

Evelyn Gianfala Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 05/23/1967
Administrative Information

Creator: Evelyn Gianfala

Interviewer: John F. Stewart

Date of Interview: May 23, 1967

Place of Interview: Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Length: 4 pages

Biographical Note

(1922 -) Campaign worker, John F. Kennedy for President campaign, Louisiana (1960), discusses composing a song for Kennedy's visit to southern Louisiana and the campaign in Acadia Parish, among other issues.

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Evelyn Gianfala, recorded interview by John F. Stewart, May 23, 1967, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

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By Evelyn N. Gianfala

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Oral History Interview

With

Evelyn Gianfala

May 23, 1967
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

By John F. Stewart

For the John F. Kennedy Library

STEWART: So how did you come to write a song for Senator Kennedy [John F. Kennedy]?

GIANFALA: My name is Evelyn Gianfala and I'm from Church Point. That's in Acadia Parish. And I'm a very close friend to Judge Edmund Reggie [Edmund M. Reggie] who at that time was a great fan of Jack Kennedy's, as we all were. [Interruption]

STEWART: We're recording.

GIANFALA: We are recording, sir. So when Jack Kennedy told Judge Reggie and Camille Gravel [Camille F. Gravel, Jr.] that he would accept their invitation to come down to Louisiana, we got very excited. And Judge Reggie, of course, who is a great public relations man, began to put all of his talent and efforts and energy into the planning of this trip. And he called me one day to come into Crowley; he wanted to talk to me. Crowley is about fifteen miles away from Church Point, the little town in which I live. So I was seated across his desk, and he was telling me all the things that he was going to do for Jack Kennedy. And what did I think of the plans. And I thought they were all great. And then out of the clear

blue sky he says, "And you're going to write a song." Of course, I giggled because that was so ridiculous. I'd never written anything in my life. I don't know what caused him to believe that I could write a song. And so we had a big laugh about it. I did. And about a week later, I got a call from him, and he said, "Have you written a song yet?" I said, "You were serious?" He said, "Absolutely, I'm serious." And, of course, I always responded or tried to respond to anything he had ever asked me. But it threw me into a complete state of shock and dilemma because I could not imagine that I could write a song for anyone. And never would I aspire to writing a song for Jack Kennedy. But anyway, that day I had read an article called "The Ten Little Indians," I think, by Joseph Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop], one of the Alsops. But he named the ten men that were likely candidates for the nomination. And my mind began to work about these men. And I then picked from that ten those three or four that I thought were nearer Jack Kennedy and were possible candidates. And so I wrote the song around these men. Then we got the Crowley High School glee club to rehearse and practice, and they were to sing this song to him which they finally did at the end of the day after his triumphant visit down in southwest Louisiana, which I'm sure you've heard from Camille and you will hear from Judge Reggie.

At the end of the day, we drove out to the little auxiliary airport outside of Crowley. And it was dusk, and there was this beautiful plane of Jack Kennedy's there and these cute little children standing out there with their choral director ready to sing a song. Of course, they were late by that time for a press conference. I think that they were due then in Lake Charles, and some of his men were trying to hurry him on to Lake Charles. And when he saw that these children were there to sing for him, he wanted to hear the song. And he just stood up there in complete delight and listened to the children sing the song to him. There was one little boy in the group that he singled out. He just didn't seem to miss anything or anybody. He mingled around with hundreds of people, and he would maybe later come back to you, having just had a very brief introduction and come back to you and say, "How are you Evelyn?" or whoever it was, which was amazing to all of us. And when he looked at you and shook your hand, the whole world

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faded out because you knew he was seeing you and knowing you and he was interested in you and just a penetrating moment of recognition which we all appreciated. But after the song, of course, he was introduced to me again and to the choral director. And he thanked me and had really giggled with the song.

STEWART: He knew you wrote it?

GIANFALA: Yes. They told him I had written it. And then they kept rushing him. You know, "Come on you are late." So he ran up on the ramp to the airplane, and then in a moment of delight is the only way I can describe it, he ran all the way back down to me to tell me how much he appreciated the song and how delighted he was with it. And he said, "The other fellows will get a kick about it, too." And I was hoping he wouldn't show it to anybody else. But that's the silly story of the song, really.

STEWART: Then there are copies of the words someplace.

GIANFALA: Oh. Judge Reggie had the song printed, embossed, and had given out copies to the members of his party, and included the song in a scrapbook which he had compiled for Jack Kennedy. And we remember that during the campaign at some point, Jackie Kennedy was on television and was recounting and relating some of their experiences across the country. And we noticed that she had the scrapbook from the Rice Festival.

STEWART: Well, good. Well, whenever anyone looks at that scrapbook—it must be in the Library—and sees that song, then they'll know the story of it. Is there anything else? Did you ever see him again?

GIANFALA: I'm trying to remember. No. Not after he became President. I was to have been a delegate to the National Convention. But just about that time, Judge Reggie was forced to run again, which he thought he would not have to do, in the local election. So we just kind of stayed around to take care of his campaign. Of course, that was something we will always regret, that we didn't go to the Convention.

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STEWART: You did work in the campaign then in 1960?

GIANFALA: Absolutely. Absolutely. And it was a labor of love.

STEWART: What did you do?

GIANFALA: Nothing really organized. I mean it was just anything that came along. Just any effort that I could exert in his behalf, and it was an easy thing for all of us to do. And I remembered at the Rice Festival, it was just an amazing event because it had never drawn that many people there before. And Judge Reggie had a cocktail party for Jack Kennedy, and it was people from all over the state calling him and begging him for invitations. And it was just a fabulous thing. He was just so charming to everybody. And everybody was just so wooed by him. I know everyone who has met him had that same reaction.

STEWART: Were you successful in the campaign? This was in the Crowley area? Where were you primarily?

GIANFALA: In Acadia Parish.

STEWART: Did they go for Kennedy?

GIANFALA: Oh. Absolutely. Overwhelmingly.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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