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**James O'Connor**

**July 22, 2014**

**Interviewed by Marie Scatena**

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Q: This is Marie Scatena on July 22, 2014. It's about 10:00 a.m. And I am speaking with James O'Connor in his office in Chicago. Mr. O'Connor, we're going to be talking about your memories of Richard J. Daley. Could we start with maybe you telling us when and where you were born and a little bit about your background?

O'Connor: All right. I was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, on the Southwest Side. I attended Little Flower Elementary School in the Ashburn area. Went to St. Ignatius High School, and from there to Holy Cross College in Massachusetts, and from there to Harvard Business School for two years for a master's, and from there to the Air Force for three years, where I also was able to get my law degree at night in three years by going in the evenings, and on Saturdays during the summer, what have you.

I was recruited when I was at Harvard to consider Commonwealth Edison, among other Chicago-based companies, and I was very attracted to the man who was the number two person at the company at the time, and then became chairman. He had also been a very good finance guy, and was just a great individual, and he took an interest in me.

And he took an interest in me because Morgan Murphy, who was one of the three top executives of Commonwealth Edison, had heard my name from somebody else and had said to him if you're out at Harvard, why

don't you look up this young man who's from Chicago, and he might ultimately have an interest in going to Commonwealth Edison, and he did. So that's how I met J. Harris Ward, who then became the chairman of Commonwealth Edison.

The man who introduced us, indirectly, was Morgan Murphy. And Mr. Murphy was a boyhood friend of the mayor's from Bridgeport. He had gone to De La Salle High School, just like Mayor Daley had. They were very good friends. Really great, trusted companions and they just had a tremendous rapport with one another.

So when Morgan Murphy felt at least I was worth looking at, and the other person at the company thought I should consider Commonwealth Edison, I said I couldn't do anything for three years, because I had a commitment to the Air Force. And they said they would keep in touch with me while I was in Washington, D.C. during that three year period, and they did. During the three year period they continued to encourage me to consider Commonwealth Edison.

After joining Commonwealth Edison and spending a year on a training program, I was assigned to work with Mr. Murphy. And Mr. Murphy had responsibility for all of the public relations, public affairs, advertising, all relationships with people in government, what have you. He was very, very effective, and really a great man, too. And so that's how I first got involved.

For the next couple of years, as I worked with Mr. Murphy, I did things that involved the mayor, most notably the Summer Jobs for Youth program, which Mayor Daley started. And Morgan Murphy was the chairman of the Summer Jobs for Youth Program, and I was kind of the go-fer, or I was the guy that tried to put this all together. And we had the

very lofty goal of trying to get as many as 10,000 jobs for inner city children in the middle 1960s, which was hard.

Yet we called on the leaders of countless organizations in Chicago to come to a breakfast. The mayor came, Morgan Murphy came, and they both talked and asked people to consider the hiring of X number of students for the summer three month period, and a great many did. I cannot find in my records what the total number was, but I think it was in excess of 10,000 children who were hired as a result of this program, so it was a really important thing at that time.

We didn't have real advanced criteria such as benchmarks for poverty or for minorities, but we did have a pretty good feel for knowing where we could do the most good if we got qualified people. So as a consequence, we had a great many young people who were minority, who were from tough areas in the inner city, and who profited from the experience of having a paycheck and a job. That was very satisfying.

And I think Mr. Murphy chaired that program for several years, like five or six years. And I was simply the guy behind the scenes trying to get the paperwork together, get letters together, get the meetings together and assemble a team of people who could work on this. That was my first real exposure to the problems in the inner city.

Then I got quite involved with…in 1968, which was a difficult period for the city, with the convention and with the assassination of Martin Luther King. When that occurred there was major unrest fires that resulted in the West Side, and there were shootings taking place. I was asked to coordinate the liaison between the police and fire department and the electric company because we were trying to restore service to the West Side.

You had police who desperately wanted people to get back into their apartments and homes, and without power it was less likely that they would do so. And you had the fire department, who wanted them to be out of the house or apartment when they came through, to make sure that fires weren't a potential problem for the firemen or the residents.

And that was a very interesting couple of days on the city streets of the West Side. And we had to position all of our people who were the linemen and people who were providing service on the local level, frankly, oftentimes with the policemen standing by while a person was on a pole so they would be protected. We were pretty successful because, as you know, there were breakouts of violence in cities across the country at that time.

Those occasions gave me an opportunity to observe the mayor, to observe the quality of his team. I always felt that the mayor had a number of unusual qualities. One was his sense of engagement on any issue. When you'd go into his office, he'd normally sit there behind an uncluttered desk, hands on top of the desk, and be totally engaged in the conversation. He didn't think this was an informal conversation at all. And most of the time he would wait to hear everything that was said before he would comment.

Normally, I was a back bencher, I was not major participant. I always felt that the mayor listened very carefully. And he did have a good sense of action. So his common response wasn't simply, 'Let's kick this can down the road and see what happens.' Rather, 'Here are the actions we should take to respond to the problem.' Because he put himself on the line, he put his people in his departments on the line as well.

O'Connor: The other thing I had great admiration for was the quality of the people he selected for the top jobs. These were really incredible. The corporation counsel, Ray Simon, to this day is one of the smartest people I've ever

met, and was also tough, in a good way, but no-nonsense. He got things done. The head of Streets & Sanitation, Jim McDonough, was a tremendous individual. He ran the Skyway before running Streets & Sanitation, and just was a very effective guy and rallied people to his goals. He had a great way about him.

Joe Fitzgerald, who was Building Commissioner, was an effective individual who worked very hard—Lou Hill who ran Planning & Urban Development, and Milt Pikarsky, who ran Public Works. The Mayor really had some superstars in key positions. Gave them a lot of authority, supported them, but also was very demanding of accomplishing things that had been set out as goals.

In that critical period, when Chicago could have gone the way of Cleveland or Detroit, we went the other way, in large measure because of the strength in his leadership. They were strong. He got people to follow, and he set forth a very ambitious agenda for this community going forward. He was just a remarkable man, in my judgment.

And a very good person. He used to go regularly down to the street to the church of St. Peter's in the Loop, and this wasn't for effect. It just happened to be close to City Hall and he'd go in for mass in the morning. I remember there was one person who wanted to be seen going to church, and wanted to have the mayor see him at church, so he'd kind of sneak and go by the mayor and say, "Oh, hi Mayor, it's good you," or something like that, but this whole thing was planned.

And the mayor was a terrific family person. Family was extremely important to him. And the hardest thing that people had to do when they were leaving the city, for one reason or another, to take another position, was to go in and tell the mayor.

And the one thing that the mayor understood was that there were family pressures an individual had with kids coming along in school, and needed additional income to help the family. That was s one thing he could understand, this was a great trait of his. And after a while some people caught on that that this was the only escape route that they had, because he didn't like people leaving for something else, but he could understand if they left because of a family need.

I would go to functions where he would speak. I remember one on the West Side. There must have been three, four hundred people there in an evening, outdoors, a little bandstand set up, and he was introduced, and I was convinced he must have had notes because he started naming people in the crowd who he wanted to thank for what they had done for others, or for leadership in the ward, or for leadership in a city department.

And he'd take about four or five minutes just to recite names of people. The Mayor had no sheet of names or what have you, he just did this as he would spot people in the crowd. And it just made the day for that individual who was mentioned, and further cemented the loyalty that that person had to the mayor because the mayor appreciated him. It was really unique. I had not quite experienced that before. But it was a great, terrific way of his gaining a rapport with people.

He would also go to a lot of funerals, but more importantly, he'd go to a lot of wakes. He wouldn't stay very long. At my father's wake, he went for just a brief visit. Just kind of in and out. But he always had people and their families understand that they were important. It wasn't just about him. He never aspired to anything beyond being the Mayor of the city of Chicago, and in my judgment, and he ran it effectively for a long time.

Getting good people, having a plan, having a dream, being tough, and he could be very tough, holding people accountable were really great

strengths. He never seemed to relax or let go except maybe at a White Sox game. But he was always alert and thinking about what can be done to make things better.

And he had command of so many allegiances in Washington, whether it was the President members of Congress or Dan Rostenkowski, who was the chairman of the Ways & Means Committee. The latter was an invaluable relationship to have was very important. His relationship with the two senators was also very important, and he was very good at that. He cultivated those relationships and they served him and the city well.

Q: That's great. He's known as being a builder, and some folks in the collection said he built the city. From your point of view, what do you think some of his greatest accomplishments were?

O'Connor: Well, I think there are several. Certainly the establishment of the University of Illinois campus on the West Side was huge. I think he took special pride in that. And it was tough, too, given the local uproar when he decided that that would be the site.

O'Hare Airport expansion was a huge undertaking. And he drove that. And then getting all of the freeways and all the stuff that had to be done in getting the property assembled out there was a herculean task, and he was up to that. He recognized that in this community, business relied so much on first class transportation, and he helped to make that happen.

He had a terrific relationship with the business community, which many mayors do not. He really did develop great relationships with the business and civic leadership. He always made a point of commenting on the importance of a strong business community, and how important it was that there be a tie between the business community and the mayor's office.

So he was a great builder. So many of the things that happened during the early part of his term—the Prudential Building over there was, I think, 1955, and the Sears Tower, the Hancock Building was early 1960s. Lake Point Tower, which is the one that…probably the tallest apartment house building in the world, at 70 stories, was also during his term in the late '60s, early '70s. So he had some real monuments to his…

McCormick Place, which burned down, and then rebuilding that and saying we're going to come back and make it even bigger and better than it really has been in the past, was a huge contribution. Its conventions are so important to the city.

So transportation, conventions, business relationships were really, really important. At the same time he had business, he also had labor, which was very important. His relationship with Bill Lee, who was head of the AFL-CIO, was extremely important. And they were good friends and understood one another's agendas, and worked to have things happen instead of being in each other's face all the time.

Q: I'd like to go back a little bit to maybe the first time you were aware of Mayor Daley, and then the first time you actually met him.

O'Connor: The first time I think I met him was probably in the 1965-1967 period. There was a group called Chicago '67, which Neil Hartigan, who was then a rising star in the Democratic Party, he put together. And he was a friend of mine, and he asked a bunch of us to become involved in Chicago '67, which was a reelection campaign program for the mayor.

And it did involve people like Jim Riley, who was an advertising agency head, and myself and a lot of people that Neil was particularly close to to come together and assemble a junior element of the main campaign that was taking place.

But we had a lot of young people. We had a lot of fun, which was, I think, was important in developing a lot of relationships. The Mayor liked the fact that we had done that. I think that may have been the first time I met him. I'm going to say it was 1966.

And then there was a follow-on to that campaign in 1971 called Chicago '71. Chicago '67 was the first and then We Care in 1971. Much the same group that had joined four years earlier came together to mobilize support. We didn't have significant money. But we could help to stage events and invite the mayor to come out to various events in the city and help him get his programs and ideas across to a large portion of the community.

So I met him on those occasions. And I also met him through the Irish Fellowship Club. He was very loyal to this organization, came to our events, and was very proud of his Irish background, and liked the Irish Fellowship Club. We had a lot of good people in there, really great to be with, and fun to be with, so I think he liked that as well.

We had our annual event on St. Patrick's Day, and he was very involved with us on that day. And we'd bring people over from Ireland who were great singers and harp players and what have you, and it was fun, and he enjoyed that a lot.

Q: The sense of community that you're talking about with the Irish Fellowship Club, how do you think he tapped into that in terms of developing the neighborhoods and working with all the different, the diverse communities in Chicago?

O'Connor: I think he tried very hard. It was a tough period in the '60s with the open housing marches in the middle 1960s. You had Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marching on the southwest side, and the mayor was largely responsible for helping to develop the agreement that provided for open housing.

There were people who did not want him to do that. Yet he thought that was the right thing to do. And that defused a lot of the emotions here in Chicago, and nationwide, fair on housing. And he took that on. He never seemed to be afraid of a problem, but would kind of jump into it and try to figure out a way to find a solution to it.

He had a great sense of getting on top of fixing small things, too. He'd drive around in the car and spot things that could be improved—a billboard that was falling down or something in a storefront that was offensive, and he'd make a note, and when he'd get back to his office he'd give it to somebody and say, you know, take a look at this and fix it. He was very hands-on.

He wanted to make Chicago beautiful and appealing, and he initiated programs which resulted in beautifying Chicago by putting lots of plantings up, and adding greenery. And of course Millennium Park is, perhaps, his son's great achievement. And the mayor was a partner in a lot of things, but he also recognized that you had to have support groups to work with you and make things happen. You just could not do it by yourself.

I was obviously impressed by him. I mean, I didn't have a close or ongoing relationship with him. I don't know that too many people really did, other than maybe part of his peer group going way back. I did feel that he did reach out to just about everybody who could help him improve the city. When he felt that there was an opportunity to have some progress in an activity, he would reach out.

Q: Can you tell me what you might think about if there were any missteps or things that you think maybe could have been done differently at any point, especially in this delicate period that you're talking about, say from the

time that you first encountered him until the end of his time as mayor and the end of his life in the '70s?

O'Connor: The only rap occasionally against him was he was principally a law and order guy, and intolerant of groups or individuals who he thought were hurting the city. Having said that it would have been hard to be much different to be successful.

I don't think he ever wanted to come across as being mean-spirited, but I think he did feel that law and order was very much an important part of the fabric of a solid community. And I think sometimes that was interpreted as going too far.

And for those of us who lived through that, in my case with the company that I was involved with, it was making sure that the manholes in the downtown area were secure, and people couldn't get in and blow the power supply up. We had a lot of things that people were threatening to do that could have created real chaos in the community. So you have to put the balance in between the importance of toughness and law and order against giving people a pass and saying don't worry about it.

Q: And your role in securing the city during that period, on the streets, getting the electricity going. Could you talk a little bit more about that?

O'Connor: I was just put into that spot because I worked with somebody who had relationships with the police and fire departments, and I was just assigned to be a coordinator. I don't want to make more of that than what it was. At least I had the ability to direct people and activity in places where there might be confusion. In the disruption on the west side following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. we would take helicopters over the area, and you could see where people were gathered, or fires were occurring, and there was a potential for harm. Then we could

communicate back, and then arrange to have crews sent to that area to restore power or to try to work with the police department and make certain that the police were working with us as we tried to do that, and also that we also weren't getting in the way of the fire department.

I did have access directly to the people in the superintendent's office and in the fire commissioner's office so we could have a constant, steady stream of information back and forth, and it seemed to work.

Q: Thank you. That sense of crisis is what I was curious about, and I appreciate you giving us a little more detail about that. I'd like to go a little bit back into the neighborhoods again, and your growing up in Chicago. It seems like the period of time when Mayor Daley was first in office, from '55 to '65, you were busy elsewhere.

O'Connor: I was in college, in law school, and the Air Force.

Q: Did you have an awareness of…?

O'Connor: Not so much. I got home twice a year. I got home at Christmas and didn't even get home at Thanksgiving. I got home at Christmas and Easter, and that was it. And then I came home to have a summer job, in fact, in college. I was an Andy Frain usher.

I was raised in a neighborhood, and spent 18 years in the same apartment on the Southwest Side, at 78th and Marshfield, and it was a great place to grow up. I thought it was heaven, heaven on earth. It was a little three bedroom apartment for me and my two sisters and Mom and Dad. Back then, this was almost before television, and the neighborhood, or the parish, as they say, was everything in our world.

Everything revolved around our school and the church and the people in a very narrow area bounded by, in our case, from Ashland to Damen, from

76th Street to 83rd Street. That was the neighborhood, and you hardly ever left it, because you had everything you wanted. I had a very happy childhood, as did my sisters. It was terrific to grow up in that kind of environment.

Too Irish Catholic, possibly. An awful lot of Irish Catholics. Yet you had a lot of tolerance for those who weren't. You just didn't even think about it. So the next door neighbor, in our case, was Jewish, and that was fine; the kid down the street was Protestant, and that was fine. We were raised to just get along. Life was pretty easy, simple.

Q: Did that sense of the neighborhood that you grew up in that was so appealing and kind of enchanting one of the draws that brought you back to Chicago as well?

O'Connor: No, the job brought me back here. That was principally the reason why, although I always knew that I'd probably wind up back in Chicago, because I liked it and my parents loved the city. And I just felt the city had so much to offer going forward. And it could also swallow you up if you weren't careful. But it's a great city.

And I lived a little bit in Boston, and in Washington, and we spent some time in New York, which, by the way, I liked all of them. Clearly my choice was Chicago. That's where my friends were. All my friends from high school were in my wedding party many years after I got out of high school. They were mainly my friends from the football team at St. Ignatius High School. They all piled into cars and came out to Massachusetts for my wedding.

Q: That's wonderful.

O'Connor: Yes, it was great. It was very simple in a lot of ways. Gangs were not a real problem. There was an occasional little turf war somewhere, but

generally gangs were not a problem. Violence was almost unheard of. In the neighborhood I was raised in we had a number of policemen and firemen who lived there, and they gave a certain stability.

We had a very tough pastor, really tough. Very demanding. And he made a big difference. He was a guy who…Monsignor McMahon, who had two big dogs, St. Bernards that he'd walk every morning. He was a lawyer as well as a priest, and he had a gold tipped cane, and he walked in the neighborhood, and he really had a presence.

As did the alderman. Alderman O'Halloran I think was his name. But you had certain major players—the pastor, the principal at the school, were really mainstays in getting things done. It was fun. I didn't realize at the time it was fun, but it was fun.

Q: It sounds wonderful. Kind of almost utopian, idyllic, sort of.

O'Connor: In a lot of ways it was. Everybody left their doors open at night. Never locked the doors. Go away for a weekend, never locked it. People would totally trust one another. Which is a nice way to live.

Q: Do you see any of that now in the city?

O'Connor: I think people are wary. And of course there's so much attention today on violence and concern that nobody is safe. And particularly what's happened in the last year or so, not just here, but elsewhere, the drive-by shootings. That was an unheard of thing. That never occurred, to my knowledge, in the time I was growing up. The vindictiveness or the sport of things, never, in your wildest dreams, could you imagine that happening back at the time I was growing up.

So how do we find ways to get people focused on doing the right thing? It's really tough. My heart goes out to Superintendent McCarthy, who I

think is a good man and an effective superintendent. But it's got to be really tough trying to manage the situation. How many policemen? Do you have to have one on every corner of every block in the city of Chicago 24 hours a day?

Can you change the culture of people to have them understand that this is unacceptable? We just can't continue to take one another's lives. What were there, this past weekend, 40 shootings? So that's a tough one. We've got to get at this one. Community organizations, the churches, political leadership, the media.

I'm very involved in and organization called Big Shoulders which works with Inner City Catholic Schools. And they are like lighthouses in the neighborhoods where they're located. They are such a symbol of stability in those communities where they're located. We have 90 of them, 90 different schools, which is a lot. There are almost 25,000 kids. And these are phenomenal schools that have become very successful.

And any time you close one of these schools, the archdiocese closes one, there's a real down spell of kind of doom and gloom, and it's affecting the neighborhoods when you close them, because you've taken away one of their symbols of hope. So we work very, very hard to keep them open. In the last ten years we've done pretty well in doing so.

But we have a lot of people, really good people, not just Catholics—who are involved in a major way to keep these schools going. Maybe the school has 250 kids. There are no security people in the building at all, unlike the public schools have. There are no gates that you have to go through to check for any iron that you might have on you. And there's great discipline. The kids behave, the kids learn, the kids do well in school. And it's just remarkable.

And the teacher is allowed to teach. In fact they're told they have to teach. So you don't have all the time spent trying to get people positioned so they can learn, which takes 30 to 40% of the time in a bad school. But in these schools it's like 100% of the time that you are really focused on learning. And so that's why the sense of community, that, to me, is unbelievably important, and why it's important to keep these schools going.

Q: The support agencies or projects that you mentioned—the youth development, the jobs efforts, and getting back to Mayor Daley, it sounds like he was very cognizant of this, that schools help communities stay together. What other kinds of programs did he do? Do you recall?

O'Connor: You know, in the material you sent to me, or I saw, there were several things that they…when he announced his budget, and the amount of investment they had in a variety of things, it mentioned summer jobs. You know, contact 18,000 Chicago businesses. The goal is to provide at least 10,000 summer jobs. I knew we did at least that, but I don't have the exact number.

Operation Head Start was another thing that was important. They had that back then and they have that today. Here's where they have "place in fire departments to facilitate working with youth who get into trouble, and working with families who have behavior problems," so that's an age-old thing. But at least there was emphasis.

"To this end, the Chicago Commission on Youth Welfare is employing neighborhood workers who will increase supervision of youth." And that goes on. I do think that was kind of descriptive of a lot of the kinds of programs that were underway. And that's got to continue.

In our schools, we put a lot of emphasis on quantitative evaluation—how many kids actually graduate, how many kids actually go on to college. Not

just because they're told they can go to college, but how many actually go. And then what is the sustainability rate—if they do go, do they finish, which is a number that's hard to get sometimes.

But we're trying very hard to say if you can get 80% of the kids graduating college by the age of 25, you've really got a major upgrade from what you normally see. So we put a lot of emphasis on results.

And to me that's one of the critical things. That's why jobs in the summertime under Mayor Daley were so important, which was a brand new program when we set it up. And all the jobs, everybody said, well, they're making three bucks an hour, or two bucks an hour, what is that going to get you, and what are you going to learn, what value is it. Just getting a paycheck, at that age of 16 or 17, is really important, instead of hanging out on the street. You've got to be careful that you don't put so much emphasis on what you're preparing the person for that you forget it's actually working to bring something home.

Q: Well, speaking of bringing something home, I feel like we're bringing the interview to a circle here. But I have a question for you, maybe a final question. If Mayor Daley looked at the city today, what kind of advice do you think he would give to all of you who are leading the city?

O'Connor: Well, first of all I think he'd feel quite proud of what's been done since he's gone, almost a quarter of a century ago. Secondly, I think he would again underscore the importance of the involvement of all the very elements—business, labor, religious, civic, political—in getting answers to things.

You can't leave anybody out in that equation. You really have to get everybody engaged and kind of put their hand on their book that says

we're going to take this forward. And I think that's a little bit of what he did. I don't know that it was that sophisticated, but he got people involved.

If you look at Mayor de Blasio in New York, this is, in my judgment, somebody who is on the wrong track with what he's trying to do. All he does is blow up business every time he talks—those guys, those greedy muckrakers who are making all this money, and meanwhile the little guy on the street is making 1% of what they're making. He's taking them down. And I don't think it's going to be healthy for that city.

I saw that with Mayor Lindsay, when he was the mayor years ago in New York, and watched that city almost go in the tank because of his approach to things. It was so fraught with anything goes. It was so liberal. And I don't classify myself, necessarily, as a conservative, but it was so we're not going to take charge of anything, unlike Giuliani, who came in and really did a great job, and Bloomberg, who also did a great job, in my judgment.

And people feel safe in New York. They enjoy it, and it's an atmosphere that's so much different than it was under Lindsay. I worry that this mayor and his approach to things is going to turn that wheel in the other direction and cause people not to be as responsive to the call to get engaged. Leadership is everything.

Mayor Bloomberg was very good, I thought, for New York. Very different and very tough. And he never minced words, which I think that's what Mayor Daley would come back and say—you've got to keep working, get all the elements together.

Q: There have been so many things written about him, and the picture that many people paint, when you talk personally about him, is so different. Are there any accounts—and maybe we can wrap with this—are there any

accounts of his life, his work, his legacy, that ring particularly true to you, or have made an impression on you?

O'Connor: Yeah. I think his ability to take himself out of the equation and recognize the value that others bring. That's why I talked about that speech, one of the first speeches I heard, where he went through the crowd and picked out all these different names, to have them understand that they were important. It wasn't just him talking down to them, but that they were important. He was very successful in doing that. And it was a great trait. I've watched that. Not too many, in my judgment, too many people in public life have that, but he certainly did.

He was very self-assured. He didn't waste a lot of time. He was a doer. And you never seemed to feel that he took too much vacation or he was lolling around the house or playing golf. He was on the job pretty much 24/7, which was great. And so from that standpoint, that's a great example to set for those who follow.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

O'Connor: No, I don't think so, Marie.

Q: Well, thank you so much.

O'Connor: You're very welcome.

Q: It was really a lovely tribute.

O'Connor: Thank you.

[*End of recording*]