

Betsy Wright Hawkings

Chief of Staff, Representative Christopher Shays of Connecticut

Special Exhibit: A Century of Women in Congress

Condescension from Constituents

Betsy Wright Hawkings describes the demeaning way she was treated by a constituent while working as chief of staff.

Interview recorded April 18, 2016

I think I lived in a pretty rarified state for a pretty long period of time. I had a couple of experiences that were sort of, you know, reminders. One story that I tell is, I had been chief of staff for probably a year and a constituent who came every year for a fly-in with his, with his association—and now that I think about it, it was also the Republican town chairman of his town—and, and therefore a close friend of the office who I had known at that point for probably three years—came in with his fly-in and I was waiting to take them in to meet with Chris and, you know, they're all sort of guffawing and chatting and, you know, he's introducing me to a couple of people that I hadn't met before and he, he kind of looks at me and he says, "You know, yeah, chief of staff," he said. "You're cute and everything, but what makes Chris Shays think you can do that job? Ha ha, ha ha ha." Great group. And he kind of went like this on my head and I kind of said, "I don't know, sir, but I guess I am." So, you know, I was about a year into it at that point, and again, didn't, didn't really think about it in terms of discrimination, but just kind of thought, thought, you know, you know, "Idiot." But it was, I—it made me feel like I just wanted to work that much harder to prove myself, and I kind of knew I had to, I think. Somewhere, although I'm not sure that I would have been articulate about it at the time—in fact I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have been, still, at that point. A lot of this stuff—you know, when you're working really hard and you're in an environment where stuff is happening and you're having an impact, I'm not sure you always slow down to see some things like that until after you're, until after you're out of the environment and that was, that was the case for me. I mean, I look back and I realize gradually there became more women chiefs of staff.