

**Stephanie Benfield interviewed by Bob Short**

**2009 December 18**

**Decatur, GA**

**Reflections on Georgia Politics**

**ROGP-098**

**Original: video, 44 minutes**

sponsored by:

**Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies**

**University of Georgia Libraries**

and

**Young Harris College**

**University of Georgia**  
**DOCPROPERTY "reference" Reflections on Georgia Politics**  
**Stephanie Benfield**

**Date of Transcription: February 24, 2010**

BOB SHORT: I'm Bob Short, and this is Reflections on Georgia Politics sponsored by the Duckworth Library at Young Harris College and the Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies at the University of Georgia.

Our guest is Stephanie Stuckey Benfield, State Representative. Welcome.

STEPHANIE BENFIELD: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

SHORT: Eastman, Georgia, Christmas Day.

BENFIELD: Yes.

SHORT: You were born in Eastman.

BENFIELD: That's right; 44 years ago.

SHORT: Well, tell us about your early life.

BENFIELD: Well, I tell people I'm from Eastman, and that usually gets me in trouble because then inevitably that leads to people playing the name game and saying, "Well, you must know the so-and-so family," and the reality is my father got elected to Congress right after I was born. When I was a year old, we moved to Washington, D.C. So that's where I grew up, and my parents remained there after my father retired from Congress. He certainly didn't retire from work, but he retired from public life.

So I grew up in Washington, D.C., but I have a soft spot for Dodge County. That's always what I consider my home, and I still have lots of family down there; and we have lots of pecan trees in

Eastman.

SHORT: Good. Well, tell us about growing up in Washington.

BENFIELD: It was wonderful. It is an amazing political experience to grow up in Washington, D.C., and I got to see so much in action as far as bills becoming law and I learned at such an early age, following my father around. I have some early memories of -- I used to have these patent leather Mary Jane shoes that would make a very loud clacking noise when I would stomp around the rotunda of the Capitol. So I remember being like five-years-old and just making a racket.

I remember voting for my father. He would give me his card. I don't know if they still vote this way, but you would stick -- it looked like a driver's license -- in a machine, and then you'd press green for yea and red for nay. And I loved doing that. He would let me press the button. And now I let my kids press the yea or nay buttons for me because I just, I really loved that early experience.

And one of my favorite things was every year we got invited to the White House Christmas party for congressional families. I don't know if they still do that, but it's an amazing tradition. And I have a real early memory of being there when Nixon was President, and I actually got to meet and speak with President Nixon. He was in, of course, a crowd of people, and I was little so I could squeeze through. I was probably about eight-years-old. I have a picture of me talking to him. So I look about eight in the picture. And I grabbed his coat, and I pulled at him. And he

kneeled down. In the picture we have, he's kneeling down eye level with me. And I said, "Mr. President, I just want you to know I did not vote for you." And he said, "well, sweetheart, you're not old enough to vote." And I said "I know, but if I was old enough to vote, I would not have voted for you." And my parents were just so embarrassed. And I heard later that he was asking around "whose daughter is that?" He knew it was somebody who was a Democrat.

So from a very early age, I was a Democrat, and I had a very clear idea what issues I supported and what I didn't, just being around my father and my family.

SHORT: *Born to Run*; does that ring any bells with you, the book about your family and you running for political office?

BENFIELD: Now, there was a -- are you talking about -- there was a political science professor who wrote a little excerpt, yeah, that included -- maybe it was a chapter.

SHORT: That leads me to this question: You come from a very political family...

BENFIELD: Yeah.

SHORT: Your grandfather was in the state legislature.

BENFIELD: He was in the State House.

SHORT: Yes. And your father was in Congress for a number of years.

BENFIELD: Ten years.

SHORT: So it's quite normal I would guess that you decided to run for public office.

BENFIELD: Yeah. Yeah. I remember -- I really actually have a vivid recollection of when I decided I wanted to run. I was probably about 16 years old, and I was at some political function with my father. He was out of politics by then, but he has always remained active. He's never been a lobbyist, but he remained active in politics and going to events. And I remember thinking, "boy, when I grow up I want to be like my mother and be a political spouse." And my mother is wonderful, and she does so many things. I'm not trying to disrespect political spouses, but then I remember thinking, "well, but then I don't get to actually vote and make the decisions." And so I thought, you know, "I want to be the person running. And I can't count on necessarily marrying someone who will get elected or someone who will stay elected; I ought to be the one to run because then I'm in control of whether I'm in politics or not."

So I just remember that thought process going from, "oh, I'd love to be a political spouse" to, "wait, I think I'd like to be the politician." And so I started getting active in different political campaigns. The first campaign I worked on was Al Gore for Senate when I was at Vanderbilt University. And I just worked on a bunch of campaigns, and it was a wonderful learning

experience.

SHORT: Good. You went to law school at Georgia?

BENFIELD: I did.

SHORT: And you graduated there?

BENFIELD: Yes.

SHORT: What was the first thing you did after you passed the Bar?

BENFIELD: Well, I went into practicing law. And I felt very strongly -- and I still do -- that I know there's a lot of people that go to law school because they're interested in politics, and that's why I went to law school. And it is I think the best background for a political career or a public service career, to have a real working knowledge of not only how to write a bill or write a law, which you learn in law school, but the practice of law and how the laws actually play out in the courtroom or play out in real life. And you get that in-depth knowledge going to law school. And just the contacts you make. I mean, so many people I was in law school with were my early supporters when I did decide to run, and so many of my colleagues are now judges or public servants themselves. So the networking is so critical. But right after law school, the interesting

thing is I felt strongly about practicing law before running for office. So I had that understanding, that real-life understanding of law. So I practiced law for, gosh, I want to say eight years before I ran. I worked as a public defender, and I tried cases; and I was really on the front lines of being in the courtroom and handle cases from arrest all the way to conviction -- my clients didn't always get found not guilty -- and through the appeals process and the parole process. So I really understand those issues, and I'd highly recommend people interested in public service not only to go to law school but to practice law for a while before you run.

SHORT: So in 1998 you ran for -- 1998?

BENFIELD: '98, yeah.

SHORT: You ran for the State House.

BENFIELD: Yes.

SHORT: Tell us about your first campaign.

BENFIELD: Oh, it was fun, and it was nerve-racking and a very exciting time in life. I ran against a woman who had lived in the district a lot longer than I had. She had worked as a lobbyist for over a decade. She's very smart, had a lot of contacts; and it was a difficult race

because it was hard to differentiate myself from her. It was a fellow Democrat. My district is heavily democratic. So it was actually like Georgia politics in the old days when most of the districts are heavily democratic and the real race was the primary. If you won the primary, you'd win the general. So my race was primary. And I think in many respects primary elections are harder than a general because it's easy I think to argue why you're the better candidate if it's Republican versus Democrat and there's some real differences in the issues and you can debate the merits of your position on an issue versus your opponent with the other political party. And it's easy to get your allies and supporters lined up. I've spent years working with the DeKalb Democratic Party and all these different campaigns, so I had all these Democratic supporters. Well, the problem running against a fellow Democrat is a lot of people I'd worked with had also worked with my opponent and liked her. And they'd say, "well, why should we vote for you instead of her? How do you differ on the issues?" And we really didn't differ on the issues. So it was hard, but I outworked her. And that's what I love about being in the State House. You can actually knock on enough doors to win a State House race. And I knocked on over a thousand doors. I lost a lot of weight. I got into great shape. And I did raise a lot of money. Politics, unfortunately, has changed from when my dad was in politics and you could really meet a lot of voters and win that way. Now it's mostly about raising money. But with the State House, you really can press the flesh, as LBJ would say, and meet people and win a race that way as well.

**SHORT:** What advice did your dad give you?

BENFIELD: Oh, well, you know, he -- I really like that he respected me to not say "you should do this and that." A lot of the advice he gave me was just advice over the years growing up and observing him because he set such a great example. One of the things I always remember about my father is he would say "never drive in a parade." There are like little things he told me. I just remember that so well. My father would roll up his sleeves and button down his shirt. He had a button-down shirt, but he would unbutton it, take off the tie, and he would walk the parade and he would shake hands. And he would also throw out candy. You can't do that as much today; people don't like candy as much. But I thought that was such an example of how he politicked, is that he worked. People don't want to see the politician sitting in the back of a car waving like the Pope or the Queen of England. They want someone who's going to get out and walk the parade and shake hands. And so that advice applied to so many aspects of politicking, that you campaign by working hard and meeting people.

He also said "never give too long a speech. People don't want to sit there for a long speech," and I like that he said, you know, "keep it short, keep it short." "Try not to come between people and their meals when you're talking," and he said "really make a short speech if people are about to eat." So he gave me a lot of real nuts-and-bolts practical advice that just carries with me.

SHORT: So in 1999 you went to the State House of Representatives. What was it like?

BENFIELD: Oh, it was overwhelming, and I really got to witness history because the Georgia

legislature has changed so much. But I actually got to be there when it was still Tom Murphy and Larry Walker and Terry Coleman and some of the greats of the General Assembly. I hate that I didn't get to serve under Denmark Groover; that would have been just a dream for me because he was so brilliant. But I got to see so many of these amazing orators and work with people who knew the system, had been in office for 40 and 50 years. So I loved that.

I tried to get my grandfather's old seat, and they couldn't find it. They couldn't find an old seating chart. So I really was crushed that I didn't get to sit where he sat. But I loved -- you know, things have changed for the better in some ways, too. It was a good-old-boy system, but a lot of those politicians who have been around for ages treated me with respect because they knew my father and they knew my grandfather. So I had a real sense of legacy in that I had a family name to uphold. So I've tried to live up to that.

**SHORT:** Tell us about Speaker Murphy.

**BENFIELD:** You know, what I'd like to say are things that I think people may not have known about him, was that he had a real heart. He was so generous with his time, and he would make time to sit down and talk with every representative, whether it was a Republican or a Democrat. And even as a freshman, he would sit down and tell me stories and just share with me. His office was the thing I remember really vividly. Just he had so much memorabilia and knick-knacks from all his years in politics. And you would just look at his walls, and you would see Georgia history unfolding just with all the plaques and donkeys and peanuts and all the different awards

he'd accumulated over the years.

But he had a real soft spot. I've seen him cry, when you talk about children especially. He fought for Grady Hospital's neonatal unit to get funding from the State. And I think people don't always remember how he fought for Atlanta, which was not politically popular for someone from Bremen. But we wouldn't have the World Congress Center if it weren't for Tom Murphy. So he would take courageous stances, and he had a tremendous love for the House and independence of the House; and he didn't mind fighting with his own party, the governor, or the lieutenant governor if it was for the House. The House came first, and I just love that. He just really had a lot of reverence for the independence of the House.

SHORT: Were you aware of what was expected of you prior to taking your seat or was it a case of just on-the-job training?

BENFIELD: I think I had a pretty good idea. I knew as a freshman that I was not going to be taking the legislature by storm. I had worked for Mary Margaret Oliver as her legislative aide and her staff attorney for the judiciary committee for three sessions. So I'd seen how tough it is to get a bill through and how much it takes as far as contacts and wheeling and dealing and knowing how to finesse the committee process and floor debate and getting the right amendments tacked onto your bill. So I knew that it was a tough process.

But I also was ambitious and ready to get to work. And I do remember I introduced a lot of bills; but I was able to get four passed my first session, with a lot of help from Larry Walker and

Speaker Murphy and Mary Margaret Oliver and people who helped me through the process.

SHORT: Well, that's the key, isn't it, to legislative success, being able to build coalitions?

BENFIELD: Yes, yes. It's all about friendships and relationships, and that's true no matter who's in charge over there.

SHORT: Let's talk for a minute about your early career. What were your goals when you went to the State Capitol?

BENFIELD: I know it sounds cliché, but to make a difference. But some advice I got from Senator Sam Nunn, who was a good friend of my father's, is to focus on one or two issues because you're not going to be an expert in everything. So figure out what your areas of expertise are and really try to make a difference with those areas. So I followed Mary Margaret's lead on trying to champion children's issues and women's issues. And being an attorney and having been a criminal defense issue, I had a real passion for criminal justice issues and making sure that the system was fair. So I've worked on those issues. I've done several bills providing exonerations for persons who are wrongfully convicted, and I've worked on trying to expand Georgia's pre-K program. And since being elected, a lot of changes have happened in my personal life. I got married, and I've had two children. So I really had become even more of a champion for childcare issues and breastfeeding and maternal care and early

childhood care and healthcare for children. So being a mom has really enhanced my understanding of those issues.

SHORT: And girls participating in high school sports.

BENFIELD: Oh, thank you. I loved working on that bill, and I was so privileged. It was during my second term. I was so new in the system. And to be able to pass a major bill... And that still is one of my proudest accomplishments, and that was eight years ago. But I did with Kathy Ashe; so I had a senior representative who knew the ropes and knew how to get bills through as my co-sponsor. And so with Kathy's help, we were able to get that through, and basically we were just saying that women and girls should have an opportunity to participate in sports in our public school system if they so choose. And it's basically a Title IX for Georgia.

SHORT: You of course had to take on a lot of opponents at that time in passing that bill. Where did most of the opposition come from?

BENFIELD: Football. People thought we would be taking money away from football, and we all know how football is king, and especially in rural towns in Georgia. But it's big everywhere. And there was some concern, which is fair, that if we passed this gender equity in sports legislation that we would be taking money away from our football teams. But we presented I think a bill that was balanced, and what we said is that women need to have an opportunity to

participate; but it doesn't mean that the funding has to be equal between girl sports and boy sports, that there was an understanding that football is more expensive. They have more equipment than, say, a swim team would. But that there should be equitable spending so that there are equal opportunities. So we were able to get the bill through by working with people.

SHORT: Are there other bills you were interested in?

BENFIELD: Well, certainly expanding Georgia's pre-K, which I have not succeeded in doing. If I can accomplish that, that will be a real achievement. But Georgia right now, our pre-K program, which I think is amazing. We were the first pre-K program funded by lottery/funded by the state in the country, and that's thanks to Zell Miller and his efforts. And we have a program that starts at age 4. Now, I know I'm a little biased because I have a four-year-old, and when I was really pushing the bill I had a three-year-old. But I'd like to see the program expanded to start at age three. Many states are now starting at age three, and I have to say, as proud as I am of Georgia's program, other states have surpassed us in a lot of the benchmarks of success for effective pre-K programs. And one of the benchmarks is starting at a younger age. So I'd like to see us get up to the standards that were set by Zell Miller and fully fund the four-year-old program and expand to three-year-olds.

SHORT: Let's move ahead to 2002 when, for the first time since John F. Conley (Benjamin F. Conley) 131 years ago, Georgians elected a Republican governor. Were you surprised?

BENFIELD: No; we saw it coming. I thought we were another cycle away. I thought we were going to have two more years. But it was coming. Georgia has been trending for a while. It wasn't like an overnight surprise. But I did think I'd have two more years. I think the one thing that did surprise me were the party switchers, and I'm still disappointed in that. And I don't mean to disparage all party-switchers, Kathy Ashe, who is a dear friend and someone I respect immensely, she switched parties. But I do think there's a way to go about it. You wait until the end of your term. You make an appropriate announcement to your constituents, and you're not doing it for personal gain, whereas what happened when the House switched and the Senate switched, is we had a lot of Democrats who switched to Republicans in exchange for plum committee assignments and money for their district. And there was a lot of backroom dealings that went with that. So I do like to point out to people when I argue that the Democrats can take that control again, and we need 17 seats to do that right now, that the Republicans didn't win just at the polls and by getting the voters to support them; they had a lot of switchers, party switchers. So that did surprise me. I felt betrayed by some of the switchers who I considered to be friends and political allies. And I still think the switchers -- there was a lot of opportunism going on there.

SHORT: Well, speaking from the standpoint of a voter, what do you think caused the switch from the Democratic party to the Republican party by a majority of Georgia voters?

BENFIELD: You know, it's hard for me because I certainly can't speak to reasons why individual voters change their positions or how rural voters versus metro, because I know I have a different perspective, and I have my own biases. But I do think the national party did not help us. I feel strongly that the Georgia Democratic party is a moderate party. We are not a left-wing party. Not that there's anything wrong with being progressive on issues, but I think that a lot of voters, particularly in the rural areas because we've lost a lot of seats in the rural areas. They looked at what's going on nationally with the Democratic party, and they didn't feel aligned with those issues that were being promoted at the national level or some of the politicians that were winning at the national level. So they just felt disengaged.

And I do think the Democrats in Georgia are to blame for not being aggressive with recruiting good candidates and campaigning and making sure that we were out there and meeting our voters and aggressively campaigning. I think we took a lot of things for granted, and we're not doing that anymore.

SHORT: How did that affect your own personal political agenda, the switch from Democrat to Republican?

BENFIELD: Huge, huge impact. I've been humbled being in a minority party. I've learned you have to listen to both sides of a debate. I haven't been able to pass many bills. It is very partisan in the Georgia legislature right now. I hope things may change with the new Speaker as of yesterday. David Ralston has been elected to the House

speakership. But my focus has shifted as a legislator. My focus used to be on passing laws and going back to my district and telling them I passed ten bills, or not ten bills, but I passed five bills this session. I could pass three to five bills a session before. I've passed all these bills, and I've gotten this money for our district. So I was able to deliver things under the gold dome. Now I can't do that so much because I'm in the minority party. The bills I pass are bills that I initiate but then I take to a Republican, and I say "can I be the second signer and you be the lead on this because I know it's not going to pass with me as a Democrat as a top signer." So now my bills are bipartisan, and I focus a lot more on community events and constituent services and just being really involved at the grass roots with the community because I can be very effective doing that.

SHORT: So what you're saying is that the Republican leadership is too partisan?

BENFIELD: Yes, yes. I hope it's going to change. We have a new leadership. But it's been extremely partisan, and I understand why that happened. We had a hundred years of Democrat rule and it was a rule in many respects, and they felt stifled. They couldn't get their bills passed, although I do have to say and maybe my memory is faulty, but I recall the Republicans passing a fair amount of legislation when the Democrats...when Speaker Murphy was in charge, when Coleman was in charge. And I remember the last night of the session the past couple of years just sitting there and keeping a tally of how many Republicans passed bills, how many Democrats; and, I'm not kidding, it's 40 Republican bills get through and maybe two Democratic

bills. It's just overwhelming how many Republicans get their legislation through and how few Democrats get their bills through. And the Democrats who do get their bills through are the Democrats who have worked out deals with the Republicans and vote with them on key issues in exchange for getting their bills through.

SHORT: Georgia today is not the Georgia when you were elected.

BENFIELD: No.

SHORT: Has our state government successfully adapted to the times?

BENFIELD: Yes and no. I would like to see a lot more bipartisanship. I think that is the key to an effective legislature, and I'd like to see more civility in the legislature. I'd like to see people treating each other with respect. Even though the Democrats are in charge nationally, I think if you talk to most voters they're moderates. They're not extreme on one side or the other. And I think the times are that people really want balanced government, and they don't want a lot of rancor or discourse. So I don't know if Georgia is quite there yet. I'd like to see maybe with our new Speaker, I'm hopeful that we'll see a stronger spirit of bipartisanship.

SHORT: Well, we're going into 2010 during a very serious recession. It seems that the only solution might be to raise taxes or to make government more efficient. Do you think it's time for

us to go back to the days of Jimmy Carter and reorganize the state government?

BENFIELD: I think we should have everything on the table, and I think Jimmy Carter did a lot of good with his reorganization. I know it was very controversial at the time, but it's played out. History has shown that he made some much-needed changes. And we have been looking at reorganization this past session. We reorganized the Department of Human Resources, which had a lot of bureaucratic problem. So we are looking at reorganization, and that was a bipartisan effort. I will say that Democrats had a seat at the table and participated in that.

So I think we need to look at a lot of solutions with the recession. We do need to look at some tax increases. Maybe not property tax increases, but maybe some cigarette tax increase. That's something I've championed and Governor Perdue did support his first year in office. And I think we need to have a holistic view of the tax breaks that we give to corporations. Some of them are needed and they generate jobs, but some of them don't generate jobs. So we really need to look carefully at whether we're getting enough bang for our buck when we give tax breaks. And we do have to look at some cuts, unfortunately, and it's going to be hard.

SHORT: Let's get back to Stephanie Stuckey Benfield. What's down the political road?

BENFIELD: Well, I would love to run statewide someday. That's always been a goal of mine. But I'm a mother and a wife first, and my family really does come first. And that is something I learned from my father. I remember he had a plaque in his office in Congress that said "the

greatest thing a father can do for his children is love their mother." And he really does love my mother. They have a great marriage. And so I think my family comes first, my relationship with my husband and my children. So that being said, my children are four years old and seven years old. I had to think for a second, my daughter just had a birthday. So they're not old enough yet for me to run statewide. And frankly, Georgia is not blue enough for someone like me. I'm a metro area Democrat. Jim Martin ran a year ago for U.S. Senate statewide. He's a progressive Democrat from the metro area, and he got beat. And I think I'm a lot like him politically. And so I don't think Georgia is quite ready for someone of my political persuasion statewide just yet. So I'd like to see Georgia turn a little bluer before I run, and I want my kids to be a little bit older. And I'm working on building a statewide base right now.

SHORT: Do you have an office in mind? Governor maybe?

BENFIELD: I'd like Secretary of State. I think that's a seat that I'm really interested in as far as the issues. I have always had a passion for voter participation, increasing voter turnout, making the voting process more fair. And I'd love to see Saturday voting. I'd love to increase voter registration. I would like to see third parties participate in the process more. I know that kind of surprises people. But I've long been an advocate for making it easier for third-party candidates to get on the ballot in Georgia. So the voting issues in particular interest me.

But I think I'm a good manager and I'm a good organizer, and a lot of what the Secretary of State does is organize the Secretary of State's office. So that's something I could do down the

road.

SHORT: What was your position on the voter ID?

BENFIELD: I opposed it. I didn't see a need for it. There were no cases of fraud related to identification brought to the legislature when the bill was being debated. I think it is an obstacle to voting for persons who come here from other countries who become legalized citizens. I think it is an obstacle to the elderly. And I didn't see the justification for it.

SHORT: So you don't think that there are holes in the method by which we vote electronically?

BENFIELD: I actually support electronic voting. That was Secretary of State Cathy Cox who pushed that. We were the first state in the country to have electronic voting. I think no system is perfect, and I do support having a backup paper ballot or a receipt. I think that would give voters a level of confidence. And I am convinced from the data I've seen, and I'm happy to look at other data that would suggest otherwise, that our electronic voting is sound. But I also know that there is some skepticism by the public, and I want there to be a level of confidence where people vote. And I think the backup ballot would give people that confidence. So I do support some changes in the system.

SHORT: As you look back over your very enviable record as a public servant, what do you

consider your greatest accomplishments?

BENFIELD: I think the Title IX, the gender equity in sports bill, made a difference. And I talk to school systems all the time. People call me about how to file a claim, how to make sure their daughter is treated fairly and able to participate in the football team is one I get, you know, girls who are kickers or they want to be able to play fast-speed softball. And so I still get a lot of feedback on that bill. I've done a lot of advocacy for juveniles and trying to make the juvenile justice system fairer. I worked on the juvenile judge bill to increase juvenile judges in our state. And I worked on the child advocate bill, which was Governor Roy Barnes. I think that was a good move, to create a statewide child advocate. So that was something I worked on. So I think advocacy, like I said earlier, for children, for women's issues, that's where I think I've made a big difference.

SHORT: What's your biggest disappointment?

BENFIELD: I think losing the House. That was crushing. And just all the changes that have come since then and seeing how partisan things have become. That's been the disappointment.

SHORT: Is there something you have wanted to do but haven't gotten around to it?

BENFIELD: Well, the only thing I haven't gotten around to, there are things like expanding the

pre-K program to include three-year-olds; I'm trying. So everything I want to do in the legislature, I've at least introduced a bill and started to go down the road to getting the bill passed. But there are a lot of issues out there I'd still like to see some progress on. One is with the criminal justice system. I don't favor the two-strikes-you're-out program. I don't favor the mandatory minimums for the seven deadly sins for juveniles. I don't think we ought to hamstring our judges. I think we need to give our judges a lot more discretion to look at the cases in front of them and make a fair decision. So that's something I would love to see changed.

SHORT: Tell us about the Benfields.

BENFIELD: Oh, I love my married family. My in-laws are conservative. My mother-in-law and father-in-law vote Republican. They're from North Carolina. So I like the debates I've had, particularly with my mother-in-law, about the issues. But she's pro-choice, so she's a pro-choice Republican. So socially she's a lot more moderate than some in her party. So I've enjoyed my political debates with them, and I've enjoyed seeing North Carolina. I go there a lot. We go there every summer for two to three weeks. And I've gotten to see that wonderful state, and North Carolina is doing a lot of amazing programs, especially with their economic development. So I feel like it's my other state. I'm also from North Carolina now that I've married into a North Carolina family. So I've enjoyed just observing all the innovations they've had with their politics.

SHORT: And tell me about the Stuckeys.

BENFIELD: Well, we've got a big family. My father has five children, and we're all over the political map. I've got brothers who are Democrats; I have a brother who votes more independent. My sister votes Republican most of the time. And I'd love to see some of my siblings run for office. I've actually encouraged my sister, even though she's a Republican. I told her if she ever ran, I would support her because I think she would have a lot to offer. She's held some political fundraisers. I don't see anyone else in my family just yet running for office, but I'd like to see that.

SHORT: But mom and dad are in Washington?

BENFIELD: They're in Washington, D.C. My father is still politically active, and my mother is too.

SHORT: And your dad has gone back to the Stuckey business?

BENFIELD: Stuckey business. We have a family timber company, and our family owns most of the shares of a small bank in Eastman. So we're into community banking as well.

SHORT: I think your mother owns a newspaper?

BENFIELD: She did. They sold it.

SHORT: She sold it?

BENFIELD: Yeah, yeah.

SHORT: Good. Well, is there anything we've forgotten or left out?

BENFIELD: No. I just want to say it's an honor to be interviewed by you because I just have so much respect for all you've done and the history that you've preserved of Georgia politics. I'm just so appreciative of all that you're doing with this project.

SHORT: Well, I thank you. I wish I lived in your district so I could vote for you.

BENFIELD: Oh, thanks. Thanks. Or keep me in line! I have a very active district, and my constituents contact me all the time. I probably get 300 emails a day. I hear from people, and I enjoy that. I like the feedback. And I like the Republicans in my district, too. I hear from them.

SHORT: Well, that's good. You're widely known as a good political community activist.

BENFIELD: Yeah.

SHORT: Tell us what you do when you aren't politicking.

BENFIELD: I'm a mom; I'm chasing kids around the playground, although my husband will tell you that I'm always politicking. Usually I will have my cell phone with me, and I'll be talking to a constituent or I'll be calling a state agency about some issue. I'm doing candidate recruitment right now for the House Democratic Caucus, so I'm calling a lot of people all over the state trying to get them to run in 2010. And it's not uncommon for me to be making calls with screaming children in the background because I'm at the playground or I'm at the library or somewhere with my children. So I'm chasing after kids when I'm not doing political stuff, but I'm pretty much doing political stuff all the time.

SHORT: Well, we certainly appreciate you being with us today. And I want to thank you on behalf of the Duckworth Library at Young Harris and the Richard B. Russell Library at the University of Georgia. Stephanie Stuckey Benfield.

BENFIELD: Thank you.

CRAIG BREADEN: Can I ask you a question real quick?

BENFIELD: I hope I didn't talk too much.

BREADEN: What are some of your constituents saying when you talk to them? What are some of the things they are looking for?

BENFIELD: A lot of what I hear about are just specific issues to them. For example, just today alone, the issues I'm working on, I have a teacher in my district who applied for a HOPE Scholarship for continuing education and was denied her scholarship. And so I'm calling the folks at the Georgia Student Finance Commission to find out what happened with her scholarship money. And in the process, I'm learning about how HOPE has had to change some of their requirements because of cutbacks so I get a good holistic view of what's going on with the issue on a broader scale. I have a constituent who thinks that the waiting period to get a Medicaid waiver is too long for their child who is getting pediatric care. So I've been calling the Department of Community Health about that.

So I get a lot of specific issues. I get a lot of very local issues. The city of Avondale Estates is in my district. They want to expand their city limits. Annexation bills go through the legislature. So I'm getting a lot of calls about annexation right now. A lot of local stuff.

BREADEN: Okay. Just one other quick question: The gender equity and sports you talked about. Are there any other gender issues that you see as being sort of on the front burner or

things that need to be addressed legislatively?

BENFIELD: Well, there are a couple that come to mind that affect primarily women; but they affect men as well. I'm thinking the Parental Leave Act is one that predominantly affects women. But there are some men who are the primary caregivers in their family. The Parental Leave Act would enable the primary custodian for children or an elderly relative living in their home to have a certain number of days, and I think it's at five days now, but a certain number of days of paid leave, or even unpaid leave but excused leave from their job in order to attend PTA conferences or doctor's visits, medical visits. We've been working on that bill for years. That's something a lot of the women are advocating for.

Another is increasing the state minimum wage, and that affects a lot of women as well.

BREADEN: Okay, thank you.

BENFIELD: There were some breastfeeding in public issues too, but we've already passed breastfeeding in public in Georgia. But there are some tweaks to the bill.

BREADEN: Right. And I knew there were other women health issues also that are...

BENFIELD: Well, yeah; Peach Care. And that's children. But obviously, if the funding is not there for healthcare for the children, you know, it affects women, especially the single mothers.

And I do have a lot of single mothers in my district.

BREADEN: Thank you.

BENFIELD: Dental care for pregnant women, that's one. They threaten to cut that a lot. And that affects the fetal development. I didn't know that until I was pregnant. And suddenly I had to go to the doctor and floss a lot because the bacteria can spread to the fetus. And it's currently covered by Peach Care. But every year it's kind of a battle on whether that will continue to be covered. So anyway. Thank you. This has been so fun.

[END OF RECORDING]

**Reflections on Georgia Politics**  
**Stephanie Benfield**

**Page**

**3525 Piedmont Road, N.E.**  
**Eight Piedmont Center, Suite 310**  
**Atlanta, Georgia 30305**  
**800-872-6079**  
**FAX 404-873-0415**  
**[www.wordzx.com](http://www.wordzx.com)**