Betty McKeever Key of the Oral History Office of the Maryland Historical Society. I will be talking today to Mrs. Lillian Owen, Mrs. Dudley Owen, and we will be discussing an organization in Washington called THIS, The Hospitality And Information Service, for diplomats. It began during the administration of Senator John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy], and its function was and continues to be today, in a very flourishing manner, just that--hospitality and all sorts of services for the diplomatic community in the city. Mrs. Owen was one of the first organizers. Several of the other women who were involved at the outset have died. But we will be able to reconstruct a great deal of this information in talking to Mrs. Owen.

This is Monday, October the third, 1977. We are meeting at Mrs. Owen's home in Georgetown. [INTERRUPTION] What I want to do is to explain to the people in the Kennedy Library that there was this activity going on, and that it did involve people who were connected with the Kennedy Administration, that it was put together by women, and that it was part of the whole Kennedy period with the opening up of a lot of embassies and the need for this sort of service to be given to them. So, if you can just start sort of at the very beginning with how the whole thing began, we'll take it from there.

OWEN: Yes. Well, it's really very simple. It's one of those things that's so easy to think

why wasn't it thought of before. Because, when the Kennedy Administration started, and he appointed Angier Biddle Duke as the chief of protocol, he brought down to the office with him Mrs. Eleanor Israel, who had worked with the UN [The United Nations] Hospitality Group in New York City, and she was at work without compensation for him. And at that time there was the beginning of the difficulties on Route, what was it?

KEY: Forty.

OWEN: Route 40. And the newspapers were carrying on a great deal about how ambassadors and diplomats who were members of the black countries, many of whom were nearly represented because we had a sudden burst of embassy representation from about ninety to one hundred and ten very quickly, and they were protesting to the protocol department, of course, about this. And so Ambassador Duke said to Eleanor Israel, "We ought to do something about Route 40." Pedro Sanjuan was working on that, too, who was also in the Office of Protocol. "And what is being done in Washington to try and help diplomats who have difficulties of any sort, not just problems of going into restaurants, similar to the hospitality group at the UN that you knew so well and worked for?" And Eleanor said, "I don't know, but I can find out." And she was particularly interested because her daughter was secretary to the New York Committee, the Mayor's Committee for Hospitality to UN people, at the time that was.... See if I can think of her name--Eleanor French [Eleanor Clark French].

KEY: Was that her daughter?

OWEN: No. Her daughter was Ellen Rosen. But Eleanor French was running it, and she was the executive. So, she expected to find something here and was surprised to find that nothing of this sort existed, partly because we always had a diplomatic core in Washington, and it had just grown, and nobody ever envisioned the numbers of people that would be involved, the fact that help would be needed. And so she cast around, she was a complete neophyte and didn't know Washington at all. She had some friends here but, and of course met more through Angier Duke. I was amazed at the speed with which she found the people to go to say, "What about founding such an organization?" And she tried, of course, she went to Katie Louchheim [Kathleen S. Louchheim], and Katie suggested that she go to Mrs. Richard Roberts, Irena Roberts, who was one of the heads of the Foreign Students Service Council and particularly active in making foreigners welcome in the capital, and was a great mover and shaker.

There was an organization that existed in Washington that was an overall sort of umbrella organization, representatives of all the groups that were giving any kind of assistance to foreigners, including the YMCA and YWCA [Young Men's Christian Association and Young Women's Christian Association] and a group called Welcome to Washington. Quite a lot of them; a Spanish group and a French group and many others. And Irena and her friend, whose name was Mary Mudd, Mrs. Harvey Mudd [Marion Mudd], were

very active in the organization; as was Rosalie Goodman, who was an old League of Women Voters gal, whom I believe Ellie had known.

KEY: What was the name of the umbrella organization?

OWEN: That's what I'm trying to think of. It's now known as IVISC, International Visitors Service Council. It was called--it had an unwieldy title, Organizations Offering Service to International Visitors. I can give you the correct title, but it's long since out. It's not been used for a long time. And the Friends Group were working with that. And one of the chief people was a Mr. Smith. So Irena and Rosalie went to Mr. Smith and said, "How about calling an ad-hoc committee together to see if this proposal for setting up one more committee is feasible, if it could be financed, if it would avoid duplication and repetition, and if it would serve a useful purpose." And I just wish more groups in cities would do something like that, and think ahead a little bit before they go charging off setting up one more organization that probably isn't necessary.

So, they had two meetings, and Eleanor, Ellie, came and explained what she had in mind, and it became abundantly clear that nobody had ever thought of diplomats as people that needed help; they thought of them as glamorous individuals who could perfectly well find their own way. It was pointed out that indeed they did need assistance, not only in finding houses, which was difficult and which we couldn't do very much about, but in schools for the children, health care, everything. Just plain neighborliness.

So, the group agreed to set up an organization with no name attached to it at all, just an organization. "Ellie," they said, "we will help you in every way we can except money." And Ellie said, "I'll go out and raise the money if you'll give us your backing so that we're very helpful and legitimate." They all said, yes, they would serve as an ad hoc group on a board of trustees that would be set up. It was just an advisory committee. So, with that in mind, Irena called me, and said, "This group is going to be formed, and we're going to put it to work in the early fall. Would you be chairman, would you be head of it?"

KEY: What year would this be?

OWEN: Dick [Richard Owen] was sixteen years old then. I'll look that up. I hate to think how long ago it was. Well, when did Kennedy first come in?

KEY: 'Sixty-one. I mean sixteen years ago was '61. He came in in the sixties, didn't he? Yeah, he was elected in '60 and inaugurated in '61.

OWEN: Well, we started, I would say, either late '60 or early '61. But that's easily ascertainable. And I went off happily on my vacation thinking that this would be something that I could do just along with other things, and came back and found that I was immersed in it, and nothing else for five years. We set up an office in my basement--in fact you may remember that--in my house in Wesley Heights and we hired a

little secretary, and we worked out of my basement for about a year while Ellie raised the money.

But the very important thing she did was to enlist the aid of the wife of then-secretary of state Dean Rusk. She got Virginia Rusk [Virginia Foisie Rusk] to say that, "I think that this is absolutely great, and I will support it. And how could I help?" And Ellie said, "We need sponsors so that when we go to the diplomats, they will not think that we're a 'Welcome Wagon' or a fly-by-night organization. We need the imprimatur, and we would like to have the wives of the cabinet officers as our sponsors that we could show on a card or whatever literature we have, and we would like to have the wives of the commissioners of the District of Columbia," because in those days there were three commissioners.

So, Virginia Rusk went to all the other cabinet gals and said, "I'm going to do this, and I hope you will, too." And they all not only agreed to serve as sponsors, but said, "What can we do to help?" So, we were off to a very, very good start. And they would even come down to our little office, which we eventually got, through the help of somebody in State [Department of State] in the basement of 744 Jackson Place, which is now part of Blair House. It's the corner place that's been redone and is now part of Blair House. And they would come down and do things like licking envelopes. But their chief value to us was their --the fact that they had the prestige of their husband's position, and that they had the enthusiasm to say, "What can we do to help?"

I remember so well that Mrs. Orville Freeman [Jane Shields Freeman] said, "I want to take a whole group of people out to Beltsville [Maryland] and show them what we're doing in the Department of Agriculture out there." And the wife of the then-secretary of commerce, Mrs. Luther Hodges [Martha Elizabeth Blakeney Hodges] got together with somebody in Labor [Department of Labor], and got us the interdepartmental auditorium, and set up a bit meeting at which people explained, to the diplomats who arrived, what the availability of travel opportunities on their vacations in this country were. It was lots of fun.

Mrs. Goldberg [Dorothy Kurgans Goldberg] had a big thing: Her main interest was in art; as you know, she was a painter. And she set something up in the Department of Labor, and all the people from all the galleries in town, the commercial and the museums, came and explain--had booths--and explained what was available for diplomats to come and see in the art world of Washington. And then she took it a step further and asked the group to come to a meeting that she held in the Washington Post Auditorium, if they would act as docents; in other words, if they would make themselves available if somebody said, "I want to go to a museum, but I don't know how to do it." They would say, "Well, we'll be on hand to take you." And she had the thing going in very short order.

So, I could go on about the cabinet wives. But with the exception of Mrs. Dillon [Phyllis Ellsworth Dillon]--who didn't spend much time, I think I told you, here in Washington, but who supported us generously with money and enthusiasm, but said that, "I can't really do anything in the way to help" in the way that the others were doing--we had every cabinet wife and then we had the three commissioners' wives helping us enormously to explain the District of Columbia.

So, in effect, from the very moment we decided to start, we were off to the start.

Eleanor raised a lot of money, principally from a lot of New York people that she knew. She also, in due course, found people here that would be very glad to help us. We didn't have to pay rent because we were either in my house or then moved down to this rent-free place on Jackson Place across from the White House. We paid a secretary, who at the time....

[Laughter] We first started with my daughter's roommate at college who she was living with me at the time. That made it very good [Laughter] that I had a little girl right there morning, noon, and night. She was born in Newfoundland, but had gone to school here, so she was tremendously enthusiastic about offering to help people who needed it.

Our kickoff was how to acquaint the diplomatic corps with the fact that this organization had been started. So, Ambassador Duke sent a personal invitation to the ambassadors of every country and invited them to come to Blair House to a meeting at which THIS would be explained. I say THIS because I wanted an acronym. It's old hat now, but I really scratched my head trying to think of a thing that could be called--that could be an easy acronym. And I finally came up with a rather unwieldy THE, because I needed the T to start with The Hospitality and Information Service for Diplomatic Residents and Families, which is, of course, in fine print, which spelled THIS.

So we became known as THIS, and it worked very well because the newspapers of course were very eager.... This was something new. It was amusing because of this and this, and we had publicity for every single thing we did without hardly asking for it. We'd just send them the calendar and then call up and say, "May we come and interview people with people here?" I'm getting ahead of myself when I speak of the calendar. I'll go back to the party at Blair House.

Angier Duke, in his marvelous way, told the group how he thought this would be of assistance and how he wished that they would communicate with everybody in their embassies that we were volunteers. As you know, volunteerism is not understood in many countries. Too many people think, well, what are they doing it for? We also were very eager to explain, and Angier did it very well, that this was a group of Washington citizens. And that while it had the blessing of the president, his cabinet, and the chief of protocol, it was not connected with or overseen in any way by the Department of State. Because, as we thought, some people might feel, well, this is the State Department, and they're coming to see us, and taking us places. Maybe it's a little too much "big-brotherism." So we made it very clear.

One of the gentlemen, who had been in this country for quite a while, who came instead of his ambassador--who couldn't come, or perhaps his ambassador came with him--was a gentleman named Lulli from Peru, Antonio Lulli; he's still here in town. I ran into him the other day. I think he's with the OAS [Organization of American States]. And after this explanation had been made, and Eleanor and I had been introduced, and Robin Duke [Robin Chandler Lynn Duke] had been introduced, then naturally, "Are there any questions?" There was that leaden silence that so often happens. And finally nice Antonio Lulli spoke up and said, "I just want to say I think this a brilliant idea and that it is something that we can use very often." He immediately made a suggestion, which was that we appoint representatives from the diplomatic corps who would take it on themselves to tell their colleagues about us from perhaps--regionally, one from Asia, one from Europe, one from South America, and so

forth, which we did, and they turned out to be, in fact, extremely helpful.

And then we had groups of them come to informal meetings, sometimes luncheon meetings. Frequently, the cultural attachés or the cultural attachés' wives--this was very much man and woman; it was not explicitly female at all--they came to meetings, and we explained to them what was needed. They used to say, I remember very well, it's a very hard to get the word across because sometimes the ambassador doesn't actually see all the things he should, and his secretary sometimes just says, "Well, I won't bother him with this." Or if you're really interested in having his wife come to something, he forgets to bring the mail home from the office, and so you would do better to contact the wife as well. So we learned as we went along. We decided that we would send out a monthly or quarterly calendar of events, which would explain what we had for them in various areas, had for them to do or to see or to enjoy in various areas. Then they would send back a little enclosure slip and sign up for the things they wished, and then we would send them an invitation time and place and everything, and, of course, all for free.

As time has gone on, we have had to charge a small fee for many things simply because of inflation and the costs of printing, the cost of the office, and so forth. But it doesn't seem to have stopped anybody. They're all quite happy to do it. And we found we had to divide things into categories, because some people were more interested in the homemaking or the domestic type of thing, and some people were more interested in the political side, and we also had age group differences. We had to do it for adults or for teenagers, college-agers; our children, I think, it was eight to thirteen; then children below eight.

One of the highlights of course was the annual Christmas party at the White House, which was started almost at the very beginning and has gone on without interruption ever since. The wife of the president had invited the children to the White House for a wonderful Christmas party. The children have to be--I think it's eleven--older than five and younger than eleven, in order to get invited. So we've had the categories, and we've had the age groups, and it continues to grow.

We also, I'd like to say, in that group that assisted us from the beginning, were two organizations. One was called the Washington International Center, which is, as you know, in Meridian House and has the Meridian House International as it's.... What would you call it? They give us support and some monetary help, and they give Washington International Center most of its monetary help. We have a few outside funds, sources of income, and they said, yes, that they thought it would be fine because the work they did was for sponsored people who came over sponsored by the State Department. So, they would give us assistance.

Then there was a group called Welcome to Washington. That was a group of women who helped diplomats, but it was on an almost one-to-one basis, and it was very small, and it was just friends of friends. They did things such as we did and gave us all sorts of ideas on what to go and see, what to go and do. They were very helpful, but they agreed that THIS should come into existence because we took the entire diplomatic corps and they only took a few people. So, there were two groups that were helping with the....

Oh, yes, one other group was International Neighbors. That was founded by the wife

of a congressman from Tennessee, Mrs. Carrie Davis [Carolyn Leigh Davis], and that was before the Kennedys came in. And a group of Washington women who wished to get to know the diplomats and have the diplomats get to know people Washington in a very, very small way. Usually, the group consisted of many of the cabinet officers' wives and the ambassadors' wives, and there weren't many below that rank. So you can see that was a small group, but they said, fine, this was needed, and we got cooperation from everyone.

As I say, this was--it is--a success story because it was founded and it's all volunteer. We are now, as matter of fact, asking the volunteers, who very much like to work for THIS, to give us a small dues contribution every year. We send them out notices saying that the board of directors has asked that people pay dues, and we'd appreciate it if they would. We know that they give because we have this hospitality group.... We know that they give in time and in actual out-of-pocket expenses a great deal of money as it is. So, we don't say, you know, pay your dues or get out; we're very flexible about it.

We also have a large group of people we call our resource members, who have to be formally interested in THIS or who will give their homes once a year. We have some people in nearby Maryland and Virginia who have opened their homes for the Halloween parties for the children or for swimming parties or for a day at a farm to show the diplomats what it's like to have a day at a nearby farm. Now, they don't come in and actually help us in THIS, but they are our resource members, and they say: Call on us when we need something of that sort.

KEY: Well, now.

OWEN: You are a resource member because you gave us the home in Annapolis.

KEY: Do you still go through other organizations asking for volunteers? Was that routine?

OWEN: No. We didn't want to take volunteers from other organizations because they were all working on a volunteer basis, too.

KEY: The reason I asked that is because I first became involved through Ramona Egan and the International Federation of Catholic Alumni.

OWEN: That's right. The Catholic Alumni, they were a great source of help for us.

KEY: Now, how did that work then, what as the...?

OWEN: We, of course, sent out notices to all the people who were in that organization, the name of which I will have to get for you, and said--one of the things we said--
"We're not here to take volunteers from any of you. However, we are a volunteer organization that could use them." And Ramona Egan was the kind of woman who said, "Oh,

well, we can help. We'll help with our people.”

Now, another group that helped us and was, if you will, a satellite agency, was a group formed by the National Council of Jewish Women. They came from Maryland, and they wanted to give English language classes. So, they came in, met with us, understood our purpose--the head of it became a THIS volunteer--and then they went ahead with our assistance, with the names that we sent, because we keep the names of the newcomers up to date. We would say, Mrs. So-and-so is very eager to have English language practice, conversations; she lives in Maryland. Here's her name. Will you get in touch with her? So the National Council of Jewish Women group kept together and did form one of the many, many English language conversation groups we had. In the same way, I think, Ramona Egan got a group of her people together to help with either straight volunteering with THIS or to take people to various.... She did a language thing, didn't she?

KEY: I don't remember about language. She would staff particular projects.

OWEN: That's right.

KEY: And send hostesses down to your monthly receptions, I think.

OWEN: That, I think, a little less because we had a small problem with the introduction to Washington, which came once every other month, I think. Sometimes evenings and sometimes daytime, because all the volunteers wanted to come because it was a great party. [Laughter] We'd have to say only those gals who promise to work and send out the invitations and be there to help are the ones that are going to get to come to this great party. I'll tell you who else you're reminding me of Ramona Egan, the Fort McNair wives, I believe. We had a group of people whose husbands were in the army and stationed here, and they had a group that met through just a friend of a friend of a friend. I can remember Petey McClintock [Frances Effinger Steidel McClintock], living in Alexandria, met somebody who said, "Well, we meet, and we're the wives of officers of the such-and-such, and we'd like to help." And she said, "All right, come on in." And we got some office volunteers, which is the hardest thing to do, who agreed to come in two and three days a week and man the telephones and do the mail for us from that group.

KEY: Now let me ask you two or three questions: Did Mrs. Israel do all this as a volunteer?

OWEN: Completely.

KEY: And she took up residence down here, or did she commute back and forth?

OWEN: Oh, no, she learned about it because she came down to work for Ambassador Duke as soon as he was appointed chief of protocol.

KEY: Oh.

OWEN: And she was listed in the State Department as an assistant something in the protocol office. But she was, as I said, a WOC--without compensation.

KEY: A what?

OWEN: A WOC it's called, you know, without compensation.

KEY: Aha.

OWEN: She worked for Angie on an absolutely regular basis as a member of the protocol office. And she had a beautiful house here in Georgetown and stayed here--oh, yes, she moved from New York down here.

KEY: All right. Since the Route 40 problem was one of the things that made THIS originate, did you ever stay in that problem, did THIS have any activity in opening up the places along the highway?

OWEN: No. But what we did do, by offering hospitality and friendship to people who were coming in in the embassies, was to say, if they had a problem or if they were uncomfortable in any way, or if we gained their confidence and they said, you know, this is intolerable, we would say, we will--we know someone who would like to know about this. And then either tell the person in the protocol office, who was sometimes Pedro Sanjuan and sometimes somebody else, to get in touch with them or we would try and help them ourselves through just friendship and explanations of what to do. But anything official that was done about Route 40 was done through the State Department.

KEY: I don't know what the duration of that problem was or how soon they did get it ironed out so that they could stop in the restaurants and other facilities.

OWEN: As I recall, it was handled with great dispatch.

KEY: It wasn't easy, I know, in some cases, some of the Marylanders were not too happy, but I don't think it took too long.

OWEN: I don't either. Well, it was at the time, too, when the whole public opinion was changing, beginning to change.

KEY: But Maryland, you know, is not quite that liberal, hasn't been since there are evidences of discrimination in Maryland that were worse than things that were

farther South.

OWEN: I know that is true.

KEY: What about the Maryland women who, in suburbs of Washington, began to volunteer? Was there any particular characteristic thing about--what kind of women were they? Were they government people who were new to the area, or were they...?

OWEN: The people who volunteered were, on the whole, women who had a certain amount of leisure, housewives whose children were in school a good deal of the time. We had one group.... Usually something like this is because of some one woman who gets--sparks a lot of other people, you know.

KEY: That's what it takes.

OWEN: Yes, it is. We had two groups from Maryland that were very active, who gave our cooking classes, and our cooking classes were great fun. They're so good that we have one in Maryland; we have two or three in Maryland, Virginia, and D.C. And for those diplomats who lived in Maryland, they would go to a nearby home, and we should show them what we--how we did certain things. And in the course of doing it, of course, we explained all sorts of things, such as how to call a repairman if your gas stove goes wrong. The kind of thing that one woman can tell another woman in a friendly atmosphere that can't be done otherwise or over the telephone. Mostly, it was the exchange--we showed them what we did in the way of cooking. Now that brings me....

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A – BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

OWEN: In Virginia, another group that offered to help us with the AAUW, American Association of University Women, and they became so interested that they formed two groups. One was an English conversation class which is still going on, and, in fact, so is the cooking, and the other was cooking. Well, the cooking was such fun they used to invite, when they first started, they used to invite Virginia Rusk and me, and then they continued to invite my successor to an end-of-the-year celebration at which the diplomats who had been enjoying the cooking in people's homes took, I think, the church over on Lorcome Lane, took the assembly hall, and invited us all to a marvelous luncheon at which they had all contributed their specialties and dishes. They even had a fashion show and some music, and it was the greatest fun, and people got to know each other very well from.... You see, all the countries got together.

A lot of it is true, we discovered this quite early on, that people who come to a new place are timid. I know how I am about driving sometimes. That was one of the first lessons we used to give to people; how to find their way around the District and how to contact AAA

[American Automobile Association] if they had to or any of the people who could help them with maps and things like that. And so they would like to keep in the neighborhood, if possible. That's why we had groups in McLean, Virginia.... We had Arlington, Virginia, groups, we had two groups in Maryland, three or four groups in Maryland, and then of course D.C. groups.

And the first thing that is done is that when we receive the word that a new diplomat has arrived, which we received from several sources--one is from the embassy itself, one is from a friend who says, "I'm leaving, but I want you to meet my successor," and one, of course, the principal one, is from the State Department. That is almost a full-time job, keeping those lists up to date. And as soon as we hear that someone has arrived, we have a calling committee in all three of the areas; someone is chosen to go and call on the newcomer with this kit. The kit contains whatever printed information we can give about schools, cooking, shopping, driving, anything that a newcomer to town would like to know, plus our calendar of events, plus an invitation which says, Mrs.--whoever the wife of the secretary of state is, we'll go back to my day--Mrs. Dean Rusk and the Hospitality Information Committee invites you to--and that is given to the diplomats so that immediately--it's a little engraved card, you know, requests the pleasure of your company. And that is given to the diplomat along with the kit, so that she immediately realizes that this is not somebody who's going to try to sell her a vacuum cleaner the next day.

Very often on that first visit, the hospitality visit, problems turn up that can be helped by the person who goes to call. Always we match up the language. We call the--in the case where we know it wouldn't be English-speaking, we call the embassy. We speak to the husband. We say, "We would like to call on your wife. Does she have problems with English? Because we do have people who can speak your language. Or would you prefer that we call when you are home?" Sometimes the wife is very timid and would like to receive the caller when her husband is home with her. So we set up the time, and the place, and say what it is, and what the purpose of it is, and then arrive with our credentials.

KEY: So, each new....

OWEN: Each knew person who comes has a call....

KEY: Each new ambassador's wife.

OWEN: Each new ambassador's wife, each new diplomat. All 1300 of them, or 1500 of them, or 23,000 of them. Whatever we have.

KEY: You mean all the way down through the whole staff?

OWEN: All the way down.

KEY: Some of them have tremendous staffs now.

OWEN: Take Great Britain or take France, but we do it. You know there is a Blue Book and a White Book. And the Blue Book are those who are listed who have the diplomatic privilege, who get the license plate DPL, who have their tax exempt, and so forth. The White Book are the people they bring with them who work in the embassies. Very often White Book people are Americans that they've hired to work for them. And those people, unfortunately, are so many and varied that there is no way we can help with them. But every diplomat, from the attaché who has just entered his country's foreign service up to the ambassador, receives a call.

KEY: Well, am I right in remembering that you made a particular effort to get to the lower echelons because you felt that the top people had full social calendars and were getting help? You want to talk about that for a minute?

OWEN: Yes. It's interesting because I can remember when we were down in Blair House, rather society-oriented individuals sashayed in and said, "This sounds interesting, and I'd like to help." She'd read about it in the newspapers. And of course there was a certain amount of clout because the cabinet wives, all of whom, as you remember, at the time of the Kennedy Administration were glamorous, and they were working. So they'd come in and see what they could do to help. And I remember this one rather over-dressed female saying, "Well, of course the French and the British have no need of an organization like THIS. And of course you won't hear anything from them. But I'm sure there are other little embassies that you will be receiving cries for help from." Well, she didn't, as you can imagine, stay the course because we gave her work to do. But she was wrong because the people who really understood what THIS had to offer were the people in the big embassies. And France and Belgium and Great Britain and Italy were among the very first. And the people we had the hardest time making understand that we were helping were, naturally, some of the Arabian countries because women don't go out. And we had great difficulty in getting some of them to come. Spanish women, of course, Spanish-speaking, are not oriented towards sort of group stuff; they were difficult to explain to. We found that by getting to the ambassador's wife and to the ambassador early on, that then they explained to the members of their staff how great this was. [INTERRUPTION--COUGHING]

KEY: We can continue.

OWEN: I remember, as I said, the dual purpose in ambassadors' wives were many a time lively members. I can remember Mrs. Balaceanu [Ioana Maria Balaceanu], who was the wife of the ambassador from Rumania; she came to practically everything we had. [Laughter] She was the most enthusiastic person. We had a lovely time with her, and she, of course, brought her staff along. And Mrs. Nehru [Magdalena Friedmann Nehru] brought many of the people from her embassy. And I can remember so well an Indian lady saying to one of our members that she had been in this country for a long time and had never

been invited to an American home. She had changed her whole feeling towards Americans when her husband was called away, because of the fact that she had finally made friends, and it was through THIS. You know, every now and then something nice like that would happen.

One of the first things that happened was we had a meeting at Mrs. Israel's house, a tea. It was just for hospitality, and I don't even remember now how we chose the people to come. But, among the people who were there was a delightful woman from India, who after we'd had our tea and cookies, said that she was very interested in any treatment for eye problems or for the blind in this country. And one of the gals who helped start us was on the board of the Society for the Prevention of Blindness, and she said, "Well, what do you want to know?" So this poor lady asked that her husband accept the position in the States because two of their sons were going blind, and they wanted to be over here so they could get treatment. So immediately Betty was able to put them in touch with the people that I'm sure they would have found eventually in any case. But it was so fortuitous that there was this gal who knew everything that could be known and, of course, kept in touch with her until she was quite happy.

KEY: Well, tell me about dealing with the black countries. Did they respond in the way that you had hoped?

OWEN: Yes, although not with the.... They were more reluctant and a little bit scared. It depends. You can't entirely generalize on that subject because some were rather sophisticated. I remember so well the group from Cote D'Ivoire which is very at home here in this country and quite sophisticated.

KEY: From where?

OWEN: Ivory Coast.

KEY: Ivory Coast, yes.

OWEN: But others, of course, were not at all. Then we also worked with the African-American Wives Association. Do you remember that? And that was part of the--I have to think--of the African-American Institute, which is New York, still going on in New York. And the Wives Association was started to make sure that the women who came here from the countries that had not had representation before, that were the black countries, were helped. Actually, they were working through a request of the State Department.

Some of the foreign service wives were working on this before THIS was started, and they gave us invaluable advice when we started. Jimmy Symington's [James W. Symington] wife, Sylvia Symington, was one of them who helped on that. And then there was a subsidy, or grant, rather, to get the African-American Wives Association, which combined the Americans and the blacks--that is, the Americans with the diplomats. With Americans we

have, of course, a large representation of the black community on that board because it was easier for them to make the contacts, I think. And they invited both Virginia Rusk and me to go on that board. We went and went to many meetings and invited them to some of ours. So we were not just....

One of the reasons I think we were as successful as we were was because we make it clear to every organization that we aren't in any way transgressing on what they are doing, but that we want to cooperate. If we can help, please ask us, and if we had problems, could we ask them to help us. And some of us, for instance, I remember, I happen to be--I'll use myself as an example--on the board of a children's hospital, and I arranged for a tour of the hospital, of course. One of the very first questions we had was a pediatric question, and I was able to tell the gal where to go and say the children's hospital was there. Off the top of my head I could give her the name of the chief doctor, you see.

We also made it a rule that we would not recommend anything that was commercial, like restaurants or places, service places that would help mend anything, or one store over another, or one real estate agent over another. We made it very clear that we weren't going to do that. And all of us could do it on a personal basis and say, "Yes, I know so-and-so would be glad to do it." And we made it quite clear that we shouldn't tell people our pet doctor, our pet hospital, or our pet anything. Give them a list, let them choose, and then in some cases we'd say, "Ask your ambassador." If there were real problems--I know one, I think it was an Indian gentleman, had a terrible insurance problem with his car and had met this volunteer. And the man, the husband, had been in the insurance business, and he was able to say, "What you need is this, this, and this. You need help." He was able to say, "Well, you're being ripped off."

KEY: What about housing?

OWEN: Housing, no. We did not.... We made that clear in the beginning. There was no way we could help on housing. That was up to the individual. We did have at our first meeting some of the real estate people in town, and they advised us against getting into that real estate problem. They did say they would like some help because, they said, "If you can figure out a way to politely tell the people things like put the shower curtain inside of the bathtub and you'll not have a flood, and in America we have flush toilets, please use them carefully [Laughter] and a few things like that, that every landlord would like to have known." We considered having little typed cards put up and then decided, no. That, again, since we met the people, when they came, since we've made friends with a great many people, that's the kind of thing you can say offhand or in answering questions, but you're not big-brothering. You're there, you're a completely service-oriented organization; you want to help, not instruct.

KEY: Did you ever get complaints from real estate people or hospitals or whatever when they had problems with the foreigners because they thought maybe you could act as intermediary?

OWEN: Not from real estate that I can think of. Probably one or two isolated things, but not generally. We did talk to various superintendents of schools in the area and asked them what their problems were. We had one woman who realized that there were a great many problems in a D.C. high school, for example. The gals would sit around, particularly the Spanish-speaking, and not try to mingle. They'd just sit at the lunch tables and would talk to each other. And the various superintendents of schools we met with said, "You could do us a great service if you would try to explain to the incoming diplomat and...." Oh, yes, that leads me to something else. "Tell him that because a certificate of graduation from one class into another in their country stands, it does not mean the same thing holds true in our country, that the standards in every country differ, that we have to make our own evaluation, and they are not to feel unhappy if their child is put in a lower grade or in a higher grade in something and a lower grade in other things and needs special teaching. This would be a great service if you could explain how the American public school system works."

I'm not sure whether it was that or it was something else, but we determined that everyone traveled, and Mrs. Rusk was very helpful on this, should stop at the consular offices of the countries they were in, and leave an explanation of what THIS was, and say anyone who is coming, planning to come to Washington, here is a little bit of information for you before you arrive. And when you arrive and need help, you will be called on by this volunteer, and do call such-and-such a number and ask for help should you need it. That worked for a while. I'm not sure how much of that is done. I think as time has gone on, the necessity for it is a little less. People understand more. Communication is easier, and people who come to this country are not quite so innocent about our ways as they were fifteen years ago. So it's not quite so necessary.

But it was a big help at the time. And, you know, we've been imitated. England has something they call Diplomatic Neighbours, which was set up after they saw what we did, and with our--they asked our help, and we gave them information. Israel had one for a while, and Finland had one. The general idea has spread, depending on the country, because America is really one of the few countries that goes in for this kind of volunteering.

KEY: Yes, I was going to say, you probably had to explain volunteerism to the women over and over again, didn't you?

OWEN: Yes, in some cases I'm not sure it ever took, but in many cases they did understand. They'd say, "Well, what does your husband do?" You know, there were as many answers as there were husbands, practically. Although we had many, many foreign service wives who understood the necessity for it and were willing to help and glad to help when they came back. But, you know, the butcher, the baker, and candlestick maker; and they'd say, "But what do you do?" And we'd say, "Well, we keep house or something." They had the hardest time understanding that we did this because we liked to and we had some free time. And when they did understand it, they were very frequently amazed that it happened.

KEY: Well, now, tell me, of course, you had strong sponsorship from the State Department. Did you ever have any feeling that the president himself was paying attention to what was happening? Were you getting any feeling of support from the White House or...?

OWEN: Well, let me tell you, one of the first Introduction to Washington meetings that we had, we held it in the auditorium at the Cosmos Club. And Mrs. Rusk couldn't come; she was.... The wife of secretary of state is always in it--we have a receiving line with the sponsors--and I don't think Virginia Rusk missed more than two meetings; considering her travels, it was amazing. So she sent us a substitution, and the substitution was Lady Bird Johnson [Claudia Alta Taylor Johnson], who happened to be the wife of the vice president. Believe me, we did have full recognition from the president and the president's wife, and of course it was in the newspapers. There were all the photographers saying, "Well, the vice president's wife is present at the Introduction to Washington for diplomats." And she, of course, was very gracious and had been to many of their countries, spoke Spanish. And so it was a great coup to have her. Yes, we....

KEY: What about Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy]?

OWEN: Well, as you know, Mrs. Kennedy did not do much of anything outside of her family circle. I knew Tish Baldrige [Letitia Baldrige], and we talked about it, and Tish always said, "You know she's interested, and you know she'll do what she can, but because of the family situation with small children, she is really not going anywhere." Which was true. "But you may use her name if you wish to." And we were not like benefits like the Symphony Ball that said "Under the gracious patronage of Mrs. Kennedy." I don't think we ever did that. I don't think we ever had occasion for that, except, of course, for the White House party.

KEY: The children's party.

OWEN: She was the first one who gave us the children's party in the White House. She said that was her contribution. And she of course, because she had small children of her own, was delighted to have it.

KEY: It was probably very logical.

OWEN: It was the logical thing to do, yes.

KEY: Did the president ever show up?

OWEN: I don't remember. I think I would have remembered if he had.

KEY: I imagine you would have.

OWEN: Although I myself....

KEY: What about Bobby Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy]? Ramona says she remembers a board meeting which probably was the International Students....

OWEN: Oh, well, he was head of the Foreign Students Service Association. So he was, of course, very much aware of what we were doing. And his wife gave us Hickory Hill [Hickory Hill, McLean, Virginia] for picnics for the children.

KEY: Oh, did she?

OWEN: Yes, and she came to several of our meetings. The whole cabinet really, as I say, with the exception of--I think the only one that couldn't participate and said so in the beginning and then very generously supported us monetarily was Mrs. Dillon. Everyone else supported us.

KEY: How does the history of the organization compare with what they've been doing in New York all these years?

OWEN: Well, let's put it this way: We're grateful to New York. We got a good many ideas from them. New York sprang full-blown when the UN was stationed there. It's a smaller organization, and it is in one building. Consequently, they are able to do things like, say, make theater tickets available. Because they will put them in one of the main offices of the UN, then people can come and say, "Yes, I'd like to have these tickets if it's possible." We do also get a block of tickets for things from time to time, but you can see the difficulty. It means telephone calls all over and people coming in and picking them up. At the UN it's quite different.

KEY: Do you think that their services reach down into the ranks the way yours do?

OWEN: Oh, yes. Oh, certainly, yes. I mean the whole point of the organization is to help every diplomat.

KEY: I mean do people respond in New York and volunteer...?

OWEN: Very much so. We had something called Thanksgiving in Old Westchester, which a group of people who lived in Westchester County set up by inviting UN diplomats to have Thanksgiving dinner in Westchester. [Laughter] I think it's still going. And the people from Westchester came down to meet with us and see what we did.

There was a very close, friendly relationship between the UN and us. We still, you know, take an exchange trip. We offer an overnight trip to New York to see the UN, to the wives. And they are given hospitality by the Hospitality Committee in New York. And we bring the UN wives down to see Washington.

KEY: When did you start doing that?

OWEN: About five years ago. We've been doing it ever since, possibly longer. I had an absolutely delightful gal from Czechoslovakia staying with me the last trip. And she had a friend who was from, oh, Great Britain, who came down, who had not been to Washington, so I flew her down.

KEY: That sounds awfully nice.

OWEN: It's very nice. It's a nice exchange.

KEY: How long? Was it overnight?

OWEN: It's overnight, yes.

KEY: And a full day....

OWEN: Two long days.

KEY: All right, let me get some of these early names for sure. How do you spell Mr. Lulli of Peru?

OWEN: L-U-L-L-I.

KEY: L-U-L-L-I. And it was Irene Roberts?

OWEN: Irena, I-R-E-N-A.

KEY: Oh, I was giving her the two E's and getting myself all tangled up.

OWEN: And she was Mrs. Richard B. Roberts.

KEY: Mrs. Richard B.

OWEN: She's dead, and Ellie's dead, and Petey's dead. It's really awful.

KEY: When did Petey come in?

OWEN: When I was asked to do, to chair, to run the organization, I said, "Well, I'm about go to Europe." Irena said, "That's all right, there's lots of groundwork to be done. Just go off, and you won't have much to do when you get home." [Laughter] So I went to Boston to see Petey, who was living there then, and my daughter, who was at Harvard at the time. I took a Harvard charter flight over to England, and Petey said, "You know, we're going to move back to Washington." I said, "Well, don't get involved." Because she used to be president of the League of Women Voters here. And I said, "Don't you dare get involved in anything like that because when you come back, we are starting a new organization, I've agreed to chair it, and I want your help." And she said, "Well, okay," sort of reluctantly. But it did sound like sort of a good idea. So, as soon as we got started, I made her co-chairman because....

KEY: You were the first chairman?

OWEN: I was the chairman. I don't remember at the time whether I was called chairman or president. I think chairman to begin with for a couple of years, and then we.... You know, we had no bylaws we were just a very, very loose organization. Then we wrote some bylaws, and decided the time had come, we were here to stay, and we ought to have some rules and regulations. We changed the names to president and vice president. Now we have three vice presidents and a huge board of directors.

KEY: It really has grown. Mary Mudd and Ro....

OWEN: Mrs. Harvey Mudd.

KEY: Mrs. Harvey M-U-D-D. And Rosalie Goodman.

OWEN: Mrs.--I should know her husband's name. I'll get it for you. I've got it upstairs.

KEY: What was Petey's husband's name?

OWEN: John C.

KEY: And Mr. Smith you mentioned. I can't remember what you said about him.

OWEN: He was--and I have that.... Actually, I got down Ellie's files the other day. He was the head of one of the organizations that comprised this organization that I told you about, and was asked to chair the meetings of the ad hoc committee. And he was with the Friends, and his name was--oh, it was an easy name like Ed or Fred or....

KEY: Is he still around?

OWEN: I think he spent a lot of time in New York, and I doubt if he's still around.

KEY: Okay.

OWEN: Oh, and Mrs. Kenny Walker [Mrs. Kenneth Walker] was very helpful. And Mrs. Dean Brown [Allison Brown], not the Dean Brown. You know there are two Dean Browns. She's the widow, Allison, and she was Irena's great friend, and she was very, very active in helping us start. She would be able to tell me the name of Mr. Smith, I'm sure, and whatever else I need.

KEY: I did tell you that I talked to her while you were still abroad.

OWEN: Oh, did you?

KEY: And she was leaving as you returned.

OWEN: Yes, she was going to Spain.

KEY: So I didn't have a chance to....

OWEN: We've been trying to get together to have lunch or dinner together for months, and each time I'm free she's off, each time she's free I'm off.

KEY: I don't know how long she said she was going to be gone.

OWEN: I must call her.

KEY: Well, I'm going to send this up to William Moss at the Kennedy Library, if it's all right with you, with a little note, and tell him to please sit and listen to it, and see if he thinks there should be further explanation, exploration of the story and maybe with the documents or whatever. Ultimately, I hope those documents go someplace where they will be saved, whether the Kennedy Library wants them or whatnot.

OWEN: You asked about the presidency. Owing to Ellie's nudging, I'm sure, I have the loveliest letters from Lyndon [Lyndon Baines Johnson] and Lady Bird Johnson. Lyndon Johnson's was really to the organization; Lady Bird wrote me personally. Muriel Humphrey [Muriel Fay Buck Humphrey] wrote me personally, saying, because I was chairman, president, whatever, for five years--now there's a two-year limit--when I left saying, you know, all the nice usual things that people say. And from Dean Rusk and Virginia Rusk and Jimmy Symington, who by that time was chief of protocol. And then Ellie, bless her heart, wrote to all the embassies, and the ambassadors wrote me letters and such

marvelous letters--I have them in a book--saying what this meant to them and to the community, and before THIS had arrived in the community, there had been not the same feeling that there is now.

KEY: Oh, that's wonderful documentation.

OWEN: It's just marvelous. And what one of them said was now that THIS has been invented, I'm sure that if for any reason it would be stopped, there would have to be another one immediately, because THIS is now very much a part of the community.

KEY: Well it really is. As you said, it's grown tremendously and knows exactly what it needs, what it wants to do, what needs it needs to try to fill. Well....

OWEN: I met a girl this summer in France in a little tiny village, Bellevisé, through a diplomat that I had gotten to know here, who is now in Barcelona, and he came to see us in France. And he said, "I want you to come over and meet some other Belgian friends." And we went over, and this young couple had started a restaurant where I had about as good food as I have had in France. I thought the girl looked familiar, and I said, "Do you remember me? Did you ever go to THIS parties?" And she said, "Well, of course, I did." I said, "You used to come with your brother." And she said, "That's right." She spoke English just the way we do, and she was simply darling. There she was in this tiny little village in France giving us marvelous food.

KEY: Somebody said they could travel endlessly just simply visiting all the good French....

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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- June 19 — Wednesday** 10 a.m. - 1 p.m.
Second Annual United Nation's Day for Children (ages 2 to 10)
 Kiddieland, Takoma Park, Maryland
- June 23 — Sunday** 5-7 p.m.
An International Hootenanny
 Informal Folk Singing
 (particularly for the young — high school and college age)
- June 28 — Friday** 9 a.m.
Special Tour of the White House
 for diplomats and their families
- July 2 — Tuesday** 2:30 p.m.
Tea and Visit to Textile Museum
 (Loan collection of Near and Middle-East rugs)
- July 4 — Thursday**
U. S. A. Independence Day
 4:00 p.m. — Mt. Vernon
 "Pageant for Patriots" (free admission)
 Early evening — Fireworks at Washington Monument grounds
- July 10 — Wednesday** 10 a.m.
Special Tour of the Department of State
 Behind-the-scenes view and informal coffee hour
- July 10 — Wednesday** 2:00 p.m.
Tea and Visit to a few Alexandria Art Galleries
- July 12 — Friday** 8:30 p.m.
Marine Corps Barracks Retreat Ceremony
 If desired, informal supper parties can be arranged beforehand.
 Seats will be especially reserved for diplomatic families.
- July 15 — Monday** 10:30 a.m.
"A Day in the Park"
 Hosts: Secretary of Interior and Mrs. Stewart Lee Udall
 (especially arranged for children twelve years and younger)
 Entertainment — Picnic — Fun

- July 24 — Wednesday** 2 p.m.
Tea and Visit to a few Georgetown Art Galleries
- August 7 — Wednesday** 2:30 p.m.
Tour of Freer Gallery of Art
 Islamic and Oriental Art Collections
- August 9 — Friday** 8:30 p.m.
Marine Corps Barracks Retreat Ceremony
 (See July 12th)
- August 17 — Saturday** 9 a.m.
Special Tour of the White House
 for diplomats and their families

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 Present
 for High School Students and Young People
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 August 12, Monday — The United Nations
East Auditorium — Department of State 2 to 4 p.m.

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