

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Project
Frankie Welch
Interviewed by
Richard Norton Smith
September 10, 2010

Smith: Thank you for letting us come to your home.

Welch: I'm very thrilled to be a part of this because we were really such good friends.

Smith: How did you first meet Mrs. Ford?

Welch: Peggy would know.

Peggy: It was in Alexandria when she came to shop at the store.

Welch: That's right.

Smith: Tell us about your store in Alexandria.

Welch: Oh, yes! That's the reason I can live here now. It was in an 18th century house, a large house for then. And it was called Frankie Welch of Virginia. Peggy, were you born there?

Peggy: No. I grew up there.

Welch: You grew up there. Tell us more.

Peggy: It was in a historic home, originally Duvall House, that George Washington had visited. Then it was sold to The Bank of Alexandria, the first chartered bank in Virginia. And the Fords also lived in Alexandria. Do you remember their home?

Welch: I do. A family residential neighborhood.

Smith: It's on Crown View Terrace.

Peggy: When Gerald Ford became Vice President, they continued to live in their Alexandria home. You delivered clothes to her there many times. And during that period the driver would bring her to your shop.

- Welch: Exactly.
- Peggy: You have said that your friendship was important to Betty Ford, particularly while she was the Vice President's wife, because she felt a little isolated?
- Smith: When he was going up the ladder politically, he was out of town a lot and we know now that she paid a high price for that. I mean, she pretty much raised the kids herself, didn't she?
- Welch: Peggy knows because she knew their kids.
- Peggy: But you also did express that it was hard with him traveling a lot. They had four children and you felt like when he became vice president that she got to see more of him. That she was more a part of, as a vice president's wife. In the White House they did things together, although, she still needed a friend to talk to sometimes.
- Smith: What did she have to talk about?
- Welch: Well, she loved clothes and that's how I came about. We were just good friends before that. She loved pretty things and she was very meticulous as the wife of the vice president and then president. She wanted to look her best and dress appropriately, and waited and listened to my advice. She trusted my opinion.
- Smith: She'd been a model, hadn't she, at one point?
- Welch: Yes.
- Smith: So, she could wear clothes.
- Welch: Yes, she knew how to carry herself and she knew how to meet people and she was gracious and kind. A lovely person. And we had a lot of good times together. We were together every weekend, weren't we?
- Peggy: Not every weekend, but she would call you from the White House to bring clothes and just to visit – quite often in the beginning.

Welch: Yes. That's true. It was an honor and fun to bring her clothes to the White House.

Peggy: And you helped Susan.

Welch: Exactly.

Smith: How did you help Susan?

Welch: Well, she was a teenager and Peggy was in her early twenties. Susan was a little bit younger, not much, than my daughter Peggy and Genie.

Smith: Was Susan uncomfortable being in the White House? I mean, none of them expected to be there.

Welch: I don't think so. Susan was very likeable, loveable, part of everything.

Smith: But she also liked to wear blue jeans.

Welch: Well, that was part of the era. So did Peggy. So did Genie, my younger daughter.

Smith: Of course. Was it hard getting her into a more formal dress?

Welch: No.

Smith: When Mrs. Ford had her breast cancer, how did you find out about that?

Welch: She called me to tell me about it.

Peggy: Right, after my wedding. The same summer Mike and Gayle Ford were married.

Welch: Yes, exactly.

Smith: To tell you that it was happening?

Welch: Yes, exactly.

Smith: Was she afraid?

Welch: Well, sure, but she was a stoic type of woman. She was a very wonderful person.

Smith: She'd been through a lot, too, already, hadn't she?

Welch: I guess.

Smith: Tell me about Mrs. Ford's taste in clothes. Did you ever disagree about a dress or something? What was she naturally drawn to?

Welch: Well, she was very fashionable, very fashion-conscious, and we had a wonderful relationship through fashion and through friendship.

Peggy: I think this might jog your memory about her style.

Smith: That's a good way of putting it. Tell me about Betty Ford's style.

Welch: Well, she liked color. You can see here.

Smith: Were there colors that she liked more than others or were there colors that she couldn't wear?

Welch: You know, she really was so cooperative with everything. She was that type of person. Peggy can tell us. Peggy has the memory.

Peggy: She dressed in a very tailored, fashionable way versus trendy.

Welch: Yes.

Peggy: You may want to expand on the tailored look that she had.

Smith: Describe for people that don't know fashion what's the tailored look versus the lacy and—

Welch: It's the non-fancy, not fussy look. The tailored look can go anywhere and is timeless and classic. She could go anywhere wearing the clothes we worked together to have for her.

Smith: She was easy to design for?

Welch: Oh, yes. In fact, she was just sort of agreeable and so in to everything. If she was supposed to do something, she did it.

Smith: She liked your scarves. Was that a trademark of yours?

Welch: Yes, it was my business, trademark and business. The first scarf I designed was the Cherokee alphabet and then I designed 4,000 others after that. I designed for many corporations and both political parties.

Smith: Oh, my gosh.

Welch: I was able to put Peggy and Genie, with the help of their father, through college.

Smith: Now, you knew Mrs. Ford before she was in the White House?

Welch: Yes, we were all friends in the neighborhood.

Peggy: In Alexandria.

Welch: And we went to the same church, Christ Church.

Smith: Were the Fords churchgoers?

Welch: Yes.

Smith: Did she talk to you about her concerns about moving into the White House?

Welch: Well, you know, we were so close. It was like sister to sister. We were just very close and we talked about so much.

Smith: Was she comfortable with the idea?

Welch: Oh, yes. Yes, she was.

Smith: Really?

Welch: She liked people and she liked being a part of everything. She did it very tastefully. She was just a very lovely, lovely person and very cooperative. If she was to be interviewed, she gave it her all.

Smith: Let me ask you. This is an awkward question, because you were so close. We all know now, and she's written about it, in retrospect, she had some problems, even in the White House with the prescription drugs and alcohol, but beginning with the prescription drugs. Was that something you were aware of?

Welch: Not really. I didn't see her take pills. I didn't know that part because I guess to me she was just a well-balanced person.

Smith: And she has a sense of humor.

Welch: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. She laughed a lot, too. We did together.

Smith: Had you worked with Mrs. Nixon?

Welch: Yes, yes. I worked with, let's see, how many First Ladies? Five?

Smith: Well, Mrs. Nixon is somebody who, even now, is not somebody well known. Was she shy?

Welch: She was warm to her friends. Let's see, who else?

Smith: Lady Bird?

Welch: Lady Bird. I knew her very well.

Smith: Everyone loved Lady Bird. I mean, everyone probably thought being married to Lyndon Johnson must've been a saint.

Welch: Yes. And I visited Mrs. Johnson several times after she returned to Texas.

- Smith: But Mrs. Nixon seemed to be more remote to the general public. Her friends, obviously, knew her in a way that the general public maybe never really got to know her.
- Welch: That's true, I'm sure. And I designed a scarf for Rosalyn Carter. We had a connection because we were both from Georgia.
- Smith: Before Mrs. Ford became First Lady she never expressed fears, doubts, and concerns?
- Welch: She liked being a part of everything. If she were here, she would enter into the conversation and be involved in what we're talking about.
- Smith: She liked people?
- Welch: Oh, yes, very much so, very much so. She was reticent in some areas.
- Smith: How so?
- Welch: Do you remember, Peggy? I'm trying to think.
- Peggy: She did talk at that stage of her life about her problems to you.
- Smith: Sure, sure. Well, remember the famous *60 Minutes* interview where she talked very candidly when they asked about "What would you do if Susan had an affair?" or "Do you think your children have tried marijuana?" or things that mothers all over America were having to deal with, but no one talked about it.
- Welch: Yes, yes. She was willing to be honest and open about topics she felt she could add something to.
- Smith: And, Mrs. Ford, in effect, probably made it possible for that conversation to take place in millions of homes.
- Welch: Exactly.

Peggy: That was her humor, I think, coming out –

Welch: Exactly.

Peggy: - talking about Susan and teenagers.

Smith: Right. And she took a lot of heat for that. I mean, there were people who criticized her for her candor, but in the long run, I think it worked very much to her advantage. Likewise, tell us when Mrs. Ford had her breast cancer, because we gather that was not something that women talked about forty years ago. It was not a subject that was publicly discussed.

Welch: That's true. Very true. But we knew.

Peggy: And you said she wanted to make that discussable like she did about other issues.

Welch: Yes, she did.

Peggy: That she wanted people not to be afraid to discuss it.

Welch: Yes. Yes, exactly.

Peggy: She had a five year life expectancy with breast cancer back then. And that was thirty-six years ago.

Welch: Yes. I'm so glad you're here, Peggy. Peggy is my memory, also.

Peggy: And I will help to clarify that Mom has always held confidences well. So, I will say that she and Mrs. Ford had some discussions that Mom would choose not to share. That's out of respect of Mrs. Ford's decision. It would be her decision, not my mother's.

Welch: Exactly.

Peggy: So, you only have shared with Genie and me lightly private conversations over the years. It is important to know that that's a respect for Mrs. Ford.

And, you know, she did talk to you about being lonely sometimes. I think she was actually happy in the White House. But it happened so fast, she just did it.

Welch: Yeah, exactly. It was just done.

Smith: Plus she saw more of her husband. I mean he wasn't traveling anymore. They were under the same roof. Remember the wonderful story? People actually wrote in to protest because the Fords shared the same bed. There were actually people who wrote the White House to protest the fact that they were that open about it. But that was just the way they were, I think.

Welch: Yes.

Smith: Did she enjoy being a First Lady?

Welch: Oh, I think so. She liked being 'on.' There was a good bit of excitement and overall she enjoyed very much being First Lady.

Smith: She had been on stage, hadn't she, as a dancer?

Welch: Yes, exactly.

Smith: Did she enjoy the entertaining? The state dinners? All of that? It's a job. It's a real job.

Welch: She did. And she loved to dress for it and, of course, being her dresser, being the one she bought her clothes from, it was really wonderful to work with her because she was so with it in that she wanted to look well. It wasn't hard for her.

Smith: And I assume he was very proud of her appearance and took an interest in her clothes.

Welch: Yes, I would say so. I wasn't in their bedroom discussing that, but he did. I think he was very, very appreciative of her.

Smith: Let me ask you something, because she was famously tardy. Punctuality was not her thing. Is that because of the perfectionism? You said earlier that she didn't leave the room until she was perfect.

Welch: Yes.

Smith: For as long as they were married, it had become almost a joke in the family. The President was always on time and Mrs. Ford was not always on time.

Welch: Okay, yes.

Smith: Do you think that in a way reflected her desire to be as nearly perfect before she went out in public as she could?

Welch: She liked looking well because she had been in fashion earlier. She knew fashion. She was very wonderful to work with because when I would dress her for something, she cooperated. You know, she didn't conflict.

Smith: Did she wear much jewelry?

Welch: She wore pearls and that's what every woman wore at that time. Not flashy like this, but she wore pearls. That was about it.

Smith: I wonder if he bought her jewelry as gifts.

Welch: I would say so, but I don't know that.

Peggy: She didn't wear much jewelry.

Smith: That's what I mean.

Peggy: She was more tailored and understated.

Welch: Elegant and a very kind and sweet person.

Smith: Did you ever go to her with a problem? We've talked about her problems. If there was something bothering you, did you feel comfortable enough to confide?

Welch: I don't remember.

Peggy: When Daddy died, she came to his funeral, didn't she?

Welch: Yes.

Peggy: You talked about that because Mrs. Ford knew Daddy and she came out of respect for him and to show you her support and friendship.

Welch: We all appreciated that gesture.

Peggy: Did you talk to her about that? That it was hard losing a husband?

Welch: Yes. Yes, we were that close. We were very, very close. I would say that at that period of time, I was her closest friend. I just remember her smiling and being gracious and lovely and wearing nice clothes.

Smith: Yes. Was that good for your business? I mean, obviously, women knew that you were dressing her.

Welch: Well, I would say it was.

Smith: It couldn't be bad for your business.

Welch: No. It was nice that she recognized it and she would tell people that she bought her clothes from me. And she emphasized 'bought' because some First Ladies had gifts given to them, but Betty Ford paid for her clothes.

Smith: She did? That's interesting.

Welch: Exactly. Do you remember any stories about that, Peggy?

Peggy: No. At some point, I think he'll want to ask about the First Ladies gown because I think that's an interesting part of your relationship with Mrs. Ford.

Smith: The gown that's in the Smithsonian. Every First Lady has a gown and she didn't have an inauguration, so there's not an inaugural gown.

Welch: She was asked to select a gown from the White House years for the First Ladies Hall. So she chose her favorite gown which was in fabric from China.

Smith: I think when they visited China, they were given fabric.

Welch: Yes, yes, yes.

Smith: And then you made it into her dress.

Welch: Yes, I designed the dress and our workrooms worked very closely with me to produce the dress.

Peggy: Talk about the fact how you chose the design of her dress of the Mandarin collar, that you thought it was Chinese inspired and appropriate for the fabric.

Welch: Oh, yes. Exactly. Do you have a picture of the dress?

Peggy: I was going to find it for you.

Welch: You'll find it. It's around. Is it over here, Peggy?

Peggy: It's a lovely picture with a scrap of the fabric in it.

Smith: Oh, yeah.

Welch: And here's the fabric, too, right here, the green fabric in that little vase.

Peggy: Yes. It happens to be right here.

Smith: And you said that was her favorite dress?

Welch: Yes, it was. It was just a beautiful, beautiful fabric that they brought back from China.

Smith: It's almost the color of jade.

Welch: Yes, a little lighter. There's more of this. Peggy has the picture.

Smith: Yes, it looks great.

- Welch: You know, I had to get a lot of fabric to frame this, to make that, but it's a wonderful picture, isn't it.
- Smith: Forgive me, as someone who knows almost nothing about the subject. How many times could she wear that dress?
- Welch: You know, she was so practical – that's a good word – she was a practical person. And she didn't pay attention to what people thought about how many times she wore it.
- Welch: Here she is with the dress and the head of the Smithsonian.
- Smith: Forgive me for asking, but I'm curious...Gerald Ford didn't have any money coming into the presidency. What would a dress like that cost?
- Welch: This particular one with this fabric? This was brought back from China, so it was very special, so you really couldn't buy this fabric.
- Smith: Right.
- Welch: But a dress made like this on a famous person cost lots of money.
- Smith: Several thousand dollars?
- Welch: It was a unique situation; I don't remember.
- Peggy: I don't think you charged her more for the gown.
- Welch: No, I didn't.
- Peggy: In this particular instance, I mean, I don't think the cost of it really was a factor.
- Smith: I'm just trying to get a sense of what Mrs. Ford's clothes budget might have been.
- Welch: She loved clothes and thank goodness she did. But she was practical and chose her wardrobe carefully.

Smith: And he sort of indulged her in terms of buying clothes?

Welch: I would say yes. I would say he was just so likeable, so going along with everything, in my opinion.

Peggy: She bought less expensive clothes. She didn't look for expensive clothes. She was on a budget.

Welch: She was on a budget.

Peggy: Didn't she talk to you about that, that she needed to _____?

Welch: Exactly. Exactly. And this dress was the dress she chose as her "inaugural dress" for the Smithsonian.

Smith: Did you do dresses for Susan as well?

Welch: She bought from our store along with other stores.

Peggy: Susan bought off the rack. Now, Betty Ford's dresses were not very often designed. The dress in the Smithsonian was an exception. She bought off the rack. Susan got some prom dresses from you and you helped her with the *Seventeen* magazine spread, when *Seventeen* sent the trucks of clothes and accessories for one of their issues.

Welch: That's right. Thank you, Peggy.

Peggy: You had fun because you helped Susan pick the clothes for that.

Smith: Were there things that Mrs. Ford hated? I mean, were there things you knew not to bring?

Welch: You know, she was such a lovely person and I say that with all respect and confidence. She was just a pleasure to be around.

Smith: But, just in terms of her fashion sense, I mean, obviously you knew what she liked and what she didn't like. There must have been things that she didn't

Peggy: This picture is a little more representative of her general style.

Welch: Yes, and she was so reverent to me and always wore a scarf.

Smith: Always wore a scarf. Okay.

Welch: She wore several of the scarves of mine. And I designed a special scarf for her.

Smith: Yes. Was that year round? Is that seasonal or is that year round?

Welch: Scarves are forever.

Peggy: She probably wore more solids than a lot of patterns, but she didn't wear ruffles and didn't wear a lot of florals and prints.

Welch: Yes, though the scarves as an accent were bright and prints.

Smith: When he ran for reelection, was she looking forward to living in the White House for another four years?

Welch: Yes. Yes. You know, she was very amenable, very part of the scene. She liked being part of it.

Smith: When President Ford pardoned Richard Nixon, was that something she talked about at all?

Welch: I don't think so, no. That wasn't part of her everyday—

Smith: One thing that might surprise people that I found out years later - for all that, she was accustomed to being part of the scene, she had stage fright when she had to give a speech.

Peggy: It's not surprising. She was used to being in the background.

Welch: True.

Smith: Yeah. Did the kids enjoy the White House?

Welch: Oh, I think so. Don't you think so, Peggy?

Smith: I mean, it must be such a radical shift in your daily existence. And it also must be tough not to be spoiled living in the White House.

Peggy: They all were very supportive of both of the parents. They were proud of their father and respectful of that position.

Smith: Did the Fords enjoy entertaining?

Welch: Yes, especially their close friends.

Smith: When she left, knowing they were leaving Washington, was it tough to say goodbye?

Welch: To her?

Smith: Yeah.

Welch: No, because we had a meeting after that in Grand Rapids. I flew in there to be with her.

Smith: The program of First Ladies.

Smith: Did you keep in touch after the White House years?

Welch: Yes, we did.

Peggy: Not like you did when she was there.

Welch: No, not the same as when they were there, but we were good friends. We knew we were friends. It wasn't pretend.

Smith: Do you remember the last time you saw her?

Welch: She had on a green dress.

Smith: I mean, did you visit her out in California?

- Welch: No. But I did write to her after President Ford died to let her know I remembered the thoughtfulness when my husband died and that I was thinking of her.
- Smith: Do you miss her?
- Welch: Yeah, but, you know, we did communicate. We talked in the early years. What else, Peggy?
- Peggy: Well, wouldn't you say some of her openness was because she really did care about her children? Discussing Susan, discussing the boys, that was a big part of her _____.
- Smith: Motherhood was a big part of her—
- Welch: It really was and she was so sincerely kind to her children and helpful without pushing.
- Smith: It's interesting. In some ways, she's a traditionalist, but in other ways, she's ahead of her time. She managed to be both a devoted mother and wife and kind of a feminist pioneer in some ways.
- Welch: Yes, very true. She was a remarkable person.
- Smith: She bridged that gulf. They were totally comfortable with each other.
- Welch: Oh, they really were and I think he adored her and she him.
- Smith: It was a real love match.
- Smith: Yeah. What size was she?
- Welch: Oh, she was very teeny. She was a size 6 or 8.
- Smith: And, for people who know nothing about it, what does that mean? What's the difference between a size 6 and a size—?
- Welch: Well, I'm a 12/14 and she was a 6 or 8.

Smith: Now, did she work at that?

Welch: She was very conscious of being well-dressed and that was good for me, good for her, and good for fashion. She really made fashion statements.

Smith: Did she diet to keep that figure? Or was that just the way she was? She didn't have to work at it like some people do?

Welch: No. She was just such a lovely person. Such a good friend.

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