

The Honorable Kendrick B. Meek

U.S. Representative of Florida (2003–2011)

**Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript**

March 19, 2019

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives

“Again, her life experience is wrapped up in not only the skin she lives in, but the gender that she was born with. And her struggle through segregation into integration as an educator, having to go the extra mile to get the kind of education that allowed her to be the outstanding teacher and leader that she became. She also brought a sense of humility and contrition. You would never know that she was a Member of Congress many times when she’s in her district because she didn’t carry herself in a way that would suggest she was a Member of Congress. She carried as if she was a grandmother, a friend that you would go to the mall and shop with.”

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Abstract

In this interview, Kendrick Meek reflects on the life and political career of his mother, Carrie P. Meek. He describes how his mother's community activism and work as an educator led her on a lifelong path of public service. Before winning election to the U.S. House in 1992, Carrie Meek served in the Florida state house and senate for more than a decade. The first Black woman in the Florida senate, Meek's valuable experience at the state level paved the way for her jump to the national stage.

Kendrick Meek explains how his mother—born in the segregated South—faced discrimination because of her race and considers how that background ultimately shaped her approach to elected office. Meek, who from his childhood was involved in his mother's campaigns for state office, recalls the personal touch used by his mother and her hands-on style as a U.S. Representative when she traveled to her district every week to meet with constituents at town hall meetings, banquets, and church services. Elected to Congress at the age of 66, Carrie Meek's impressive legislative resume and skills of persuasion (described in detail by her son) helped her secure a rare Appropriations Committee appointment as a freshman. During the interview Kendrick Meek reveals how his mother's extensive "life experiences" influenced the issues she chose to highlight in the House, the active role she played in the Congressional Black Caucus and her rapport with the Florida delegation. Meek also discusses how his mother served as a political mentor offering him advice as a budding Florida state legislator and, later, as a U.S. Representative.

Biography

MEEK, Kendrick B., (son of Carrie Meek), a Representative from Florida; born in Miami, Dade County, Fla., September 6, 1966; B.S., Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, Fla., 1989; member of the Florida state house of representatives, 1994–1998; member of the Florida state senate, 1998–2002; elected as a Democrat to the One Hundred Eighth Congress and to the three succeeding Congresses (January 3, 2003–January 3, 2011); not a candidate for reelection to the One Hundred Twelfth Congress, but was an unsuccessful candidate for the United States Senate in 2010.

[Read full biography](#)

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov> and the “People Search” section of the History, Art & Archives website, <http://history.house.gov>. For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:

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Interviewer Biographies

Matt Wasniewski is the Historian of the U.S. House of Representatives, a position he has held since 2010. He has worked in the House as a historical editor and manager since 2002. Matt served as the editor-in-chief of *Women in Congress, 1917–2006* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), *Black Americans in Congress, 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008), *Hispanic Americans in Congress, 1822–2012* (GPO, 2013), and *Asian and Pacific Islander Americans in Congress: 1900–2017* (GPO, 2017). He helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of current and former Members, longtime staff, and support personnel. Matt earned his Ph.D. in U.S. history from the University of Maryland, College Park. His prior work experience includes several years as the associate historian and communications director at the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, and, in the early 1990s, as the sports editor for a northern Virginia newspaper.

Kathleen Johnson is the Manager of Oral History for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University, where she also played basketball for four years, and holds two master’s degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House’s first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008). Before joining the Office of the Historian, she worked as a high school history teacher and social studies curriculum consultant.

— THE HONORABLE KENDRICK B. MEEK —
A CENTURY OF WOMEN IN CONGRESS

JOHNSON: My name is Kathleen Johnson, and I'm here with Matt Wasniewski, in the House Recording Studio, and we are very happy to be here with former Member Kendrick [B.] Meek [of Florida]. Thank you so much for coming in today.

MEEK: Thank you for having me. Glad to be here.

JOHNSON: Great. And this interview is for a series that we're doing that is *A Century of Women in Congress*. It's commemorating the centennial of the first woman elected to Congress, Jeannette Rankin. We asked you here today so that you can talk about memories and recollections that you have of your mother's service in the House, Carrie P. Meek from Florida. So, to start off today, can you briefly describe your mother's upbringing, where she was born and her family?

MEEK: Carrie Pittman Meek was born in Tallahassee, Florida, to Carrie Pittman and Willie Pittman. Her parents were sharecroppers, and Carrie was one of 12 children, so her upbringing was more than humble.

JOHNSON: What about her grandmother? We had read that she was a slave. Did she talk about that at all with you when you were growing up?

MEEK: Carrie has very few memories of her grandmother. She was raised primarily by her mom and dad and rarely interacted with her grandmother. Carrie has shared with me that her grandmother was a slave.

JOHNSON: And did she have any female role models that you know of when she was younger? Did she discuss that with you at all?

MEEK: One of her role models was Mary McLeod Bethune, who actually hired Carrie at Bethune-Cookman College. Carrie also had role models in sports and athletics. I can't recall the names of those athletes, unfortunately.

JOHNSON: Was she a role model for you when you were growing up?

MEEK: Oh, absolutely. She's the reason I got involved in public service in the first place.

JOHNSON: What specifically about her caused that for you?

MEEK: Well, at first when I was a child I didn't fully understand and appreciate it, her career as a public servant. There's actually a clip on YouTube of the night Carrie won her special election to the Florida house of representatives in 1979, a special election. At the time, I was 12 years old, and, up until that point, I never got involved in politics. Carrie was a twice divorced single mother—bringing up three children at that particular time—working in community outreach and physical education at Miami Dade College.

I grew up with Carrie in Miami. So you have to think about the setting at that time, there were a number of federal programs, Model Cities, which she was in charge of and the director of. That was a national program from the federal government to rebuild inner cities. She was really involved in the community. Our weekends would consist of not only Boy Scout activities for me, but also Red Cross volunteering during hurricanes and natural disasters—every weekend had an agenda. {laughter} It wasn't like you—there were very few weekends hanging around the house. We were always involved in things. And because it was just me and her—and my two sisters, to a point—I had to go along because I couldn't stay home.

We would go shopping at the local grocery store, and people would stop her and want to talk to her about issues or just say, “Ms. Meek, I want to thank you for helping me get into my first home.” Before she made it to Congress, she was in the [state] legislature. “I want to thank you for helping my son get into school.” And so shopping was more of a two-hour event for us versus the 30 or 40 minutes that people may have at most going to the shopping center. She always loved people. And she still loves people to this day. I learned an appreciation for loving people. When I talked to people about running for public office, I said, “You can’t just like people; you have to love people. And then you can be a better public servant if that’s already in your mind, in your heart, as it relates to the work that you have to do.” That grew on me. And once I started attending Florida A&M University, I knew I wanted to get into politics probably my junior year because of what she was able to achieve for our folks back home. I know I kind of went a little further.

JOHNSON: No, that’s fine.

WASNIEWSKI: Segregation was part of your mom’s life as a child, and even as a young adult. What impact did that have on her, and did she talk to you about that?

MEEK: Well, she talked to me about it. My sisters and Carrie would talk about when they used to be on the highways and byways in Florida, either going back to be with grandmom, Carrie’s mother, in Daytona. There weren’t many stops that they could make because of segregation. It was almost like a *Green Book* experience. You had to kind of know where you could stop to just use the restroom.

My mom would talk about her time as a Girl Scout. She would take brownies to the legislature in Tallahassee I said I wasn’t going to get emotional, but—she talked about how when she was a Girl Scout, she would

bake brownies along with her troop, but could not take it into the [state] capitol. Because she was Black, she would have to stop at the sidewalk in front of the Capitol, and the sergeant at arms would come and pick up the brownies from the Black girl scouts. They would watch their white girl scouts take the brownies to the senators and to the members of the legislature. She remembers that vividly because of course the old capitol is maintained in front of the new capitol.

Later in her life, she would become the first female Black [state] senator in the history of the state of the Florida. For her to have that background as a public policymaker, to be an educator in Tallahassee—she went to the University of Michigan for her master’s at the age of 19 because she was not allowed to go to the all-girls school at Florida State University because she was Black. Coming back, traveling the highways and byways of Tallahassee on to Pensacola due to some of the recruitment programs for the various universities where she served, she could not use certain bathrooms. She could not sit at all-white lunch counters, things of that nature. So with her being born in north Florida and working in north and central Florida during segregation, she experienced quite a bit of that. She shared those experiences with me to make sure that I was well-rooted and understood the Black experience in Florida. She in many ways, was able to use those experiences to provide context to her work as a policymaker, and that’s what, I think made her such a powerful change-maker.

WASNIEWSKI: We also read that she was quite an athlete growing up, and in one place she was quoted as saying that sports prepared her for politics.

MEEK: Oh, yeah.

WASNIEWSKI: How do you think that—what she meant by that?

MEEK:

Well, sports is almost like the game of life. You can work hard, you can be the best of your field or with your peers, and then you show up at a track meet, and someone's faster than you, or you might have won if a certain penalty was called. In college basketball it wasn't. And so in life things like that happen; the best person doesn't always prevail. She believed in sports, loved sports, taught sports, and was always athletic. And she has a number of students throughout the country that still call her today at home and say, "Ms. Meek, I want to thank you for coaching me in basketball," "I want to thank you for coaching me in track and field," people who played sports with her. Sports has a very, very big chair at her table.

This past Super Bowl, I went to her house to watch the Super Bowl because we would always have Super Bowl parties—not because she liked to party, but she just loves sports. But this year I had a challenge because I showed up, and T. D. Jakes was on, and she said, "Well, you have to wait until T. D. is over before we can watch the Super Bowl." Fortunately, he finished before the Super Bowl started. {laughter} Of course, [he is] a well-known theologian.

JOHNSON:

You mentioned that your mom was in the state legislature and that you were, I think you said 12 years old when she was first elected. What did you do in her career? Were you involved in her campaigns? Did you go to meetings or conventions with her?

MEEK:

Oh, absolutely. The meetings were at our house, where she still lives today. When she ran in 1979, she ran against 12 others who were seeking the office. It was a special election. State senator Gwen Cherry died in a car accident, and so there were a number of people who jumped at the opportunity to replace her in the state house of representatives. She ran and really didn't have any money. Just sitting here talking to you all, I remember the graphic

arts students at Miami Dade College at the time drawing the signs—literally putting “Meek” on one side, putting “Carrie” at the top, and with a marker filling it in, waterproof marker, putting “Carrie Meek.” And then we put a black and white picture in the middle of it and put a little {laughter} cellophane over it. That was the sign. There was no printing or union printing or anything like that. Those were the original signs. And the handout was basically something that was typed with her picture on it, and we ran photocopies of it.

So that’s what she had at the beginning. And we started running and knocking on doors and stood on the street corners with bullhorns because Carrie wasn’t supposed to run. There was a city commissioner by the name of Athalie Range who was an undertaker in the community. A community meeting was held at her house. Remember, I spoke of the fact that she was director of Model Cities and was very involved in community development and community activity, even through the college. And they met at her house. They talked about who should run. Of course, men were chosen to run {laughter} and said they would be the best candidate. And Athalie Range hung around until everyone left and said, “Carrie, you should run. The very reason why they would even meet in your home is the reason why you should run.”

And, of course, there was a meeting before the meeting to kind of choose the man {laughter} to run. Because they didn’t want to—the community, the Black community, did not want to miss out on an opportunity to maintain the seat that Gwen Cherry held. So she decided to run, and I’m glad she did. That’s the reason why it was such a big victory. Here were people who were well-financed in that race, individuals who were already elected, to lower office than the state legislature, slated or predicted to win. When she

launched her campaign, Carrie Meek was seen only as someone that helped other people get elected or the person that you call when you want to put together a strategic plan on how to build Martin Luther King Park, but not as someone to serve in the legislature.

WASNIEWSKI: As you're describing your mother, she was very, very involved. I mean, there was no moss growing on the soles of her shoes. So how did she balance being an active community person and later politician and then also be a mom?

MEEK: I remember vividly being in boardrooms or—I wouldn't just call them boardrooms I would call them conference rooms because this was really grassroots work that she was doing. I wouldn't know what a company boardroom looked like. But playing on typewriters in offices, they know when my mom would come in late to work or at night because she would work all day, come home—remember she had double duty. She was sometimes on loan to Model Cities and while still having to keep up with her work at Miami Dade College. So she would go into her college office at 9:00 after she would come home, pick me up, sometimes dinner, sometimes Burger King. I preferred Burger King. {laughter} And she would work into the night. This was commonplace. This was not every now and then. This was two or three nights a week. And this was before she was elected to the state legislature. The security guards used to carry me to the car, asleep, because that's what kind of work ethic she had—always immersed in her work. She was an educator in the classroom and was a coach, so she was used to having a daytime, evening, and into-the-night kind of worker.

As far as I'm concerned, I've never seen anyone work as hard as she did. Even now, at 92, if she was physically able to get out and do the things that she used to do, she still would be doing it. But she really has a very sharp mind, one of the best spellers I've ever encountered, still today. I test her, I'm like,

“Mom, how do you spell this?” or “What’s your social security number?” She would just run this stuff off. There was never grass growing under her feet. She was always on the go, always involved, always reading, always coming up with innovative ideas for her community.

JOHNSON: Did you enjoy growing up in that kind of environment, being in a political family?

MEEK: I did. It was a give and take. As she started going to conferences as a legislator and on behalf of Miami-Dade Community College, it was nice going to Orlando for a conference and kind of hanging out at the hotel in the pool, going with her to meetings. She would take my friends and I to Key West or Long Key. We had a camper, and we would go once a month. That was guaranteed. Many of my friends never really left Miami-Dade County, believe it or not, because we lived in Liberty City. It wasn’t like it was an affluent community—we would go camping. And so it would either be Everglades National Park if we couldn’t make it down to the Keys for any given reason. But we would go down to Long Key and sometimes all the way to Key West, and she would drive that camper which was amazing.

She was a mom and a dad—on the Seven Mile Bridge. Still today, if you’re traveling south on U.S. 1 in the Keys, and you look to the right, you see that bridge. The bridge was so narrow; it almost looks like a sidewalk. And the fact that she was driving a Winnebago—and I remember we used to all have to sit when she’s driving this camper because it would be like, “Be quiet, be quiet!” We’d have to sit down and be quiet until she gets off the bridge. But I don’t even know how she drove that thing in one lane.

But it goes to show you that the dedication and determination of this woman, who came up on the rough side of the mountain, but when she

grabbed the mic in the state house or the state senate or in Congress, you would never know it. She was highly educated, highly intelligent, and had so much to offer. And I think because of her real-life experience, her constituents benefited from her leadership, and I believe the good people of our country benefited from her experience, her life experience.

WASNIEWSKI: Were there any key lessons or takeaways from her time in the state house or state senate that informed the way she came to Congress and what she did here?

MEEK: Well, she was a special election Member, so she had the benefit that many of her freshman class Members who came in the year after did not have. She was able to file legislation in the middle of a session. She helped secure reimbursement for hospice care; Florida was one of the first states to do that, something that a lot of folks were not familiar with. She became an expert in it through the years and continued to fight for end-of-life dignity. To that effect, she worked with a gentleman by the name of Hugh Westbrook, a Lutheran pastor, who then became one of the first real professionals in hospice care on the private side once hospice got to the point where it really took off. But he and some other individuals within that church started the hospice movement in this country.

And at that time, remember, 1979, the ERA, Equal Rights Amendment, was hot and heavy in this country. And she became a part of that movement, which was a battle, and especially with male members of the legislature who didn't necessarily value equal rights for women. Then you had some women who had issues with it, believe it or not. She fell in the middle of that debate.

In 1980 there was a gentleman by the name—a veteran, army veteran, by the name of Arthur McDuffie, who was murdered by the Miami–Dade Police

Department after a police chase. He was beaten like Rodney King, in the street, and he died the day after. There was a lot of uproar in the community over it. And the trial of these four officers was moved to central Florida, where they were acquitted of the murder. Those events would spark the riots in Miami.

Senator Claude [Denson] Pepper was still—he was a Member of Congress at the time, the House. My mother being one of the two Black elected officials at the state level, she was pulled into a number of meetings, not only with Senator Pepper but also with other leaders in Miami. And she was in the middle of it, trying to not only calm the community but at the same time, talk about some of the underlying issues that led up to the uprising. So she was thrown into a quick, fast, and hurried leadership position—publicly. When she played a leadership position for years, this was at a higher level that raised her stature in the local community—those who did not know her, and also in the legislature, when it came down to dealing with some of the issues around economic disparity, basic human rights when it comes down to people of color. She was able to work in the legislature to not only make other policymakers aware of what we're aware of today but to also find ways that we can prevent those kinds of events from happening in the future: through police training, through community involvement, and also through investment in financially-challenged communities.

WASNIEWSKI: As someone who's served in the state legislature yourself before you came to the House, how important do you think that legislative experience is? And how does that translate into easing your transition into the federal house?

MEEK: Well, it helped a lot, because now you have freshman Members that are vice chairs of committees, chairs of subcommittees, which is pretty encouraging, because when I came to Congress it was, "Okay, maybe when I'm 60

{laughter} I'll get to chair a committee.” And then when Republicans changed their rules it became a little more useful for young Members. But being in the legislature prepared me for the opportunity to serve in committees here in the Congress—same thing for my mother. Our two experiences were a little different. If I wanted to put forth an amendment, I would have to go to a staff member and just kind of start from scratch on how we write the amendment to be germane to the legislation we want to amend. Carrie Meek could write amendments herself. That was the beauty about her. When she was in the legislature, she spent a lot of time in the legislative library, working on writing legislation to meet the needs not only of her constituents but issues that she thought were important.

She was very involved in housing. Remember, I talked about some of the issues that faced her district—like the surtax program in Miami-Dade County. Miami-Dade County was the only county that had a documentary stamp program that brought about financing for low-income housing. And it's still available today. I believe it expanded statewide, but Miami-Dade County was the first community to benefit from that. That's a testimonial to the work that she was able to do in the legislature. And since she prepared herself so—she would do the receptions, the glad-handing, with her colleagues, and with constituent groups like the teachers and others that used to come to Tallahassee on legislative days, but then return back to the Capitol, working in the legislative library. I haven't encountered anyone that was as studied on the consistent basis as she was as a public policymaker. And with the Congress being such a nocturnal institution—{laughter} one that goes into the night, taking various votes—it was natural for her to be in her office at 9:00, 8:30 at night, because she always practiced that kind of commitment to the job.

And when she got to Congress, that was the first time I saw her work only one job. {laughter} The legislature was a part-time job, working at the college while she was in the legislature was a full-time job. She always had two jobs. I've never known her to have one job, in my lifetime, until she got to Congress. So it did prepare her. I guess practice makes perfect. She was able to work with staffers and get the best out of them. She would always tell me, "Kendrick, listen, if you don't understand something, tell them that you don't understand. Because they know if you don't understand {laughter} once you start talking or start trying to take action." And she said, "That's the problem that many policymakers encounter. They don't want to admit when they don't know something. This institution and others like it would be a lot better if policymakers were to say, 'You know, I don't quite understand the legislation' or 'I need to study more' or 'I need more input on this.' It would help the process."

But she benefited greatly from being in the legislature those years that she was there. Coming to Congress, she had more staff, more resources as it relates to research. She would always use the Congressional Research Service, which she encouraged me to use once I got here. She said, "Kendrick, listen. That's the easy button. You can talk to people who have dedicated their lives to the study of that issue." {laughter} And believe it or not, these researchers would come to my office, fidgeting with their tie or what have you, and I would ask them, "Are you okay?" "Well, you know, I usually don't put this thing on." {laughter} But they get a chance to come to the Hill.

JOHNSON: Why did she make that transition and decide to run for the U.S. Congress in '92?

MEEK: The Voting Rights Act was not fully recognized in the South. After Reconstruction, Black Senators and Black Members of Congress, simply

disappeared from the face of the Congress. Black and brown representation wouldn't return to the Congress until courts took more action to secure what one might call minority-access districts.

And in that election, as you know, Congresswoman Corrine Brown and Congressman Alcee [Lamar] Hastings and my mother were elected. My mother had the privilege of really kind of claiming to be the first because she won her primary and ran virtually uncontested in the general election. So she enjoyed a kind of victory lap before Alcee and Corrine. Becoming a Member of Congress was something that was not only a great accomplishment for people of color in Florida and people of goodwill but also an accomplishment as a public policy maker to be able to serve at a higher level and to bring resources to the community. Congressman Bill [William] Lehman was very supportive of my mother's campaign. And also Dante [Bruno] Fascell, Congressman Fascell, who served. Seeing that ever-changing face of Congress is something that I think makes our country stronger. And she was the kind of Member who represented every community and was very conscious and aware of the importance of her election and of her being in Congress.

WASNIEWSKI: So just to go back to the question about the campaign, the first campaign—age and gender, were they issues at all?

MEEK: Well, age—at the time when she ran for the state house, no, because a lot of the folks were in their 40s and 50s. And she was, I believe, 52, 50, around the age I am now. When she ran for Congress, she was 66 years old, and a lot of folks choose to retire at that age. When she ran for Congress, people often commented, “Oh, she'll be there for one or two terms, and that'll be it.” A young state representative even said, “Congress is about seniority and how long you can be there? Elect me because she's too old.” I remember her telling me “Kendrick, he should continue to say that I'm too old because the

folks that are going to get out and vote are going to be my age or around my age, and they're told every day they're too old. He's doing nothing but helping us." Of course, she won that primary in a landslide.

When she got here to Congress, she was placed on the Appropriations Committee, just like every freshman—not! {laughter} But she sought the Appropriations Committee because she was an appropriator in the Florida legislature. Mr. Fascell was an appropriator. Mr. Lehman was a cardinal [subcommittee chairman]. Both of them were cardinals in Appropriations, so that helped. And she went in to see the Speaker—I believe it was Speaker [Thomas Stephen] Foley—went in to see the Speaker, and she said, "Mr. Speaker," she said, "I just want to share with you that I've served in the appropriations committee in the [state] legislature. I would love to carry out your agenda on Appropriations how you would like to see it carried out. Hurricane Andrew just hit my district. They really need me to be on this committee to help rebuild my district. But I am committed to the priorities that you would like to see fulfilled on the Appropriations Committee." Lorraine Miller, who was a former Clerk of the House, and also an aide for the Speaker at that time, she said when my mom walked out the Speaker said, "Put her on Appropriations." {laughter}

So she knew exactly what to say to people in power. I call it the Carrie Meek pie voice. She would really lay it on thick. But she knew how to do it because she was dealing with pork-choppers in the state legislature. The power of the Speaker's gavel, nine times out of 10, or the president of the senate, they came from north Florida. And so we used to go to hayrides in the state legislature, go out to these coon hunts and carrying on, things that I never would have encountered as an inner-city kid. But it was because she knew,

she understood the art of politics and how to woo those that could make decisions to help her constituents.

One of her favorites here in Congress was Mr. [John Patrick] Murtha [Jr.]. And she used to talk about Mr. Murtha—“I knew Mr. Murtha before I even met him.” And she was able to get all this money in the defense appropriations. I was like, “Mom, how did you do it?” “Oh, Mr. Murtha’s a great man.” {laughter} She’d just carry on and talk about him and really play him up. And Mr. Murtha just fell in the palm of her hand—which was a great benefit for me when I got to Congress because it was wonderful. Because I came, in the eyes of many people that were chairs or ranking members, as her son, so I was able to, how would one say, cash in {laughter} on those relationships.

JOHNSON: Your mom was elected in '92, so that was called the “Year of the Woman.” So lots of women, more than 20, were elected to the House at the time.

MEEK: Which was a big number then. {laughter}

JOHNSON: That was huge. What did that mean to your mom, and did she talk at all about that, to be part of that special group, what that meant to her?

MEEK: There’s a picture online that says that a woman’s place is in the house and the senate when she was in the state legislature. And she wore, like I said, many hats through her life experience. We talked about segregation, we’ve talked about her work ethic, being a working woman, being in the room and being second-guessed, not only one, two, three, maybe 50 times, and understanding that and still marching on. Coming into Congress with a historical class of women, she understood that her membership carried great responsibility. And just because she was a woman that did not mean she could not, how would you say, spar with men on public policy in debate and

not kowtowing, one may say, or bowing to men of equal power in this process.

She was involved in a number of research caucuses here in the Congress that dealt with women and issues that faced women because she's a woman, and she understands the struggle and plight of single parents. Her life experience, I think, prepared her better than any university could to serve working people. She was here when she was a Member of Congress and a member of the [state] legislature. She gave voice to the working man and working woman. She worked very hard to amplify the voices of women in countries where suffered the most. And she took the opportunity to travel places like South America, Africa, Europe, and places where women really didn't have the opportunity to vote and advocated for them. But I believe if there was any testimonial to the work that she was able to improve the situation it was in Haiti.

JOHNSON:

I'm just going to ask a follow-up to that. One of the people that we interviewed for this project, Yvonne [Brathwaite] Burke from California, she mentioned that she represented three constituencies. She said she represented women, she represented African Americans, and also her district. And from what you're describing for women the way she was international, going international, that sounds like that was a role that she embraced as well. And also with African Americans around the country, is that something that you think that she felt?

MEEK:

Yes, she was very active in the Congressional Black Caucus, as you know. The Congressional Black Caucus in, I would say—I couldn't say "they" say; "we" said, and still do today—that we're the conscience of the Congress, caring about things that we all should care about. But because of the Black experience in America, being the only group of Members of Congress that

were enslaved by the very country that we're legislating on behalf of, really takes you from the bottom to what one may say the top—the very government that endorsed slavery but at the same time outlawed it, which is an experience that you just don't shake.

When I was coming up, my mother would say, "Fold the washrags." That's a slavery thing. Of course she knew it was a washcloth. But her mother said that to her, and her mother's mother said that to her. Because all you had was a rag; it wasn't a washcloth to wash yourself with. So there's still things that are lingering in the legislative Black experience that keep you rooted to communities of struggle.

Some of your very poor communities—there are still zip codes that have been poor for 300 years. And believe it or not, at that level they don't even look at color. {laughter} They don't know what you mean when you talk about racism because they're all poor, and they're all going through the same struggle, and they're all looked down upon. She came from that, and so she understands that.

She made my sisters and I promise that we would never move her out of Liberty City. Of course, she could be at the best retirement community Florida has to offer, but she did not want that. She wanted to be right there with her neighbors and wanted to stay there. Being in the Congressional Black Caucus, she was able to speak on behalf of people of struggle and commitment, while also working with and around colleagues who did not have that same experience as she had. And I think it made her a better policymaker. Again, her life experience is wrapped up in not only the skin she lives in, but the gender that she was born with. And her struggle through segregation into integration as an educator, having to go the extra mile to get

the kind of education that allowed her to be the outstanding teacher and leader that she became.

She also brought a sense of humility and contrition. You would never know that she was a Member of Congress {laughter} many times when she's in her district because she didn't carry herself in a way that would suggest she was a Member of Congress. She carried as if she was a grandmother, a friend that you would go to the mall and shop with. She would get her nails done in flea markets and things of that nature. These are things that she did throughout her life, so it really wasn't a political put-on to say, "Oh, I just want to show them I'm a person of the people." She was always a person of the people and never forgot that and never left that behind.

WASNIEWSKI: You've talked about and described a freshman coming in who knew how to pull all the levers, and it was a smooth transition in that sense. But your mom was still one of only eight or nine African-American women at that point. Do you think that there were any obstacles placed in her way because of that or that she got more scrutiny than other Members, maybe?

MEEK: Well, with her being an appropriator it really helped her as a freshman because she was able to have privileges that your average freshman Member {laughter} could only wish they had. There were senior Members of Congress coming to her for projects. And because she was the kind of person that she was—and I'll tell you a quick story. She was on Appropriations, and a Member from Texas started talking to her about a project. She knew he was trying to pull one over, and said, "Well, you know," I'll just put it this way, "he came to ask me," I'll leave it that way, "but what he didn't know [was] that I carry a turd in my hip pocket." {laughter}

She could roll with the best of them and knew how to get even with them, but also give them some room to make them feel they're pulling one over. She would always tell me, say, "Kendrick, listen. Whenever you have someone in a corner, always allow them an out. Don't corner them because now you have a very dangerous kind of badger situation." She said, "You'll keep more friends that way in this process." She also said, "Don't get caught up in the emotions of debate. Many Members get excited when it comes down to another Member representing their district." She would always say, "They are who they represent, and you are who you represent. The key is respecting their interpretation of what they think is right."

And that kind of came in handy for me. Vice President [Mike] Pence and I used to be on the floor doing special orders. I have hours and hours of special orders on 30-something working group or what have you. And he would be there too. Sometimes he'd be saying things right before my hour, and I would be saying things right before his hour. But some Members get so riled up they want to grab the mic and "Will the gentleman or the gentlewoman yield?" And she said, "Listen. This is the house of democracy, the only body, federally elected body that you actually have to be elected to. You can," in the House, "you can be appointed to the Senate; you have to be elected to the House. So you have to respect that but still have your tenacity."

If I was elected today, I would be a better Congressman because I've had the benefit of real-life experience of raising children, working, serving, paying taxes, all of those things. You're able to bring that experience to this body. At the time that I was here I could bring it as a young American, as someone 36 years old, coming into the process, having two young kids, being married at the time, understanding the struggles of education through my children's experience. As a state trooper, coming straight out—almost straight out—of

law enforcement to the Congress, coming out of the legislature I brought some of that—but now in the past eight-something, nine years, there are other things that I’ve learned. And Carrie Meek had a lot happen between birth and making it to Congress, some 50 years of—some 66 years—of real-life experience with the energy of a 30-year-old, {laughter} coming here would outwalk you. In a minute when I used to come up here, and when I was in the legislature, she would invite me up to a conference or watch a State of the Union or something like that, and I’m like, “Mom, why are you walking so fast?” And she’s almost 70 years old.

But I can tell you one—this is a joke that she told—well, it’s not a joke, it’s reality. When she retired at 76, and I was a Congressman, and I would go home to the district, and I would sit there with her. And I’d say, “Mom, when did you know it was time to leave Congress?” She said, “Well, you know, when I would walk from my office and walk to the Capitol and then forget why I walked over to the Capitol, but all I knew is that I had to pee, I thought it was time to go.” {laughter} I don’t know if that’s for public consumption, but that’s what she would say. She’s a jokester, but she would say, “It was time to go. I needed to allow someone else to serve.”

As you know, that’s the battle with Members of Congress. I will tell you as being one before—and I’ll stop after this—there are many Members that serve here for many, many years, men and women. And you get institutionalized. I don’t want to call it a correctional institution or something, but you get institutionalized. And once you’re out of Congress it’s almost like you have to go through a reentry program—I’m serious. You don’t know how to function. You don’t know—some Members don’t even know how to work an app to book a flight. I’ve seen it. I know these people. I was here with Congressman Jeff [Jefferson B.] Miller just two weeks ago,

and we were talking, and he had two of his clients with him, and we got on the elevator, we just started talking. And one of his clients said, “Is someone going to press the button?” I mean, we’re just used to an aide or something with us. You get institutionalized, and you revert back to it once you get in the environment. But she was able to progress out because of her age. But that’s probably for another history moment, when it comes to how do Members of Congress act when they get out? {laughter} Yes, that’s a real, real issue. I mean, I kind of got out there, and your former staff, they kind of call you like, “You going to be okay? If you need me to do anything, let me know!” And I’m like, “No, I think I’ll be okay. I’ll live.”

JOHNSON: Appropriations, we know, was really important to your mother’s career, her committee work. But what about the CBC? You mentioned the caucus, but how active a role did she play in the CBC?

MEEK: A very strong role. Her experience in the CBC was one where she was a part of what I call two groups. As you know, they meet every Wednesday at 12 noon. And you’re in the room with “the struggle” and “the fruits of the struggle” at the same time. You’re in the room with people who lived under segregation and those that live under integration as we see it today. She made a great contribution to the CBC. Being part of the wave of new Members from the South: from Florida, from Alabama, from Georgia, from Mississippi with Chairman Bennie Thompson, North Carolina, South Carolina. So her being from that part of the country really helped the Congressional Black Caucus gain not only numbers but also power. And being one of eight women, Black women, they were able to bring a new flavor not only to Congress but to the Congressional Black Caucus. And with her being an educator and a graduate of historically Black colleges and universities, the

Congress benefited from her experience in education in a really meaningful way.

She held workshops and brain trusts on aging through the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. For her constituents and districts like hers, getting older was a struggle because Social Security and Medicare are essential components of retirement plans in financially challenged communities, especially now today with the pension system not being what it used to be and the cost of living going up. So she was able to bring that to the Congressional Black Caucus, the perspective of someone who's eligible. Mr. [Charles B.] Rangel used to joke with her when she first got to Congress. He said, "You have the opportunity to draw down your post-65 retirement from the beginning. {laughter} It's unfair"—for someone who served so many years in Congress like Mr. Rangel.

She enjoyed the Congressional Black Caucus because there were several members who understood the importance of their being in Congress. Every day had a purpose. She would often tell me, "Kendrick, don't waste a day in Congress because many policymakers in this country wish they could be not only a Member of Congress but have the impact on Congress through federal legislation, through education, and also helping your constituents back home because of the office that you hold."

So district work was very important to her and talking about that and sharing notes with members of the Congressional Black Caucus, need it be Social Security, Veteran Affairs, best practices—it is really a brain trust that I believe that really allows America to meet its full potential. Having discussions about what the troops need, not only on the battlefield, but also when they get back home. And what does that mean for their families? What does that mean for their community? When you have a community where you may have—you

may be the member representing the highest concentration of individuals that are incarcerated in this country—which she did have as a state senator, what I had as a state senator and as a Member of Congress—how does that work in a community, post-traumatic stress syndrome and other issues? Free and reduced lunch?

And believe it or not, some of the most challenged communities are not communities that the Congressional Black Caucus represent. So some of the folks that are voting against the needs of their constituents, the Congressional Black Caucus was able to bring to light about what happens in many of these districts, the life experience that they're going through, and some of the very programs and benefits that their constituents needed a voice on. There were individuals voting in the opposite direction that had a greater need than she did and other members of the Congressional Black Caucus. So she was able to communicate that in a way much better than I could any given day of the week because she had the ability of grabbing the attention of policymakers because when you see her on the floor, it's like, you get quiet because you may learn a new word. And folks would say, "Who's that old lady on the floor?" Well, she knew exactly what she was doing, and she did it well.

WASNIEWSKI: How did she stay connected to the district?

MEEK: She traveled home every week, which was interesting. I was her youngest child, and by the time she made it to Congress, I was a grown man. She enjoyed her district work. She represented the largest concentration of Haitians in the country. There was, at that time, a lot of unrest in Haiti.

Being home was important, not only to communicate with her constituents but to also understand their needs. Here's a woman—if anybody understood their district, she did. But every weekend it wasn't just, "So I can't wait to get

home and hang out with my Great Dane,” but it was going to not only banquets, going to churches, but going to events in the community, having town hall meetings and workshops, not only on housing but also for veterans. There was always some sort of district activity taking place, or a meeting. I think that’s what really preserved her in Congress, staying active. She would always say to me, “Kendrick, you have a choice. You can run for office for three months and probably get elected, or you can treat every day as though you’re running for office and always be re-elected.” I followed her model and realized that, with it, you’re able to get a lot done. And that’s the reason why she was untouchable politically during her time here in Congress. She just worked all the time.

I remember one time I was talking to her, and I said, “Mom, you won.” I said, “This was ‘landslide Carrie.’” And I said, “Well, why aren’t you happy?” She said, “I’m just mad that they got 0.8 percent of the vote.” {laughter} She had tenacity. She wanted to kill a mosquito with an axe. She wanted to see the highest number that you could actually run up in a political election. She used to say, “If the score’s 89–0, I’m happy,” as it relates to a football game.

JOHNSON: I was going to say, that sounds like a connection to her athletic background, that she must have been very competitive.

MEEK: Oh yes, oh yes, very competitive.

JOHNSON: What was her relationship like with the Florida delegation?

MEEK: It was a good relationship. As you know, because of the neck of the woods that we represent in Florida, constant communication was key. One Member would have a hurricane one year across the state in Tampa, another Member would have a hurricane, and we all kind of came together as a Florida delegation to represent the state. Many of the Members at that time she

served were former members of the [state] legislature, so they had that bond of once serving together. In our south Florida case, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen was there in Congress years before my mother was elected to Congress. You had Lincoln Diaz-Balart, who served with her in the Florida senate, in the Florida house. And so they had a long bond, and they came together into the process, into the federal arena. Myself and Lincoln Diaz-Balart both came to Congress. So that bond—and that’s the case throughout the state regionally—and so that bond really helped our state as it relates to communication within the Florida delegation and having a relationship.

That may change now, and has changed, due to the fact that we have more turnover in the Florida delegation than the Micas [Daniel Andrew Mica and John L. Mica—trying to remember a few of the other Members—the Crenshaws [Ander Crenshaw] and others who served in the body for a very long time. Maybe with the changing of the rules and Members able to make an impact in their first two or three or four terms may change. Maybe people will stay longer. But I think it changed along with the workforce. People very seldom stay in jobs 30 years and retire. People are now renting more and leasing cars more versus buying because of job relocations. So I think the same thing in Congress. I think the future will speak to a more transient kind of Congress, a little in and out. I’m not sure, maybe you all may know, the average may be three terms, two terms, I don’t know. But I’m pretty sure that number will get a little higher.

WASNIEWSKI: So you’ve already mentioned your mother chose not to seek re-election to a sixth term. Did she turn to you for advice? Did she ask your advice when she was considering that?

MEEK: Well, she often said she would retire after three terms, and then she said, “Oh, you know, I think I’m going to hang around.” First it was “When I’m

able to vest, I'll leave." And I was like, "Okay." It's like, "Mom, no one is suggesting that you leave." We liked the fact that she enjoyed what she was doing, and she didn't show any signs of any health issues even while traveling back and forth. She enjoyed it. I was in the state senate at the time, so I said, "Of course I would love to run when you're ready to retire, but I can be in the senate another four years, six years, what have you." So she decided to stay, and then the term after that she decided to stay. Then she kind of told me maybe a little bit over a year out that she feels that she'll retire after 10 years. And she made that decision. She made a lot of decisions on her own, life decisions like if she was going to run or not. It was not a committee meeting or anything like that or "What do you think we should do?" She would just do it. Being a strategist—I was like, "Well, Mom," six months out I said, "Maybe you need to let folks know that you're going to retire." She said, "No, no, no."

So it was kind of a month out before she retired, before she announced it. I think it was a month before qualifying. And she said, "Well, I'm going to make an announcement at church that I'm going to retire." I said, "No, on the floor." I said, "Wow!" She told the congregation, and then that following week she went to tell the Congress that she was retiring. Well, of course everyone was kind of upset back home, like, "We should have known months ago, and maybe we could have had a chance at winning this seat." But it was an environment—I announced that I was running, like, two or three days or a day after. Of course, she told everyone in Congress that "My son's going to run." So {laughter} she was like—so it was kind of giving them the eye, like, "You will want to support his campaign" kind of thing. She was a strategist. The environment was so anyone that was thinking about running people were getting upset with them. "Well, Carrie wants her son to replace her."

Even though I was a policymaker and had a lot of legislative accomplishments, I enjoyed the shade of Carrie Meek. And she knew exactly what she was doing. We ended up running with not a lot of challenge because of her strategy. No one felt left out. It wasn't one of these, like at midnight of qualifying she decided not to do it. She gave them time. But she said, "Listen, if anybody wants to jump out in front of this Mack truck, I welcome them"—because she was very much involved in the campaign, and she wanted to see it.

But just to think about the transition, she never once encouraged me to get into public service because she knew what it meant. That it meant—it brought about a commitment—it's hard to put it in words because she threw her life into it. Some things fell to the side. It took away from my upbringing and my time with her, even though I didn't feel cheated in any way. I didn't feel that I was neglected in any way. My sisters were grown by the time that she got into public service.

But as a mother she overcompensated in some areas, trying to involve me in her life and at the same time tried to be, quote, unquote, that mother on the shutdown of saying, "We're going to Key West," or "We're doing this," or "We're doing that." But she understood what toll that played on her personal life and in her family life and on her social life with her friends. And we talked about this after she retired. I said, "Mom, why didn't you ever encourage me to get involved?" She said, "I knew you would make your own decision. If you wanted to get involved it would be upon you and only you and your family, and I would not have my thumb on the scale. It wasn't where a Meek shall hold this seat or run for that seat. It was, if it's in your heart to do it, you would do it. If it wasn't, I didn't want to force you to do it."

With her being an educator, a person of great belief, and a person of commitment, I've watched her when I was coming up, diagnosed with dyslexia in third grade. The time she took out for me—specialists, schools, homework, commitment—but she always, I think she was the best mother that anyone could have actually had. Because when I was in school, I was a student-athlete, and she said, “Kendrick, listen. When you graduate from high school, if you're on the back of a garbage truck throwing cans in, I'm going to support you. If you want to go to school, I will support you. I want you to do what you want to do in life,” which I thought was just stellar. At that time, a lot of teachers did not understand children with learning differences. Through her legislative years, to go back to what prepared her here, she passed legislation in the house of representatives and in the senate to help children with learning differences because of her experience with me. Some of the laws that are written in Florida—and even some of the laws that were written here in Congress—were because of her experience that helped many more parents deal with their children with learning differences and also children with autism. So her real-life experience is amazing.

And as a parent—now that my kids are grown—just seeing the work that she was able to do independently is just amazing because I wasn't able to do it for my children the way she was able to do it. And I have a daughter who has auditory processing, which, through me watching her and me living the life of someone with a learning difference, and then having my daughter, who went to Savannah School of Art and Design and graduated and went to the Lab School here in Washington, DC, and having that understanding and knowing what it means to encourage and not discourage a child, I learned that from Carrie Meek.

JOHNSON:

And this at a time when there weren't a lot of support groups and parent groups and organizations like there are now, definitely. We talked about this before we started recording, but you were the second son to directly succeed his mom in Congress, and you have that really strong bond and connection that you've talked about in this interview. What did that mean to the two of you to have that distinction because you are one of the few to be able to do that in Congress?

MEEK:

Well, it meant a lot. When you're in this process, it's hard to trust advice. If you can't trust the advice of your own mother, something's wrong. {laughter} But it's a double-edged sword. I remember one time, this was the first State of the Union that I was a Member of Congress, and my mom would always go down and, as you know, they'll take a vote, a suspension vote, and then it's kind of like you're just waiting around for the event. She told me, she said, "Now Kendrick, you got to go down there, and you got to take your work and sit in the chair, so your constituents can see you when the President comes down the middle of the chamber. And you get to see all of the people that you're going to have to call and write to help your constituents. You will see the cabinet secretaries, the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I said, "Okay, Mom."

So she called me at, like, 3:00 before the State of the Union, and she said, "Well, what are you doing?" We had this conversation months before. "What are you doing?" "Oh," I said, "I'm in my office; I'm doing some work here, really catching up on a lot," because we don't have votes, and there are no committees that are called. And she said, "Why are you in your office?" I'm just kind of not thinking, and I said, "You know, that's what I do; I work in my office." She said, "If you don't get up and go to the chamber, I'm going to catch a plane up there and make you go." She said, "Remember what I

told you?” And, of course, when she finished with the tongue-lashing, I said, “Okay.” I grabbed my stuff, and I went to the chamber. {laughter}

After the State of the Union I called her, and she said, “I saw you on television and so did everyone else in the 17th Congressional District.” So that speaks to the kind of coach she was during my tenure. I would talk to her about issues— maybe appropriations I was trying to get for the district, and she would say, “You need to see that staff member; you need to go over to the Senate and talk to this person. You need to give these three Members cards when you go on the floor with your projects, and let them know what it’s connected to. You need to try to get language within this bill.”

She would be the person in football they say the person in the press box. She would be the coach in the press box for me. It was something that really gave me the answers to the test of being a Member of Congress through her experience and her being such an engaged Member in this process. Meetings with chairpeople when I came in, ranking members who eventually became chairs, they would tell all kinds of stories about stories about Carrie Meek. “Oh, we were on this CODEL [congressional delegation], and Carrie Meek taught me how to do the electric slide.” It was just amazing. And then they would just go on and on. They would say, “Now, you’re here for?” So the relationship is already there. I haven’t run into a Member yet who said, “Your mom crossed me.” And even if she crossed you, she has such a loving spirit and understood the trade of politics so well. To the point that the person didn’t feel violated in any way, they just felt like maybe they had a little run-in, and it’s over, but there’s 10 stories layered over that that are positive, feel-good stories. And I certainly benefited from that.

Back home? Oh my goodness. If someone invited me to a dinner to give a speech and Carrie Meek was there, I mean, people would just say from the

mic, “Congressman, we’re so glad you’re here, but we’re really glad the Congresswoman is here. {laughter} And if she would please share a few words with us.” “Oh, sure, no problem,” take the back seat. She was that kind of person not only when I was in Congress but still today. Physically she’s not able to get around to do the things that she used to do, but it was great to have someone there in the district while I’m here. And to have her join me at the Congressional Black Caucus legislative weekends were great because she was able to bring a perspective—we had the Carrie Meek Classroom that the constituents would come up for the legislative weekend, that we still operated while I was here, all eight years that I was here. And she participated and chaired that. Many of the Members of Congress would come through, including Speaker [Nancy] Pelosi, not because of me but because of Carrie Meek. So that was wonderful.

WASNIEWSKI: So you had this wonderful coach and a network that she had established. You have this historical mother/son succession. But did you—was there—at any point did you feel like you—any pressure to make yourself distinct as a Member of Congress, to kind of have your own agenda or your own issue?

MEEK: That is a very interesting question. Because I guess being her son, and me being a mama’s boy in every sense of the word, I embrace it; I wallow in it. Wanting to please her, wanting to make sure that she knew that the torch was not dimming as it relates to the commitment to the work, which is a full-time, night and day job, I worked hard. I worked hard in the senate. Well, put it this way, it goes back to college because when I was in college, she’s in the hall of fame, track and field, at Florida A&M, and basketball—track, field, basketball. And when I got to Florida A&M it was, “Hi, my name’s—” “Oh, you’re Carrie Meek’s son.” It was like, “You’re the son of, you’re the son of” and you kind of fight for your own identity. “Oh, hi, my name’s

Kendrick.” “Oh, you’re Carrie—” “No, I’m Kendrick.” {laughter} So you try to fight for that.

But as time moved on, it was kind of back and forth. Because when I first ran for office, I was 26 years old. I was a young state trooper. Even though I had a college degree and I was serving in a very honorable position as a statewide law enforcement officer, there were three reasons why people would vote for me. One, I’m a young man that’s eager to serve the community, and I have a great platform, and I’m Carrie Meek’s son. I’m endorsed by the teachers’ union and endorsed by the school bus drivers, and I’m Carrie Meek’s son. Or, “He’s a bumbling fool, can’t complete a sentence, but he’s Carrie Meek’s son.” So everything was that—the fact that I was her son. My first election—even though, again, the coach of politics—I had to resign from the Florida Highway Patrol to run, so I was out knocking on doors a year before the election, okay? So if you think about it, that’s pretty lonely. You’re out there knocking on doors, asking people to vote for you, when it’s not even political season.

Because she would call me, and at this time she was in Congress, and she would say, “How many doors did you knock on today?” And I’m like, “Today,” I said, “Well, Mom, I covered half of this precinct or this,” and she said, “Okay.” Then at the end of the week she would come home, and we would look at the precinct maps. And she would say, “Okay, now when you’re finished knocking on doors, what you need to do is go to the grocery store, like a little bit after seven because many of the parents have now cooked and have their kids ready for bed, and that’s when they shop. You go out, and you do that, and I need you to do that two days a week.” Of course, me being a young man, “Okay, Ma.” I would do it one day a week, and she

would be like, “What happened to the two? Okay, now you owe me three next week. And which grocery stores are you doing?”

And that’s the kind of strategic hard work person she was as it relates to the application of serving. And we won that election. Actually, we were running against the majority leader of the [Florida] house of representatives. The majority leader resigned or retired three days before the election. And lobbyists that were supporting the leader said, “We did the polling, and we saw the fact that not only you, but when they knew that you were Carrie Meek’s son that it was hands-down, and it would have been a landslide election. It was time for the leader to move on anyway.” Later she told me, she said, “Kendrick, I wanted to make sure that you build character and that you knew what you were doing because that would be an education that would make you a better policymaker.” So this business of raising the money and announcing three months before qualifying or whatever the case was did not exist in the Meek household. Yes, raise your money, but at the same time get out there and do the kind of shoe-leather work that you should do to win the election. And so she believed that wholeheartedly and thought that it was important.

But we did all kind of things. When they had the Million Man March, I was with my mother in Miami, and they had an all-women fundraiser scheduled the same day as the march. But I watched it on C-SPAN, and there was a call for people to get involved politically and register to vote. We got out, and we registered over 30,000 people in one year to vote in Miami-Dade County, in Broward County. And so we had all kind of things going on.

I was in the senate, I believe, at this time, and we were at a dining room table, and I had my house, she had her house. But we would always talk about what’s going on and working so hard. And she said, “Kendrick, you

don't have to prove anything." She told me, she said, "You've proven yourself"—which meant a lot to me because here's a woman who was the pillar of what was right in politics. For her to be my mother and for her to say that, I knew that was better than any degree or honorary doctorates that I hold now. Having that validation from Carrie Meek did not come easy.

Now, she probably knew what I was doing. We never talked about it. I never said, "Oh, one day I'll be hopefully validated by you before I leave this earth." We never talked about that. It was never a discussion. It was never, "Mom, I want my own identity" or "You should have your own identity." And then she would say little things like, "Oh, yes, I remember, I used to be the Congresswoman, now I'm Kendrick Meek's mother. I'm Kendrick Meek's mother." {laughter} So she would say that, and we would get so tickled by it.

And I tell people, I say, "Not just because she's my mother, I think she's a national treasure because of what she gave of herself to this country." And she traveled to places where [George Thomas] Mickey Leland and others traveled to, where people don't have shoes, and bring that experience back to Washington, DC, back to the United States of America. Going to see senior citizens who did not have the care that they deserve in assisted-living facilities and bringing that message back to Congress. Taking people—and these are things that I witnessed—taking people that were...had a drug addiction to a rehab center that turned that person around, but they showed up with their Congresswoman or their state senator or their state representative, and they were given entry, despite there usually being no extra room. For her to go to the Social Security Office with people that were denied benefits and sit with that officer—not as a big heavy, but saying, "This is Ms. Johnson, and she has attempted several times to—and I believe statutorily she has the right to

take advantage of this benefit. Is there a way?” In a working kind of voice, versus “Heads are going to roll, people are going to be fired if this lady doesn’t get what she deserves.” “How can we help her?” That’s the value that she brought to public service, how we can come together.

I run into people in this town now that work in the congressional office that I represented. I tell them, I say, “We used to work together.” “Oh, no, no, sir, I worked for you.” Well, everyone that worked for Carrie Meek worked with her, not for her. And that’s what she would bring to this body. So saying that, you stepped on something when you said, “personal identity.” And still today, {laughter} all of the buildings and the streets are named after her, and I’m just “little Joe” here. But I celebrate, and I love it because one of those streets I named after her. {laughter}

WASNIEWSKI: That’s great.

MEEK: Yes. I know we’re way over time, so I’m not even thinking—it’s up to you all.

WASNIEWSKI: We probably got three or four more questions left.

MEEK: Go ahead. We’ll do some lightning rounds. I’m ready.

JOHNSON: Well, I have one short question. You have talked about her experience, her humor, how she understood politics. If there’s one piece of advice, just one piece of advice, that she gave you when you were becoming a Member of Congress or as you were serving that was the best piece, what would that be? Something that stuck with you.

MEEK: Well, she told me this when I was in college but also told me when I came to Congress. She said, “If you speak”—I will use the one she gave me in

Congress, “If you go out of your way to speak to the Speaker of the House, you go out of your way to speak to the people that clean your office.” And I think about that, which is interesting because Members of Congress feel that that person that’s cleaning the office can’t do anything for them. But she said, “That person that cleans the office or cleans the bathrooms will probably do more for you than the Speaker would”—which is true. She knew all the names of the janitorial staff. She knew the people in the cafeteria. She knew the Capitol Police officers. She knew the people that worked in the garage, in the Rayburn Building, the Cannon Building by name. Not, “Hey, he works,” or “She,” she knew them. And she would talk to them, and they would {laughter} do things like “Ms. Meek, the weather’s changing,” or this is happening, or that’s happening, and that was her friend—those were her friends here in this institution. Those that are not on the lens side of the C-SPAN cameras. These were people that worked in this building, and she appreciated. So I took on that philosophy.

And we used to have—of course you’d have these little events in the office, need it be lunches or what have you, and we would invite members of the staff or either we would leave things that would come to the office for the people that clean up the office, put their name on it or what have you. I would work in—sometimes when waiting on special orders, and I would run into these individuals in the cafeteria, I knew them well. That’s the advice she gave me. In college, she said if you speak to the president of the university, you go out of your way to speak to the person that’s cutting hedges outside of your dorm room window because they would help you more than the president.

Dr. Michael Eric Dyson talks about having depth perception, that you’re just as good as the next person. And me representing a constituency that—it’s

nothing like visiting a federal correctional system and running into former classmates. You haven't lived until that happens. And I used to go in on Black History Month, I used to go in during the holidays and speak to the inmates. And it'll give you perspective of what you should do and how you should make sure you give voice to those individuals and those families on both sides of that tragedy, the victim and that individual—that inmate's family. That son or daughter, wife, significant other, mother, aunt, cousin going through a special experience. Because once you see the industrial prison business here in this country and the overrepresentation of people of color, you can't help but pause and say, "How can we prevent this from happening?"

Again, those are reasons why talking about these things, teaching about these things, is so very, very important. Carrie Meek understood that, and she put me in a mind frame that all policymakers should do more of that kind of thing so that you don't get taken away by the "Honorable," and "Let's open this door for you," or "Let's give you access to what have you," or boarding an air force jet at Andrews and going to foreign countries and staying in nice hotels, and you start forgetting about the person that woke up at 7:00 a.m. on a Tuesday morning to elect you to be a Member of this body.

WASNIEWSKI: We've asked you a lot of specific questions, but maybe just to step back for a broad one. So, 2020's going to be the 150th anniversary of the first African American to serve in the House, Joseph [Hayne] Rainey, 1870. Looking maybe even just from your mom's career forward, from the early '90s, how has the role of African Americans as Members of the House changed over the last several decades?

MEEK: Oh, a lot. I mean, who would have think it? That you would have not only chairs of major committees but Members of tenure in this body, experience

in areas of jurisdiction, ability to put a major—I wouldn't say footprint, but major language into legislation. To have a Speaker that understands some of the same struggles of people of color in this country. The dialogue's not—it's more than a dialogue; it's an experience. And serving in the Capitol, a building that was built by slaves; a building that until recently—in the naming of Emancipation Hall—didn't have any kind of plaque or testament to the work of those slaves, we've certainly come a long way. It's a book that I think we're not even halfway finished writing, even after 150 years.

I used to spend a lot of time under the Capitol dome in late votes just kind of sitting there thinking about the various things that took place in Statuary Hall, which used to be the old [House] Chamber. The courage of non-Black Members of Congress that stood up for rights of free slaves. Thinking about what exists today of people having low expectations when it comes down to the ability of many of these policymakers that are past and present serving. What they bring to the table is invaluable to the work of Congress. And to have been part of that cohort is a great honor. To see someone like Mr. Rangel who served here for a number of years. I told him the only problem I have with him is that he beat Adam Clayton Powell [Jr.] by 11 votes. {laughter} But Adam has his own place in history.

See Mr. [Ronald V.] Dellums, who served over the Armed Services Committee, from Oakland, who didn't believe in war and would vote against his own authorization bill because of his beliefs serving as a former marine to become chairman of that committee. Having a chance to talk to him as a freshman policymaker here on the Armed Services Committee, where he told me, he said, "It's important that you go to every meeting of the Armed Services Committee." And at that time when I came in, I was the only African American on the committee. I said, "Mr. Chairman, why?" He said,

“Because when you’re not there, everyone knows.” {laughter} He would say these things to me.

Seeing people like Congressman [William Lacy] Clay [Sr.] and then serving with his son, Congressman [William Lacy] Clay [Jr.], I’m pretty sure, to the Historian’s office [he] has a special value because he was a writer and an educator himself and served in Congress as well. Having a chance to serve with Jesse [L.] Jackson Jr., where you have Jesse Jackson Sr., who I worked with on various issues and projects, to see that kind of Black leadership become a part of that body and that experience. To see Harold Ford [Jr.] serving with his—my mother serving with his father [Harold Eugene Ford], and then him serving in this body even though it was brief. Well, he served just about the same time as I served, which was a brief term. But to see that kind of generational politics come in. Mr. [André] Carson, who serves here now. Julia [May] Carson, his grandmother—serving in this body. Having Members of color of the Muslim community and the Christian community come together to give flavor to the public discourse.

But we all come from slavery, and for slavery to have happened in this country for so many, so many years, and to see outlawed education for so many years, outlawed voter participation for so many years, see a Mr. [John R.] Lewis serve in this Congress and still watch video and film of him being beaten and still seeing video and film of him in the White House, major legislation being signed. And to see him today on the floor giving closing speeches to close debate on major legislation, bills—not—how would you say—mixed feelings about our country, but definitely give you hope that a greater day is still coming. Even after serving with Senator [Barack] Obama and serving with President Obama, the struggle still continues.

So I think that we'll see more and more people of color come to the Congress. We have Members that serve one percent {laughter} Black representation in their district. And hopefully that trend will continue because we all have something to offer. I do believe that the best candidate can win if the electorate is ready to elect someone like that. I know you all may ask this question to other Members of Congress and people of color, and I think it'll always be a difficult answer because it's a tug of war, and there's so much to be done.

In some instances, folks will say, "Little has been accomplished." And some may say, "A lot has been accomplished." But because it's such an emotional question for those of us that have served—I've never been a slave in my lifetime, and none of us serving now has ever been slaves, but we are descendants, and some of the residuals from that are still a part of our experience as Black people. We have very poor individuals in our families. We have individuals that have been affected by some of the things that I identified earlier in our families, and some of us have, quote, unquote, "made it" out of—regarding all of the obstacles that are placed in many of the communities we grew up in, we're here, and we continue to fight every day. So I'm encouraged that more will happen, more understanding will happen in this country as it relates to the kind of representation that people deserve. I'll answer the last question quickly. I keep saying that.

WASNIEWSKI: You want to go ahead? I'm good.

JOHNSON: I think that's a good place to end.

WASNIEWSKI: That's a great one. Okay. Terrific.