PBS’ “TO THE CONTRARY”

Women’s History Month Profile: Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton

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Host: Bonnie Erbe

Interview with Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton
Bonnie: Coming up on to the contrary... Long time panelist delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton tells her fascinating life story. Congresswoman Norton I have known you for more than 20 years but we want to do a whole half hour interview with you because you have become a national treasure. And we just want our viewers to be able to know who you are and what you're starting from childhood, what life was like for you. You told me your great-grandfather was a runaway slave. Tell me about that story.

Eleanor Norton: Well that’s how I got to be a native Washingtonian Bonnie or at the moment a third generation Washingtonian. My great grandfather Richard Holmes as my grandfather told it simply walked off of a plantation sometime in the late 1840s or 1850s. No conspiracy. Richard Holmes just walked away and walked all the way to the District of Columbia. Where he established himself very well, became a minister. His son, my grandfather, Richard Holmes, entered the DC fire department in 1902 and I have a wonderful picture of my grandfather with his three or four colleagues in the DC fire department. There were all of I want I must say perhaps half a dozen African-American men in the DC fire department all told.

Bonnie: And then tell me about your education and how you ended up at Yale Law School.

Eleanor: I went to segregated schools throughout my life.

Bonnie: Separate but equal.

Eleanor: Yes such as they were. But really not subject to what people in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia were which was the back of the bus. That we did not have in Washington but I yearned to be in the civil rights movement. And so while at Yale I was recruited by Bob Moses who is one of the most storied leaders of the civil rights movement, the first of the student nonviolent coordinating committee. He had been a philosophy student at Harvard, the first to go into Mississippi. There were half a dozen snick people in Mississippi. Medgar Evers who was The President of the N.A.A.C.P., he had whole sit-ins in Mississippi. Mississippi was the only state at that point in the early 60’s, about 63 that hadn’t even had sit-ins. Sit-ins had to spread all across the south but not to Mississippi because you took your life in your hands. So, Mega Evers led the sit-in movement. When I came to Mississippi on my way to the delta, he met me at the airport took me around Jackson, Mississippi. There were so few people with any legal training that he wanted me to stay in Jackson. And I told him I had convinced sorry -- I had told Bob Moses I would come to the delta. So I couldn’t possibly remain there. Took me all around and put me on a bus to go to the delta around 10:00 at night. I arrived in Greenwood, Mississippi; everything was very worked out in snick. They took me to the home of some farmers. The farmers told me what to do that they’d be gone when I woke up, where his office was. I did exactly what they told me. Heated water on a stove so that I could pour it into a 10-tub a washer tub to take a bath was sitting in that tub when a young person knocked at the door and said aren't you the student from up north? Yes. They need you to come right up the street to the snick office and Medgar Evers was shot and killed last night. He took me to the bus station, went home and was shot in the back. Here is my introduction to Mississippi. I got up there, Bonnie, and I’m the oldest person in the room. Somebody about my age had gone over to get another of the great leaders -- woman who was to become a great leader, Fannie Lou Hamer out of jail because she had been put in jail for
getting off of a bus in Winona, Mississippi nine miles away to use the ladies room. Lawrence Giot my age went to get her out of jail. I'm told by these young people younger than me, I am a second year law student, well now he is in jail. So I said I guess that means I have to go to try to get him out of jail? And he went to get Ms. Hamer out of jail; he got put in jail, now I'm supposed to get him out of jail? I was enough of a law student so I said tell me everything you know. I just questioned these were 14, 15, 16-year-old kids. They told me that the police chief in Greenwood did not march with white citizens councils when they picketed the office. One of them, he was racist but he understood he was law enforcement. I went to see the man. And I said sir; my name is Eleanor Katherine Holmes, I am a student at Yale law school. Everybody knows I am a down here and not only my mother and father but the Dean of the law school and lots of folks know I'm here but it will be up to me to go get people out of jail and I'm asking you one thing, sir... Would you just call Winona, Mississippi and tell them I'm coming and that all I want to do is get the people out of jail not to be jailed myself? Bonnie, I went over; found that the man who had gone before me to get Ms. Hamer out of jail had been let out during the night so the white citizens councils had been beat so badly, no clothes on when I got there. They had to ask him to put something over him; Ms. Hamer had been beaten mercilessly. But I was not put in jail. And we were able to get them out of jail. That was the Mississippi that I found myself in, in 1963.

Bonnie: A whole different world.

Eleanor: Very different and today Mississippi has the largest number of African-Americans in the state legislature of any state legislature in the country. It is a hard fight.

Bonnie: And tell me about Yale. Were there other African-Americans in your class? How many? Out of how many students? What was it like for you being an African-American woman at Yale at the time that you went?

Eleanor: Well, I suppose I might be said to be of the age of tokenism because there were one, two African-Americans in a class.

Bonnie: Out of?

Eleanor: A class of maybe a thousand.

Bonnie: Oh, my God.

Eleanor: My class stood out because there were 14 women and that was unheard of. So it was a time when few women went to law school, few African-Americans went to law school and certainly not to the Yale’s and Harvard’s of this country. I then married a New Yorker. Went to work at the American civil liberties union which was a very much of a career shaping, life shaping opportunity for me, because I got to argue before the United States Supreme Court. I got to represent people with whom I profoundly disagree and got to have a lot of fun.

Bonnie: At one point you represented the women O F "Newsweek" magazine and that’s become a TV series on one of the on-line networks. Tell me about how that case how important
was that to you? And do you look back on it with great pride? It was a class action against "Newsweek" for sex discrimination keeping the women down as researchers, never letting them become editors or reporters.

Eleanor: That is precisely what it was. And the film that has been made is called "good girls revolt." and that is what they were. Good girls. "Newsweek" had the crème de la crème. These were Phi Beta Kappas and rode scholars so they of course all wanted to be part of the, what was then very glamorous publishing business. And "Newsweek" and time were it. So to get to be there seemed good enough, few of them came to see me and said do you think we have a case? And I said would you like slam dunk? If all the women and all the men are equally qualified and men are brought in as cover reporters and women are brought in as researchers. There to rest for the rest of their journalistic lives that is an open and shut case of discrimination. That said, the women didn’t say hoorah let's go for it. And there is a reason they didn't. There had not been, and I believe I'm correct, a class action brought by women at that time. Blacks had been waiting for the 1964 Rights Civil Act this was the Act, this was the irony my life I was to enforce later in my life, but women were if you will recall added Bonnie only at the kind of rear end at the very end of the statute when somebody said let's put sex in instead of race, gender -- race and religion et cetera. And some thought that that was a way to kill the statute. Well, it lived to fight another day. But women were not prepared to be a part of a civil rights statute. But certainly when you are dealing with the women at "Newsweek" and there had been no class actions you can point to, no role models who had succeeded, the first thing I had to do was work on what was then called consciousness raising and to make the women understand that there was strength in numbers, that you could not be fired that was an additional violation of the statute. To the point where they were ready, actually they were the courageous ones. I did not have anything to lose. I was only their lawyer. They didn’t know for example would they be black balled? Yeah, maybe they couldn’t be fired but what would happen to them for the rest of their career? Well, ask Norah Ephron what would happen for the rest of their career. She was one of the few women who left to seek her own fortune but many others went on to be top flight journalists not only in “Newsweek” but throughout the country.

Bonnie: Fabulous. That’s a fabulous story. Now tell me you were later appointed by President Carter to lead the EEOC?

Eleanor: Yes. There had never been a woman to lead the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and again I think it speaks to how the commission was born and how it was seen. Remember 150 years after slavery still there was job discrimination, housing discrimination. There hadn’t been federal law passed. So when I got to the commission, I was obviously interested in it’s the mission that brought it to life but I was very interested in women as well. And spent a lot of my time on that aspect of the sex as well as the race aspect, we brought many class actions, turned the agency into not just an individual agency but into a major class action agency. So that you could go after whole classes of discrimination at the same time. What I discovered at the commission was that sexual harassment in jobs, Bonnie was pretty close to sexual savagery if a boss or a supervisor wanted to and it intimidated women enormously to come forward and essentially recount what has happened to them not that somebody pinched them on the behind but often much worse. Captured them in a bank vault and wouldn’t let them out. What do you do about that? How do you make women recognize they have a right but it
can't be vindicated if they don't seek to enforce it? Well, I decided I had to issue sexual harassment guidelines and this the employers were not ready for. So I called them all in. And I said this is going to protect you. Because we are going to describe what sexual harassment is. So you will know when to hold somebody accountable and how to educate your employees as to whether or not they may be submitting you to liability for sexual harassment. It was as important breakthrough. The guidelines were vindicated by the supreme court of the United States. Still a lot of sexual harassment in our society, guidelines were very important step forward. Without putting the onus entirely on the woman to come forward putting the guidelines and putting the onus therefore on the employer to set out policies that make it possible for enforcement to occur. It is true that employers woke up very fast to preventative measures. Who wants to be sued? Either for sexual harassment or sex discrimination? Certainly not racial discrimination. So, yes, employers would rather spend the money up front training their supervisors and managers than paying a lawyer to defend them once their reputation is sullied by such a lawsuit. Even if they are vindicated, class action against you ask "Newsweek". We were very strategic against “Newsweek” because Katherine Graham the famous publisher of the "Washington Post" as well as "Newsweek" was, of course, the head woman in charge. Her consciousness had not been raised yet then either. It was subsequently raised I got to know her and became a friend of hers. But at the first negotiation for "Newsweek" was one of the first things that you do when you bring a complaint against a company is you seek to negotiate your way out of it. Usually you have to go further and we did in this case. But I insisted that Katherine Graham be there for the first negotiation.

Bonnie: Very strategic thinking.

Eleanor: Yes. As it turned out this was not part of the strategy. I was very pregnant. And so the men as "Newsweek" didn’t quite know how to handle this big bellied lawyer who came in, shall we offer her a seat or is she an adversary, how shall we treat her? They finally said my God, let's get her a chair then they sat on the couch and the problem with offering me a chair while they sat on a couch is that the chair sat me above them looking down on them.

Bonnie: And that was a problem? Or a benefit?

Eleanor: For me you can imagine what it was. But I got to know them as well and all is well that ended well there. But it was important case because it spawned suits of this kind throughout the annals of American journalism and gave women in other categories of work the gumption to sue because of the high profile of the “Newsweek” women.

Bonnie: So you were chair of the EEOC and now you have been in Congress for 12 sessions, 24 years. You got here before Newt Gingrich took over.

Eleanor: Yes, just before he took over.

Bonnie: I was covering congress and that was a massive change. The Democrats had been in charge of the chamber for 40 years. And they were good friends with the Republicans who were largely moderate Republicans, who barely exist in the party now.
Eleanor: The change occurred at the national level and I decided that I couldn’t let that happen to the District of Columbia. One of the best experiences I’ve had as a member of Congress is getting to know Newt Gingrich. Newt Gingrich and I had something in common. By the time I came to Congress, I had been a tenured professor at Law at Georgetown. I still teach one course there because I left a lot of my brain there. And Newt Gingrich is nothing if not a university intellectual. So I didn’t think I could hurt myself by going to talk to him. I began to talk to him about the District of Columbia; about wanting to work with him hoping that he would apply the principles remember he taught American history of our own history. Newt Gingrich was as helpful to me as any speaker has ever been. He became interested, I think intellectually interested in his role as speaker and the relationship of the congress to the nation’s capital perhaps the best story about Newt is that during his tenure they closed the government down repeatedly. And after they closed it down I said Newt how could you have close to it down? The district had to bring its own budget over to the Congress to let the Congress kind of pass on it before we could spend our own money. We were caught into it even though we had nothing to do with why the government was closed down. I said how could you let them close the district down? So he said ok, I’ll tell you what Eleanor if we have to close it again, we'll keep the district open. Sure enough it closed again and then again and it must have been four or five times. Each time there was something in the so-called congressional resolution that excluded the district from being closed down. There came a time when the congressional resolution did not say except for the District of Columbia. I said, oh, my, God, Newt you promised me? He said what it's not in there? And I said no. He said staff must have made a mistake. Tell you what Eleanor, you don't say anything and I won’t say anything tell them to keep it open. So the district did not close down. I have had to learn to work with the Republicans I have had very few years when Democrats had been in charge, certainly the house. They know who I am when it comes to national issues I am not with them. But it is not been impossible to find Republicans to work with increasingly difficult to be sure, on matters affecting the District of Columbia. And I have had a lot better luck in finding Republicans to work with not to mention Democrats who have been in charge more often in the Senate. To just have to work with the hand you are dealt, that is life.

Bonnie: So you have learned how to fight and learned how to get beyond fights and cooperate. Now, under the Trump Administration you’re gonna have the fight of your life?

Eleanor: I am afraid so. Learn to get beyond fights and not so much cooperate but to find ways to negotiate. I hope that Donald Trump is as open as his mind seems to be. He is bereft of policy; he does not seem to have been staunched himself in policy. He is of more than one mind on so many matters. My problem is more often than the president it is the Congress of the United States itself. So we may find members of Congress doing what I have been able to keep them from doing thus far, wiping out all the gun laws of the District of Columbia. Imagine what position that will leave a great city in. Because great cities, large cities are where you have more guns and more gun crimes. So I could be faced with that. Have been faced with it every single year. And have been able to beat it down and I will have that with a Republican House, Republican Senate and Republican President he is gonna have to put things in the budget affecting the District of Columbia although the District of Columbia pays entirely for itself.
There are a few things that do depend upon the President's budget. So I am going to have to be in touch with him and work with him.

Bonnie: You once said that if women were to -- would become half or more of congress and you still did business the same way as you have forever that wouldn't be progress. What did you mean?

Eleanor: Yes. Not enough for one for you and one for me. You want women who are especially tuned to the very important issues that are facing women. It's very interesting to note that I guess 3-1 we have Democratic women to Republican women. Republicans do not tend to even elect women to Congress. And when they do, they tend to go right along with the men. Having seen that, I don't think it's enough simply just to say all we need is half the congress to be women and everything is going to hunky dory.

Bonnie: Now, what do you want your legacy to be seen as?

Eleanor: Continuing. I don't think of myself in legacy terms yet. But I do think I've had the best of what my era had to offer. That is to say I was born in time for the civil rights movement to be a part of it. And to come home and to apply what I learned and did as a fighter in the civil rights movement to representing my city which is perhaps the one jurisdiction in the United States that most needs a fighter.

Bonnie: Why is that?

Eleanor: And it's because it doesn't have the -- the District of Columbia doesn't have the same rights as the citizens of every other part of the United States. Number one, Bonnie, number one per capita, in the amount of federal taxes paid to support the United States government. I have all the rights and privileges of every member of Congress except that final vote on the House floor. I mean I can chair committees. I can go on the floor and talk like anybody else, I can do anything anybody else can do. But what is emblematic of your citizenship is having somebody that can raise their hand down there for you when it comes time to vote on policy and the district doesn't have that and that's why we are striving to become the 51st state of the United States.

Bonnie: Do you think it will happen while you’re still in Congress?

Eleanor: It may not happen tomorrow or the next day, it’s going to happen.

Bonnie: All right. Good luck with that. Thank you so much for your time this has been wonderful congresswoman Norton.

Eleanor: Always a pleasure to talk with you, Bonnie.

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