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This oral history interview is part of the Richard J. Daley Oral History Collection at the Special Collections and University Archives Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It has been used to create content for the online exhibit, Remembering Richard J. Daley, <http://rjd.library.uic.edu> , published on July 20, 2015.

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November 10, 2014

Marie Scatena  
RJD Library  
U of I at Chicago

Dear Ms. Scatena

Thank you for inviting me to participate on the Oral History Collection of Richard J. Daley. Your guidelines are helpful in directing my recollections in harmony with the other participants in the project.

A little about yourself??? I was born in Chicago, September 1929. Until college, my territory was 74<sup>th</sup> to 87<sup>th</sup> Streets, Halsted to Ashland. St. Sabina grade school, Leo High School, St. Joseph College (Indiana) and De Paul University College of Law.

I doubt that you will interview anyone who has a longer employer/employee connection with the Mayor than mine (1949-1974). In 1949 he was Cook County Clerk, I was a first year law student and my mother (a widow) was a legal secretary in the Daley & Lynch law firm (RJD, Bill Lynch, Joe Power and George Schaller). I was hired part time (1PM to 7PM) to record the County Clerk's tax foreclosure data in the basement vault of the County Building and to write marriage licenses on Saturdays.

After a time in the U.S. Marine Corps and in Korea I returned both to law school and to the County Clerk's office, but now as RJD's Administrative Assistant. In advance of the 1955 mayoral election I was moved full time to the campaign headquarters at 69 W. Washington with John McGuane, Rachial McGurty and Gert Gibbons. After the election RJD moved to City Hall, I was admitted to the practiced of law, and in July 1956 was appointed Assistant Corporation Counsel (one of 125 or so) in the City's Department of Law. Thereafter I was First Assistant

(1965-69) and then Corporation Counsel (1970-74) before being elected Circuit Court Judge in November 1974.

What sparked your interest in politics??? My interest was always in law and not in politics. RJD had a firm position that his lawyers were not his political or policy advisors. My rebuke came early when I seemingly crossed the line and was told, "I have you for the law, I don't need your opinion on politics or policy. I have others for those. Politics is none of your concern". I did not need to have the message repeated.

Regarding the law, it is always difficult and awkward for a lawyer to have a client who is also a lawyer. The Mayor was a demanding and critical client. More than once he'd remind my predecessors (John Melaniphy and Raymond Simon) and myself that "I don't need or want lawyers around here who tell me what I can't do. I need you to be thinking of how to get it done". And always "the law should serve and never obstruct the public welfare".

How did RJD influence your career??? His influence totally shaped my personal life and professional career. His work ethic was well entrenched and on display for decades before what today is called "24/7". At his desk, in his car, at a Sox game, private or public meetings, taking notes, gathering facts, hearing opinions, testing ideas, exploring options and listening – important "always listening". The example he set was to do the best he could do and to demand the same from all those to whom he had delegated responsibilities. That example was contagious and excuses were presumed invalid. The opportunities available to a lawyer for the City were endless and challenging (taking me twice to the U.S. Supreme Court) and the satisfaction of having support of one's benefactor was an added incentive and confidence builder. The prospect that one's performance might fail or disappoint, or that effort might be seen as somehow lacking was motivation to excel – mediocrity had consequences.

Influence RJD's career had on Chicago??? In April 1955 he took control of a sleepy, "nothing is happening" city and refused let the rust-belt predictions of the times threaten for even another day. He generated a "can do" mind-set, enlisted corporate and labor leaders and made "no little plans". O'Hare Airport was developed without City dollars, Kennedy and Ryan expressways were designed and constructed with mass transit in the median, street lighting was upgraded in

every neighborhood, Skyway bridge to Indiana, sewer and water capacities were expanded, Lake Front Protection Ordinance, garbage to energy initiatives explored, gun-control advocacy, ban on phosphorus in detergents, new water filtration plant, McCormick Place, Hancock and Sears Towers, Marina City, sales-tax revenues for cities, high S&P credit ratings, Judicial Reform for Illinois, "home-rule" for Chicago and other municipalities, air-rights development over Illinois Central rail-yards, U of I from Navy Pier to Circle Campus. His focus on making Chicago a better place to live and to work was relentless and those engaged knew-well that any failure to follow-up on note-pad-directions would not escape his wrath.

As a result of this unprecedented performance, RJD was annually and universally acclaimed as "the best big city Mayor in America" and Chicago as the "city that works". However, all of that praise ended when police batons met the heads of a few east-coast reporters who would not obey the police order to clear Lincoln Park in 1968. For months trouble-makers had been announcing that they would come to Chicago to disrupt the Democratic Convention – for months the Mayor responded that everyone was welcome but that visitors' conduct would be measured in the same way Chicagoans were, i.e. streets would remain open, parks would close at 11PM and vandals would be prosecuted.

The national press/media turned 180degrees. The "best Mayor" immediately became the "bully Mayor". The out of town trouble-makers became "our children". The police became the "instigators of riot". The city became a "police-state". In Chicago and middle-America RJD was never more popular but the commentators and other molders of public-opinion would never relent -- nor do they accept credit for the fact that their one-sided portrayal of the events of that week in Chicago gave us President Richard Nixon. 23 years of progressive municipal management, massive public and private development, a rebirth of civic pride are ignored or routinely downplayed so that a false caricature of a great mayor can be sustained for public consumption and regrettably for history.

Critics mock the mispronunciations or tangled syntax of the Mayor's public speaking, but none of that criticism is from anyone who ever participated in a one-on-one or a small group meeting with him. Up close and personal he was a powerhouse. Comfortable with his mastery of the facts, familiar with the alternatives, and prepared for opposition (see "listening" above) the sincere and

cogent recital of his views on the subject were never hammered home but rather were delivered in a soft, confident (but never condescending) voice with full eye-to eye contact. "People skills" on steroids produced a synergy for respect, action and results.

From that chair at the right-hand corner of his desk Martin Luther King and Chicago's religious leaders found an ally not an adversary, labor leaders found a supporter, developers found a governmental partner, department-heads found re-focus, a fireman's widow found compassion and a job offer. All found a listener who shared their concerns and sought solutions -- one who did not crave the limelight.

RJD's greatest accomplishments??? He himself selected the U of I Circle Campus as the most significant. It brought major-league education into mid-city where proximity to home, work, and mass transportation would open opportunities for advanced learning previously unavailable to those from middle or low income families. Although wildly opposed at first in the neighborhood, its impact on the city's near west side has been dramatic and positive. The impact on its students over the years can only be quantified in terms of opportunity enhancement and quality of life enrichment. I believe that a close second-place goes to the mass-transit in the expressways. They deliver thousands each day to central city jobs, reduce the traffic-count, and aid the environment. They were the first of a kind in USA.

How would RJD like to be remembered??? The Mayor would have no time for this question. He lived in the present, accepted its challenges, and recognized limitations. His family and faith were foremost and everything else was a distant second. With gratitude to God for his many blessings his prayer might be one of thanksgiving for the opportunity to maximize their influence on behalf of the public welfare. His was a truly productive life, lived by a good and decent man whose accomplishments Chicago continues to benefit from decades later.

Regards,

  
RICHARD L. CURRY

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