

Rochelle Dornatt
Chief of Staff, Representative Sam Farr of California

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

“The Sister Chiefs”

Rochelle Dornatt describes her role in organizing a network for women chiefs of staff.
Interview recorded January 18, 2017

That connection between women chiefs of staff actually became very important. The, the Democratic leadership at the time was all male, and they would hold chief of staff meetings every week, and at the front of the room were all men. And they, and they seemed to hold the most important information to themselves. I mean, I'm not, I'm not blaming them. It's just the way it was. But I didn't find the chief of staff meetings particularly helpful, because they didn't get into real—the nitty-gritty of issues. And talking to my other female chiefs of staff, they felt the same way. So we started to hold back when the chief of staff meetings were over. The women chiefs of staff would remain behind, and we'd have our own meeting, and we would discuss issues and get information that the guys were never giving us at the official meeting. And, and eventually we created—it wasn't a formal organization—but we created a group called the “Sister Chiefs.” And we used to have our own little post-chief of staff meetings among ourselves, and got more done and more information than in the bigger group. And eventually I got called by the leadership into the office to find out what was going on, because they thought I was fomenting revolution or something. And I was like, “No, we just want to be informed, and you guys don't ever give us any information, and it's all men at the front of the office—the front of this meeting.” And so gradually they began to change. They started adding women to the chiefs of staff meeting who would make the presentations, women at the Whip meetings, and we had, we had a little more information that got passed around. But the, the women who started that little group, we called ourselves the “Sister Chiefs.” And it still exists today—a little more informally, but it's, it's still there, and I'm very proud of that. Something Jeannette Rankin would've loved.