

John Knowles Oral History Interview – RFK#1, 07/02/1974
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Biographical Note

John Knowles was a classmate of Robert F. Kennedy at Harvard College and general director of Massachusetts General Hospital (1962-1972). This interview focuses on memories of Robert F. Kennedy as a Harvard student, reflections on the Kennedy family, and Knowles' input on health legislation, among other issues.

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Oral History Interview

with

JOHN KNOWLES

July 2, 1974
New York, New York

By Roberta W. Greene

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program
of the Kennedy Library

GREENE: Why don't you begin by recalling when you first met Robert Kennedy and what your early impressions of him were.

KNOWLES: Well, because my name is Knowles and his was Kennedy, we found ourselves sitting next to each other in a class in navigation in the ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] at Harvard. I didn't know who he was; I didn't know who the Kennedys were. I'd grown up in a typical suburban white anglo-saxon Protestant community outside of Boston. And generally speaking the WASPs and the Irish don't consort with each other very frequently in that area. They have different clubs, different social life and so on. I'd never heard of Joseph P. Kennedy [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] or all this Kennedy family. And that was long before his brother Jack [John F. Kennedy] ran for Congress. So there I was sitting next to him. And he was very pleasant. We struck up a nice friendship. I found him extremely intelligent and he grasped the ideas of navigation in this class very rapidly and spent a good half of his time helping me to understand it, as a matter of fact. And we had a very pleasant relationship.

One of several times, the first time, on a Friday, he said to me, "Why don't you come on down to my place in Hyannisport?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I'm kind of busy." He said, "No, I've got a large family." I said, "How many in your family?" He said, "Oh, ten or twelve or something." So I said, "You probably wouldn't have room for me down there in your house." He said, "No, we've got a pretty good sized house down there." And to make a long story short, I said hell, I didn't have any desire to spend a weekend down at Hyannisport. And obviously he took a liking to me; we liked each other. And a couple of weeks later he asked me again if I'd come down and spend the weekend with him, have a good time. During that time I was playing baseball and hockey and squash, and he knew that and I think he rather admired

that aspect. All the Kennedys seemed to like athletics and football and god knows what. So he kept asking me. It was only later when his brother became president of the United States that I realized that if I had become as close a friend as he obviously wanted to become by asking me down and being friendly with me and so forth, god, I might have rode into the White House with them all. Who knows. At any rate, I didn't see much more of him after that.

GREENE: You never did go to Hyannis?

KNOWLES: I never went down there.

GREENE: And when did you finally realize who he was?

KNOWLES: Only when his brother started running, I think when he ran for the Senate and beat Henry Cabot Lodge in Massachusetts.

GREENE: You didn't realize it even when he was a congressman?

KNOWLES: I didn't realize. Then I began to find out more about him. I found out that Joseph P. Kennedy was rich as hell and had been the head of the SEC [Securities Exchange Commission] and had imported a lot of liquor into the United States, and they made him the head of the SEC because he knew how to manipulate the market better than anybody else. And he had been mixed up with movie magnates and all kinds of things. Then it began to dawn on me that this was a very wealthy, very powerful family--not that that would have necessarily influenced my accepting the invitation to go to Hyannisport. At any rate, I didn't.

Subsequent years, as I went into the field of medicine and finally ended up running the Massachusetts General Hospital, Bobby Kennedy and [Edward M.] Teddy Kennedy, and occasionally calls from the White House itself (not Jack directly but a few other people) would call me when anybody in the family got hurt. One of their kids got burnt one time quite severely and they called me up for help.

GREENE: When was that?

KNOWLES: That was two or three years ago, and at that point it was Mr. [Stephen E.] Smith here in New York who called me up about that. And then when Teddy Kennedy went down in the airplane out by Springfield, Massachusetts, they called us up and we sent one of our surgeons up there to consult and ultimately helped to organize his care.

GREENE: Was he brought to Mass. General? I can't remember.

KNOWLES: No, he wasn't finally. He was taken to another hospital in Boston for a variety of reasons. So he never did come to our hospital. Meanwhile, the [Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr.] Kennedy Foundation had given to Massachusetts General over a million dollars for studies in neurology and mentally defective children, neurobiology

and so on. So I got to know him well through that mechanism too. Sargent Shriver was the titular head of the foundation's work and they would visit the hospital once a year to get a review of what we were doing with their money. We established the Joseph P. Kennedy laboratories for the study of neurological disease and mentally defective children. So I got to know him well then. The chairman of our board, a man named Francis Gray, was a classmate of Joe Kennedy's at Harvard College and they had kept up their relationship over many years. And then I would get periodic letters when Bobby Kennedy was attorney general. He would write me letters when something arrived in the newspaper that he'd see.

GREENE: Just congratulatory kinds of thing.

KNOWLES: Yes. So we kept up a very nice friendship, although I never saw him again really after those days at Harvard. He was playing football and doing other things.

GREENE: Did you play football too?

KNOWLES: No, no. God, I got as far away from that game as I could. So I knew him well then. And intellectually I think he was very bright, he was very tough on himself, he worked hard, and he clearly even at that point--and I never perceived myself as having much of a purpose at that point except I knew I wanted to go to medical school, but I had the definite feeling with him that there was no fooling around in any way. There was a very serious intent about him, a very intense person with his eye on the mark. He had a good sense of humor, but there was no joking about that school work.

GREENE: That's interesting because other people say that he really wasn't serious at all at school except for an occasional course that really caught his fancy.

KNOWLES: Oh, I found him very serious in the classes I was in with him. He was always listening closely to the lecture, he was always getting that work done. No, there was a definite feeling of intensity and purpose about him that I was quite aware of. I didn't have it so at that point until later, until I went to medical school. But I was just playing the game like most people and trying to get through with the least amount work, whereas he was constantly going at it hard. He had a good sense of humor, but I wouldn't say he was a great stand-up comic. He was very tough on himself and the people around him. He was a wiry, feisty little guy.

GREENE: What do you think of the description that Margaret Laing uses here? It doesn't make him sound very attractive.

KNOWLES: No, I wouldn't say he was, "Full of preconceptions and inflexibility, with a narrow mind," or I wouldn't say he was rigidly dogmatic. I am rather hard on people myself, and I rather admired the tenacity and sense of purpose that the guy

had. He worked hard, he was serious about what he was doing there. You could feel it in him, that this guy meant business. And you didn't see that in many people in the undergraduate student body at Harvard in those days. And he was one of them. That by itself stood out in my mind. He certainly had a sense of humor. He never tried to foist the Catholic faith on people around him, nor did I in any way find him so rigid or dogmatic. He was tough on himself and tough on the people around him. I think that characterized his life right to the end. He was tougher than hell. He stood up for what the hell he believed and kept going at it. He was looked upon as kind of a nasty, brutal, humorless little fellow when he got going, but I don't think you could fault him for his ethics or his capacity for hard work or his moral commitment. You don't have to agree with him, but at least you could admire the fact that he stood up and stood firmly.

Some people think that he even had some kind of a peculiar psychological death wish towards the end, that he would launch into crowds, stand up in full view and was almost inviting the assassin's bullet. I mean some of his speeches were quite emotional and quite polarizing for those people who didn't agree with him. And he was flirting with danger to incite a lot of this wrath at that particular time. I think you have to admire him. Now, I didn't always agree with him or his family, and I'd get a little tired of the demagogic aspect to some of Jack Kennedy's speeches and some of Bobby's too. I think they at times would make the voice quiver and look out, lift their eyes up into the hills, and I'd feel a little the elements of demagoguery and excessive emotionalism.

GREENE: Are you thinking, particularly in Robert Kennedy's case, of the campaign in '68 or other times?

KNOWLES: A little bit. And some of Jack's heroic speeches at the Berlin Wall and so on. Of course, that's the politicians' stock-in-trade. When they see an opener, they make the voice quiver and get people excited emotionally so they can make decisions. But there was a little bit of the demagogic, inciting emotionalism, that I thought was a little excessive at times--in all of them. I also thought at one time--I mean I had the experience for example of the Sargent Shriver's and the Eunice Shriver's and various members of the Kennedy clan riding into the Massachusetts General Hospital, and there I was the director of the hospital and they kind of treated me like a hired hand. You know, that was my territory.

GREENE: Is that so? I wondered about that.

KNOWLES: They didn't own the place. And they'd run in and kind of offhand say, "Where's the meeting? And I'll sit at the head of the table." They were a little bit arrogant and overwhelmed with their real power. Jesus, they had it!

GREENE: Would Robert Kennedy do that sort of thing when he would come?

KNOWLES: He wouldn't have done it to me. Nor would, I'm sure, Teddy Kennedy, whom I've had a very good relationship with. But some other elements of the family, in the aggregate, I mean they had a hell of a lot of power in this country.

GREENE: You're thinking now mainly during the administration then?

KNOWLES: Oh, yes. His administration, there you had Jack Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, Teddy Kennedy. You had Smith here in New York. You had them tremendously wealthy, they knew politics. You can't out-Irish the Irish when it comes to politics, and anybody who tries to out-Irish the Irish ought to have their heads examined. The Irish are masters at trade-offs in politics. You reel out a buck, you get a buck and a half back. And the leash is very short around the country. And if the catastrophies and tragedies hadn't befell that family, I dare say that we would have had a Kennedy dynasty in this country for a long time to come, no question. And I'm not saying that that's bad. You had the Adams family and you had other dynasties in this country within certain limits. So it could have been a very good thing.

GREENE: Did the attitude of Mrs. Shriver and Sargent Shriver change at all after the administration, or they still took that . . .

KNOWLES: No, I think they were still pretty tough, pretty tough. Of course people like that who have a lot of power and influence are used to circulating with nothing but the most powerful and influential and wealthy people in the country, so when they run into ordinary mortals they might not be quite as interested as they are when they circulate in the high circles. But that was a minor element. It never interfered with our work or what we were trying to do.

GREENE: You didn't get that same sense from Senator Kennedy though, Robert Kennedy. Is that what you're saying?

KNOWLES: Not in my relationship with him, no. I thought it was a very human and warm relationship, no funny business. And I never had it with Teddy Kennedy. But sometimes when the whole group would flow in, it was a pretty summary performance. It's understandable--after all, they gave us a couple of million. They have a certain right to call the shots or try to. But it was a little bit heavy.

GREENE: How would Robert Kennedy's dealings with other members of the hospital staff be, with whom he hadn't had a personal relationship?

KNOWLES: Oh, I think our chief of surgery, for example, he and Robert Kennedy had to do quite a bit of talking when Teddy Kennedy was hurt in that airplane crash. No, was that before? I think it was around that time. Was Bobby Kennedy still alive?

GREENE: Oh, yes. That was just before he ran for the Senate in New York.

KNOWLES: And our chief of surgery thought he was a wonderful guy. He was very thoughtful and kept his distance, didn't try to tell the surgeon what the hell to do, was very appreciative of what he was trying to do. He also said Bobby Kennedy had a great sense of humor, a wry sense of humor about the irony of a surgeon being in charge of the whole Kennedy family and the Kennedy family not being able to tell the surgeon what the hell to do, something like that. So he had a little insight of humor about the situation.

GREENE: Do you remember talking to him at all in that period and how the whole thing affected him?

KNOWLES: I talked to him once on the phone during that time, and most of it was business and then he said, "I was trying to get you down to our place there about twenty years ago. Why don't you come on down there sometime." And I had a big hee-haw and I said, "You just tell me when. I'll drop everything." I said, "I didn't know how rich and beautiful and influential you were." And he had a laugh about it. Then nothing happened after that. He got into the campaign and so on so I never really heard from him again until I read in the newspapers he had been shot. But I had great respect for him. He was much more intelligent, quicker than Teddy Kennedy. Teddy is intelligent, but I wouldn't say he was half as intelligent as Bobby or Jack Kennedy. Bobby Kennedy I knew best of all. He had a very quick intelligence, a great capacity for hard work.

GREENE: In backing up a little bit to Harvard, do you remember anything about the people he was friendly with at the time?

KNOWLES: Mostly football players and athletes there were the people he was most interested in. I think he was playing some football at that time. But he mostly liked athletes, liked that stuff. And later on a lot of his friends--remember Roosevelt Grier and a variety of heavies on the football field.

GREENE: Right.

KNOWLES: Why the hell. . . . I think one of the reasons he was friendly with me was we were sitting next to each other and we just happened to like each other.

GREENE: How much of a relationship was there outside of that navigation course?

KNOWLES: Very little. Socially for example, we didn't go out together or do things together. But I'd see him pretty regularly throughout the year. I'd see him walking along the street and he'd ask me about the hockey team or the baseball team or the squash team mostly. No, I think he was attracted to jocks, so to speak. He liked that.

GREENE: At that point he had already been to sea. I don't know if you remember that. He was in a naval officers training course at Harvard and after his brother was killed he requested [James V.] Forrestal to let him go aboard the Joseph P. Kennedy and he was at sea awhile. Did he ever discuss that experience with you?

KNOWLES: No, never. We never discussed that.

GREENE: Or the fact that he had had a brother killed in the war?

KNOWLES: No, I did know that side, but we never talked about that. I think we mentioned it one day in between classes or something. I don't know how the subject arose, but I remember he got quite--and I was told by other people--he still got emotional about it. He got very-not tearful-but a little bit choked up about that. Joe Kennedy [Joseph P., Jr.] was supposed to be a wonderful person, wonderful looking person and a wonderful brain. He was supposed to be the king of them all, that big Joe had nailed for the White House.

I ran into Jack Kennedy after he got out of the war in Beverly Hills, California, and got into a conversation. That was about the only time I'd really ever seen him. But Bobby I knew the best in college, and later on when I was the director of Massachusetts General I got to know Teddy very well. I used to testify and help his staff with various aspects of health . . .

GREENE: Yes, I was wondering if you did any of that with Robert Kennedy on health legislation, if you were consulted at all.

KNOWLES: No. No, not by Robert Kennedy; it was always Teddy. And then Teddy got mad at me and stopped consulting me after I refused to go all the way with him on his Kennedy bill that was backed by the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] which he has now moved off of. And he got mad at me after I'd come back from Vietnam in 1967 at the request of the president, [Lyndon B.] Johnson, and the State Department to report on the state of the health of the civilian population of South Vietnam. And he held hearings right after we got back, and he wanted us to say that there were a hundred and fifty thousand killed each year in the civilian population and our best estimate was somewhere between fifty and seventy-five thousand. And he said in essence that we ought to have our heads examined, we were wrong. He wanted it to come out a hundred and fifty thousand. Well, we couldn't come out at that figure from what we saw and did. And he got a little upset there too. That was at a time when LBJ was in the White House and was very suspicious of what the Kennedys were up to. And within certain limits the feeling was that the Kennedy boys were kind of digging tunnels under LBJ's chair.

GREENE: Are you just saying this from public accounts, or had you . . .

KNOWLES: No, public accounts that Johnson was suspicious of them. And the Kennedys were standing back you know kind of half throwing spitballs at him. And Johnson was quite aware of the fact that the Kennedy boys wanted to come back into power. It's a big league game. Rough.

GREENE: I don't know what else. . . . Observations, perhaps, on books, things like that, did you ever discuss things like that with him, the kinds of things he was reading?

KNOWLES: No, I never really got that close to him. If I had spent the weekends with him or socialized with him more, I would have had a lot more anecdotes about him.

GREENE: It's interesting that he remembered the fact that you had rejected the invitations.

KNOWLES: Yes, it is interesting. It was interesting to me.

GREENE: It's also interesting that he probably deliberately didn't ever tell you who he was.

KNOWLES: No, he never did.

GREENE: He must have enjoyed that.

KNOWLES: Oh, yes. We had a big hee-haw about that twenty years later. I said, "Do you remember the time you asked me down there to your house on several weekends. God, if I had only done that. I would be sitting there as special advisor to the president of the United States right now." And he laughed and we had a big laugh about that. I was very fond of him. I never knew him very well, but till the day he died I had a nice, funny relationship with him--a very brief interlude in his existence with all the things he was doing and people he was meeting and so forth. But we liked each other. It's funny. It never became a close friendship, but nonetheless we both enjoyed it.

GREENE: I don't know what your political affiliations are, but were you ever approached to support him--doctors for Kennedy or anything of that sort--in '68?

KNOWLES: No. It's funny that I wasn't. Teddy approached me and wanted to come into the hospital to campaign, and I let him do that and so on. I told the other side if they wanted to come in at lunch hour, they could too. No, they never went after me in that way.

GREENE: Well, they weren't that organized in Massachusetts anyway.

KNOWLES: They also knew that I was an independent in Massachusetts too and that I wasn't a down-the-line Democrat. Subsequent to my run-in with the [Richard M.] Nixon administration, I re-registered as a Democrat, largely because Kevin White, the mayor of Boston, wanted me to run on the ticket with him for lieutenant governor of Massachusetts. They did a number of polls and I had very high visibility in that state running that hospital and I got about six months straight of ink with no mud sticking on me when Nixon tried to get me down

there. They did polls of people, and about 95 percent of them knew who I was, which is very high.

GREENE: That's amazing. It certainly was.

KNOWLES: I was right next to the Kennedy visibility and [Edward W.] Brooke and one or two other people. I was about the third or fourth best-known person in Massachusetts. And 95 percent of those people polled had a favorable impression, which is highly unusual. I was running the hospital, which is a humanitarian purpose and is a fine institution. So at that time some of the pols started flocking around. And if I hadn't come here I might very well have run for political office. I wouldn't now.

GREENE: No?

KNOWLES: You know you ultimately run for political office in order to influence the course of the country. Well, this job potentially has more influence than a senator of the United States.

GREENE: Lieutenant governor.

KNOWLES: Or lieutenant governor. And being lieutenant governor, you're sitting behind the throne waiting for the opener and of course the governor is making sure you take the crap. And no matter what they tell you, all the boys are flitting around trying to knock you off. Sitting there as lieutenant governor for four or eight years doesn't prove a hell of a lot. If you're going to run for politics, you might as well win big or lose big; go for the big one and the hell with it. I still wonder to myself someday whether or not I might just do it. I think the ultimate battle, you know, is running for political office. That is the roughest one of all. But I'm perfectly happy here and I have no desire at all to run. I told them I'd give them seven to ten years here, and that's what I'm going to give them.

GREENE: Really? You've been here what, about two now?

KNOWLES: Two years, yes.

GREENE: I think, unless you have some other recollections . . .

KNOWLES: No, I think that's good.

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