

Rochelle Dornatt
Chief of Staff, Representative Sam Farr of California

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

“I Was the Afterthought”

Rochelle Dornatt remembers her struggle for equal treatment in the workplace.
Interview recorded January 18, 2017

You know, Mr. Coelho was a very ambitious and political kind of guy, and he always wanted to be in, in the middle of whatever was going on. And, and he would hold early morning staff meetings, and the guys would, the guys would automatically show up, and I was never included. And I thought, “Well, the heck with that.” So I started to show up. And they didn’t kick me out, but they were, they were surprised to see me. And I was like, “Well, if you’re going to have a staff meeting, and I’m staff, I might as well be here.” So, so that was, like, one of several type—similar instances in that office where—and I don’t think Tony realized it. I don’t think he was being—and I don’t, I’m not even sure the guys were being malicious, or intentionally discriminatory. It was just the old boys club, and that’s, that’s, that’s the way it was. So when the Democratic Caucus took their annual retreat to Greenbrier, and they’d, you know, they’d put, you know, 200 Members on a train and go off to West Virginia, all the guys were getting ready to go, and, and I wasn’t. And so I finally went to Tony and said, “I want to go, I want to go to the caucus retreat.” And he just looks at me and goes, “Sure.” And it’s like, “Yeah, all right, sure, I should be there.” So I went, and it was great, and it was, you know, it was very interesting. And, again, you see a different side of Members and politics and what goes on there, because, you know, when the cameras aren’t on, on the floor, it’s a different way of communicating, and a different way of interacting, so—but again, something similar happened, almost exactly the same way, when, in 1988, leadership was putting together the staff to go to the convention in Atlanta that year. All the guys were getting their travel arrangements made, and getting ready to go, and they were doing pre-convention meetings, and I’m like, “Well, what am I, chopped liver?” I went to Tony and I said, “I think I ought to go to the convention.” And he just, same thing, looks at me and goes, “Well, yeah, of course.” And it’s like, but somebody had to tell them. The guys didn’t think about it. I was the afterthought, and I think it’s because I was the girl. So, but, but they were all friendly. I mean, we were all friends. It was just an—it was an attitude that, that needed to be changed. And so I was constantly poking them to change it.