

An Interview with  
**Kate Stepleton**

at the State Historical Society of Missouri St.  
Louis Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

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interviewed by Dr. Blanche M. Touhill  
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**Oral History Program**

The State Historical Society of Missouri

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## PREACE

The interview was film on a Canon XH A1S A camera on a placed on a tripod using a HDV digital tape. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [ ] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets [ ]. Any use of parentheses ( ) indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks ["" ] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [   ] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [   (??) ] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

**THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS**  
**INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**  
**NOVEMBER 25, 2014**  
**KATE STEPLETON INTERVIEWED BY DR. BLANCHE M. TOUHILL**

Kate Stepleton: My name is Kate Stepleton. I'm the daughter of Sue Stepleton and I'm 31 years old.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your childhood: your parents, your grandparents, siblings, cousins, neighbors, kids you played with, elementary, secondary school. How many people or who said to you, "You really have ability, Kate, and you should decide what you want to do and then you should make your way toward that goal"?

Kate Stepleton: Well, I grew up here in St. Louis in Webster Groves, Missouri in a house with both of my parents and my brother, Tom, who is three years older than me. It was a pretty typical white upper middle class suburban upbringing, I think. The first educational experiences I had were in public school, so Webster Groves Public Schools. I went to Bristol Elementary and from, I think, very early on, for as long as I can remember actually, I was a student who excelled. I was a student who was very well liked by all of my teachers, I think because I was attentive and studious but also gregarious so participated in class quite a bit. Fairly quickly, I was placed on an advanced track so in the school district, there was a gifted program and it's kind of funny to think about how it was almost never really a question of whether or not I was going to be in the gifted program, I think partly because my brother had been in the gifted program for many years. So in the school district, I was sort of known as Tom's sister. Tom is the smart kid; Kate is probably a pretty smart kid too. So this particular program was, I think, fairly important to me in allowing me to explore things that I was interested in. The way that it was set up was once a week, students in your grade from across the district, so there were, I think, about 25 of us, would go to a different school. So, say, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday I'd be in my regular classroom but Wednesday I'd go to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade center and be in a special classroom all day where it was much less structured. It felt like playing. Everything that we got to

do: there was a reading corner; there was a pond in a kiddie pool where they put fish and turtles; there was a computer lab and it was sort of self-directed. You'd write reports and have various assignments that we did. I think the message that I got from that, beginning in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, was "You can do much more than you're being asked to do in your regular class. It can be a lot of fun. You can study science if you want to study science. You can sit and read all day if you want to sit and read all day."

Blanche Touhill: Was it a Montessori?

Kate Stepleton: It wasn't. It sounds somewhat like it. I don't know if they were Montessori principles that they explicitly drew on. I don't know that there's anything like it that exists now.

Blanche Touhill: Does the Webster School District have it today?

Kate Stepleton: I don't think so because by the time I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, they had cut the budget so much that what had been this huge room that they'd subdivided into different areas and fit lots and lots of kids, had been downsized to what was basically a closet, without windows and had three computers in it. So my guess is that doesn't exist today, and I'd be very surprised if parents today would necessarily be excited about the fact that a student would be missing a day of regular classes.

Blanche Touhill: But they figured that you would make that up, that you were bright enough that that was not going to be a problem.

Kate Stepleton: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: I know you enjoyed it. Did you learn anything?

Kate Stepleton: I think I learned a lot. There was a certain amount of instruction, not a lot. It was really very separated...well, separated isn't the right word but there was a distinct time when there was instruction and then a distinct time when you do what you want. I certainly learned a lot through some of that exploration.

Blanche Touhill: Did you learn what you liked to do in the future?

Kate Stepleton: That came later. You know, I think I learned some skills at the time because one of the things we had to do was create a research report. I

remember that very well because in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, the prospect of writing a research report seemed unlike anything that I'd done before but they...

Blanche Touhill: But you did it?

Kate Stepleton: I did it. They took us to the library in the school and showed us how to...

Blanche Touhill: How to use the library.

Kate Stepleton: How to use the library, right, and sort of how to structure a report and how to write it up.

Blanche Touhill: Did they do that every year, the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades?

Kate Stepleton: Mm-hmm. I remember I wrote one...I think my first one was on Jupiter. My introductory chapter was about Jupiter, the mythological god, and then the rest was about the planet. I wrote one on the Voyager Spacecraft and I wrote one on Amelia Earhart. So there was sort of an aeronautical aerospace theme there but I did not go in that direction. I remember, when I was a kid, I was really determined to be part of NASA, which I think is not uncommon for kids...

Blanche Touhill: No.

Kate Stepleton: Certainly kids who were growing up when I was growing up when the space program was more vibrant, I knew I wanted to work for NASA but I also knew I was too afraid to be an astronaut.

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Kate Stepleton: So I wanted to work in mission control.

Blanche Touhill: So your home life was such that you knew you and your brother would go to college?

Kate Stepleton: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: And you didn't know, at this time, what you wanted to do?

Kate Stepleton: Right.

Blanche Touhill: Were you a class leader?

Kate Stepleton: I think so. I was certainly positioned that way by my teachers often. When I got to middle school and high school, there were more

opportunities for leadership that I moved into more consciously. In elementary school, they're sort of informal cliques that have leaders. I wouldn't say that in elementary school I was popular. I was smart and I had smart kid friends but when I moved to junior high and high school, I actually left the public school system and went to a private school in St. Louis called Thomas Jefferson School: very unusual school. Today, when I describe it to friends, nobody really has any analog.

Blanche Touhill: Why was it unusual?

Kate Stepleton: Well, it was a boarding school.

Blanche Touhill: Did you board?

Kate Stepleton: I did not board. I was a day student which I'm very grateful for. It was very small. I think when I was there, there were between 75 and 80 students for grades 7 through 12, so each class was quite small and when I graduated, there were 13.

Blanche Touhill: I suspect that's still true.

Kate Stepleton: For the most part. They've grown a tiny bit but it's one of the only places I think you can go almost around the country where it's such a close-knit, small familial environment. It was also unusual for the structure. There were classes in the morning, from about 8:30 to 12:00...12:30 and then the afternoon was left open. They assigned a great deal of homework and the classes were 35 minutes long. Typically you'd have between an hour-and-a-half to three hours of homework per class and the idea with getting so much free time was that you would sort of learn how to triage and complete all of your work, as much of it as possible by setting your own schedule, by learning how to manage your own time.

Blanche Touhill: Did you study together?

Kate Stepleton: We did. We had dorms so, even though I was a day student, they were sort of cottage-like around the campus and in each room there'd be one to two boarding students and then the day students would have a desk. So we would hang out, really, in one room or another. If we had work to do, we would work together.

Blanche Touhill: And what time did you generally go home?

- Kate Stepleton: I went home around 5:30.
- Blanche Touhill: And did you have sports afterwards too?
- Kate Stepleton: We did. Those were also part of the afternoon. It was up to you to figure out how to complete all of your homework with an hour of soccer practice, basketball practice, volleyball practice.
- Blanche Touhill: And did they have clubs?
- Kate Stepleton: They had some, not many. They've added a lot in the last few years. They've really diversified what's available. I was the editor of the newspaper, a very small, sort of quaint...
- Blanche Touhill: Had you learned to write in the first six grades...or the first five grades?
- Kate Stepleton: Those research reports that I had to write in the gifted program helped. I think I knew some compositional tools.
- Blanche Touhill: The mechanics of it.
- Kate Stepleton: Some, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: So they taught you to write as well?
- Kate Stepleton: Absolutely and I would say the training I got at Thomas Jefferson has made me, certainly not the best writer of my peer group but has given me an ability to write that exceeds most people and every job I've had, every class I've taken, I have been given a lot of praise for that and called on to write. I have a grasp of grammatical rules and pacing that was the result of this one very particular assignment that we had.
- Blanche Touhill: And what was that?
- Kate Stepleton: Every day, from the summer before 7<sup>th</sup> grade to halfway through my senior year of high school, we had what was called outside reading. So in addition to what we were assigned for English class, there was another book that we were assigned to read. It was typically not discussed in class but we'd be assigned 10 to 20 pages a night and we had to write a grammatically perfect summary. So 40 to 50 words in the early grades, it was really the grammar that was focused on. As we progressed through the grades, style was added and it was pass/fail. We wrote in those black and white marbled composition notebooks and had to turn them in

before 8:30 every morning outside an office door. We'd get them back that afternoon with a check or an x. If we had a check, then we passed; if we had an x, we had to rewrite and fix whatever the error was.

Blanche Touhill: And could you go to a teacher and get help?

Kate Stepleton: You could. You could also go to a teacher and contest. I remember once feeling very vindicated because I'd been given an x for something that I knew was correct so I found the rule in my Strunk and White book and I went and I presented it and my x was rescinded.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have to footnote as well?

Kate Stepleton: We did not, not for that. It wasn't entirely appropriate because there was really just the one source.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, that's right. It was sort of the precis as you said.

Kate Stepleton: Right.

Blanche Touhill: Who among your teachers said, "Kate, you really have to go on and..."

Kate Stepleton: One of...

Blanche Touhill: Or your friends.

Kate Stepleton: Sure. One of the things about the high school was that everyone went to college. Everyone applied, everyone went. It was almost part of the curriculum that you would apply but I think I got a lot of encouragement from almost all of the teachers I had in high school.

Blanche Touhill: Do you remember any words?

Kate Stepleton: One teacher...we had grade letters instead of report cards. We'd be given a letter with your letter grade on it and then a paragraph, so each teacher would write, "Kate does a wonderful job at x, y, z. She ought to talk more in class" and I remember one teacher telling me that, for a particular class assignment, we had to teach. We had to lead a seminar essentially and one told me that I reminded him of the old masters at St. John's where he'd gone to college.

Blanche Touhill: In Maryland?

Kate Stepleton: Yeah, when they do the (great books?), mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: Annapolis, I think it is.

Kate Stepleton: That stuck with me. I remember teachers in elementary school pulling me aside and saying what a pleasure it was to teach me, I think because I was engaged and hungry. One thing I remember is I had a teacher who would tell me...this isn't exactly telling me I should go on...but who told me that I was her classroom barometer because she would look at me and if I didn't understand something, I would screw up my face and...

Blanche Touhill: Well, that was wonderful.

Kate Stepleton: Mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: So you were honest in displaying your thoughts and emotions?

Kate Stepleton: Absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: What about your parents? Did they take you on trips to broaden you or...

Kate Stepleton: Certainly. An early memory I have is of my mother...my mother had lived in Germany for several years...and she wanted to bring her children to Germany. So this was something...I was seven years old when we went. I remember there was about a year of preparation.

Blanche Touhill: So you could speak a little German?

Kate Stepleton: That was the goal. It didn't necessarily work out that way. I could say "please" and "thank you" and count and all of that but in addition to the language preparation, there was a lot of discussion about, culturally what we were going to experience; what was appropriate in Germany versus appropriate in the United States and the things that you remember from when you're seven were things like, we drink a lot of soda and they don't. It's not a kids' drink, a lot of those cultural literacy pieces and then when we were in Germany, seeing the family that she lived with and having meals with them and just discussing the way that the day-to-day family life was the same, was really what we were focusing on, just by the fact that we couldn't understand what was being discussed, talking about how Sunday dinners happened or that sort of thing. I remember going to a string quartet in Austria on that trip. We took a detour through Austria. That was my first trip abroad.

Blanche Touhill: Did it affect you?

Kate Stepleton: It stayed with me. It made the experience of going abroad seem very...it seemed like something I could do and the fact that I knew my mother had lived in Germany for so many years when she was young made me...it certainly made me look at my mother in a different way because that was such a brave thing to do and just to imagine that she'd had that desire at 16, 17.

Blanche Touhill: And carried it out.

Kate Stepleton: And did. She graduated high school a year early and lived in Germany and my grandmother and grandfather had an exchange student live in their house and that was something that I couldn't conceive of almost at the time. But a few years later, when I was in high school, I also chose to study abroad.

Blanche Touhill: And where did you go?

Kate Stepleton: Paris.

Blanche Touhill: Did you live with a family?

Kate Stepleton: I did.

Blanche Touhill: And were you courageous?

Kate Stepleton: I could have been more. I lived with a family but I wasn't fully incorporated into their routine. In some ways it was wonderful because I'd been living at college for a few years and it would have been a fairly big shift to be living in a family with two small children. The way their house was set up was such that they had their wing of the apartment and I had my wing. So we came together for meals twice a week.

Blanche Touhill: Did you learn to speak French?

Kate Stepleton: I did, fairly well.

Blanche Touhill: Did you know it before you left?

Kate Stepleton: I'd studied it. I studied French two years in high school. The training they gave us at Thomas Jefferson, though, was really for reading, reading Camus and all that. When I got to college, that was when I started learning to speak and then...

- Blanche Touhill: Now, did you go abroad when you were in college or in high school?
- Kate Stepleton: College, not high school.
- Blanche Touhill: Where did you go to college?
- Kate Stepleton: I went to Barnard College.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, in New York.
- Kate Stepleton: New York City.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, Barnard, at your time, was it the first year was female and then from then on you went to Columbia University or how did that work?
- Kate Stepleton: It is an all women's college the entire way through but it is part of Columbia University so while technically the way you've described it is not entirely accurate in the experience, that was what I experienced. So the first year, you live in the Barnard dorm which is all female. The second through fourth years, you're able to live anywhere on Columbia's campus, in Barnard housing.
- Blanche Touhill: Can you live in the city?
- Kate Stepleton: Yes, New York City.
- Blanche Touhill: But the first year, they really want you in the Barnard dorm?
- Kate Stepleton: They do and there are seminars that are specifically for Barnard women. I always thought Barnard was such a great deal compared to Columbia because Columbia had such a name, their acceptance rate is fairly low. Barnard's acceptance rate has gotten a lot lower but the thing people don't understand is that if you are a Columbia student, you have access to all of Columbia but you're not able to access a lot of Barnard. If you're a Barnard student, you have all of Barnard and all of Columbia.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, yes. Why did you choose Barnard?
- Kate Stepleton: I chose Barnard because I liked the idea of a women's college. I can't say that I was determined to go to a women's college. I'd had a very close family friend...I'd call her a friend independently but she's a family friend also, who went to Wellesley and one thing that really impacted me when I was in high school were two trips that I took to visit her. So she was...I

think she's five years older than me...so twice I went to Boston, I stayed with her in the dorm. I was sort of carted around by all of her friends and welcomed and really loved the environment of Wellesley. I loved Massachusetts but I think that the sisterhood felt very comfortable and empowering to me. When I was applying to colleges, I did apply to Wellesley but I had been really taken by the idea of college in New York as well, in a city...not New York specifically but in a city. My first choice was Brown University. They did not accept me but when I got the rejection from Brown, it sort of allowed me to become very excited about Barnard and, in hindsight, I think it was exactly the right place.

Blanche Touhill: What did you major in?

Kate Stepleton: I majored in sociology.

Blanche Touhill: You did, okay. And did you decide at that time to do what you're doing today?

Kate Stepleton: I kind of did. You know, the decision to major in sociology was one that went along with probably the only real epiphany that I think I've ever had in my life, one of those moments of clarity where you just see what's happening. I'd gone to college not at all sure what I was going to major in and was trying different things and I think I'd always been aware that I was able to do math, I was able to do languages but it really felt like a lot of work and I felt like my brain sort of worked in a different way, that I had a lot of social intelligence, I certainly could do school but I remembered names and faces and details and was just socially very adept. I sat in a sociology class, it was Intro to Sociology, one of those huge lecture halls and I was in the third or fourth row and I just remember thinking, oh, my gosh, this is actually a legitimate way of thinking, these social connections and social dynamics, you can actually make a study of these things and it's a legitimate thing. Then the very next thought I had was, you can't do anything with a Bachelor's in Sociology; what are you going to do? And then the very next thought I had was, I guess I'm going to go do social work which had been something I'd resisted for quite a while. My mother had been a social worker. My father actually has a degree in social work, was a corporate lawyer for his career but it felt very uncreative. I thought I should blaze my own trail but when I sat in that room and I thought, oh, I guess I should go get a Master's in Social Work and be a social worker, then the

very next thought was, I was never going to do anything else. It was sort of a relieving feeling and an exciting feeling.

Blanche Touhill: You had acknowledged your place in the world?

Kate Stepleton: I had, yeah, and it felt like something I could be really good at and really enjoy and it meant that I had really remarkable role models in my mother, in family friends. There was still a little part of me that felt, this is not entirely creative, but then mostly I was thinking, this is exactly what I was supposed to do.

Blanche Touhill: Where did you get your Master's, at Columbia?

Kate Stepleton: No, I actually chose to go to University of Chicago. I made a conscious decision not to stay in New York City. I felt as though I'd been in New York for a while, I needed a new experience and I think the summer after my junior year of college, I came back to St. Louis and I had an internship. I applied for a grant to take this internship over the summer at the Family Support Network, which was a non-profit here in St. Louis that did child abuse and neglect prevention work specifically in-home. I was brought on to really just plow through their backlog of follow-ups.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how interesting!

Kate Stepleton: They were under staffed and they had probably 150 cases that were supposed to have nine month or fifteen month follow-ups after their course of in-home work had completed but they were way behind. So they showed me to the drawer, they gave me the assessments that I was supposed to do and said, "Go off into St. Louis and do this" and what happened was, I found myself in parts of the city that I'd never seen, that I'd maybe heard mentioned but...North St. Louis...far South St. Louis County...it was all over the county. I was in the sprawl suburbs in the houses that spring up in 30 seconds, seeing fairly well-to-do families who are having serious disciplinary problems with kids. I was in North St. Louis seeing very, very poor families who were living in really upsetting conditions and were having trouble feeding their children. I was utterly ill-equipped to provide any service but it gave me a sense of what I had been sheltered from, which...there's no fault for sheltering a child like me but I grew up in between Highway 40 and Highway 44, which is just a very white, middle-class corridor and I found myself on the other side of

these highways seeing beautiful homes, families that were vibrant, all these things that, of course, exist everywhere but that I had never seen.

Blanche Touhill: Now, what did you do? Did you identify if the advice and training had taken root? And then, what if it hadn't?

Kate Stepleton: There was a risk assessment. So what I would do is I would go in, I'd read their case file and I would say, "Tell me what brought you to the Family Support Network?" Some families were mandated, some weren't, and I would just get their story.

Blanche Touhill: And what if they still needed help?

Kate Stepleton: If they still needed help, there was not a lot I could do.

Blanche Touhill: Did you go back and say to the other people...

Kate Stepleton: I would, I would write up my case notes. I would discuss them in supervision but there wasn't money to continue providing services if the family didn't want services.

Blanche Touhill: But what if the family did want services?

Kate Stepleton: If they did, I could give them numbers, phone numbers.

Blanche Touhill: To get it?

Kate Stepleton: To, hopefully, get it, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Of the 150, how many had taken advantage of the opportunities?

Kate Stepleton: It's hard to say because I spent about 45 minutes with each family. So it was really sort of in and out, do my risk assessment, discuss, then leave. Some took phone numbers from me when I referred them to resource hotlines. I think some families did very well with the services that had been provided to them, learned disciplinary techniques, were connected with resources. Some were just in such dire circumstances that there was nothing that could really help. I mean, there were cases where...there was one that actually was in between the two highways, so very close to my home and the child had Prader-Willi Syndrome which is a devastating illness that causes incredible behavioral problems and also children have just an insatiable desire to eat so they're breaking into cabinets, they're gaining tons of weight and then they get very large and have behavioral

problems and it becomes incredibly unmanageable for parents and I went and sat down with a mother who had gone through the nine months of service with my organization and had to institutionalize her child. So the risk assessment looked great. There was no risk in the house anymore but...

Blanche Touhill: Her heart is broken.

Kate Stepleton: Yeah, she cried, she just cried with me for an hour.

Blanche Touhill: Does that exist today?

Kate Stepleton: I'm sure, and just to close the loop in my early thought about why I didn't go to Columbia, because those two are connected, I wanted to go somewhere where I could get to know the city the way I got to know St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: And New York was not that easy?

Kate Stepleton: New York is too big.

Blanche Touhill: But Chicago?

Kate Stepleton: Much more accessible and I found myself...you're assigned an internship your first year of social work school at University of Chicago. I was, again, assigned an internship where I was doing home visits. So I had a similar experience where I was driving from the far northern, western, southern tips of the city into all different types of homes and I did feel like I got to know the people in the city the way that I may have gotten to know a borough if I'd stayed in New York.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, that's true. I understand that. How did you happen to choose child welfare? Now, I know that's your mother's great forte.

Kate Stepleton: Yeah. That has a lot to do with it.

Blanche Touhill: Was that at the moment of...

Kate Stepleton: ...my epiphany, my clarity.

Blanche Touhill: Was it also children?

Kate Stepleton: It was definitely families and children. When I was growing up, my mother was the executive director of a residential facility for severely

abused and neglected children, Edgewood Children's Center in Western Groves and Rock Hill and I spent a lot of time there just because she would take me, when she had work to do on the weekends, when there were events and if it was nice outside, I didn't want to sit in the Rock House which was the main administrative building. I wanted to go play outside. I'd play outside and I'd play with kids and we would talk about why the kids were there and I think there were...my mom was careful to give me appropriate information for my age, but there was a real sense of, these are normal kids who are fun to play with and we have our games that are just like the games I play with my neighbor friends but they sleep here and every once in a while I would see a meltdown or a child that would have to be restrained or something like that.

Blanche Touhill: But you had a sense you wanted to help them?

Kate Stepleton: I had a sense that it wasn't fair.

Blanche Touhill: So you had a sense of injustice?

Kate Stepleton: Yeah, and my parents always...

Blanche Touhill: They felt that too.

Kate Stepleton: They did and they worked hard to make sure that Tom and I knew that we had what we had because of the way society is structured, they were able to go to college, they were able to go to graduate school, they were able to get jobs that earned enough money that we could live in a nice house. When we went to private school, that was actually a hard decision for my parents because they were very...they are big believers in the public education system but they made it very clear to us that it wasn't any innate virtue that we had; it was that the world is an unfair place, "You happen to be a position where you are benefitting and therefore it is your job to try to change it."

Blanche Touhill: So then what happened to you? You graduated from the University of Chicago?

Kate Stepleton: I graduated from the University of Chicago. I stayed in Chicago for two years. I loved Chicago, I really loved Chicago. I studied policy at the University of Chicago so even though I had some experience with direct

practice, I went the administrative route partially because I knew that was a possibility, having seen what my mother did but also...

Blanche Touhill: You can make change.

Kate Stepleton: You can. It's harder to see sometimes but I felt that there were people around me who were really brilliant at that work and I happen to be very good at writing, at number crunching, all of the policies and things so I saw it as my mission to facilitate them, my friends who were doing this direct practice and counseling and therapy and were amazing at it. So, I decided to go into policy and administration which is tough when you've gone straight through school and don't have really any work experience but I sort of lucked into a wonderful job. I worked for the Center for the Study of Social Policy which is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank where they study and do policy related to income and equality, child abuse and neglect prevention, anti-racist community building work. It was objectively a fantastic job. What made it an even better job was I got to stay in Chicago so my first two years out of graduate school, I worked from home. It was wonderful for all of the reasons you would imagine it would be wonderful: I had flexibility; I didn't have to commute, all of those things. It was difficult because I found myself working with some of the smartest people that I had ever known and I couldn't talk to them but I did have this experience of working on a small team, five to six women depending on the time, who were...we were working on this child abuse and neglect prevention initiative, specifically around early childhood so it was about the warmest and fuzziest social work that's out there but this team of women, I was by far the youngest. The next youngest was in her 40's and then the other three core members were in their 60's. They were towards the end of their careers. They'd accomplished a lot. They were just interested in doing the work and in really nurturing this next generation of policy makers, change makers. I received some mentorship there that was invaluable to me. My boss at the time, her name was Judy Langford, she worked in the White House in the Carter Administration because she actually married Jimmy Carter's son and is now divorced and remarried but had children with that gentleman. Her son just ran for governor of Georgia and lost, unfortunately but she really guided me, gave me opportunities to write, to speak in meetings, to go present...

Blanche Touhill: What new policies did you advocate?

Kate Stepleton: Specifically, we were working at the state level to advance this sort of framework called “Strengthening Families,” which was about building protective factors that protect against abuse and neglect in families with young children. The intervention point was childcare centers, early care and education providers who are really expert in child development and interface with parents twice a day typically and can be sort of early warning systems when stress is building in a family and the risk of abuse and neglect is increasing. They can also connect families with resources. So we would work with children’s trust funds often or early childhood cabinets, whatever sort of infrastructure was at the state level, to make trainings available for early childcare providers, to create funding streams for that sort of thing. The framework that was developed was written into several different states’ policies around early care and education.

Blanche Touhill: Did you do that legislation bit too?

Kate Stepleton: We did not typically do legislative.

Blanche Touhill: You had experts who could do that?

Kate Stepleton: Yeah, and that would be work that our partners who were in the states would be going. We’d be consulting essentially.

Blanche Touhill: And what do you do now?

Kate Stepleton: Now, I am a doctoral student. I am at Rutgers University, School of Social Work. I study child welfare and mental health services and I’m particularly interested in quantitative data analysis. In between those two, the think tank and my returning to school, I worked for the federal government, for the Administration on Children, Youth and Families.

Blanche Touhill: You moved to Washington?

Kate Stepleton: I did.

Blanche Touhill: And how was that?

Kate Stepleton: It was really interesting.

Blanche Touhill: How many years were you in Washington?

Kate Stepleton: Four. The way it worked for me was, when the president was elected, President Obama, folks in Chicago in policy positions were being

nominated to fill various seats throughout the administration. I had breakfast with Judy, my boss, and she had mentioned someone she knew who she'd actually mentored many years ago, had been nominated for a position and he was looking to the think tank where I worked just for some support, support work, literature searches, that sort of thing and I made an off-hand comment, which was, "Well, I'd like to learn more about federal policy. If there's any way I could do that and be a part of this, I'd like to," and she did not skip a beat and she looked at me and said, "Really? Would you move to Washington?" and I sort of thought for a minute and said, "I think so." And so I made plans to move. I continued to work for the think tank for the year that it took for my future boss to be confirmed and then I moved over to the government.

Blanche Touhill: And you learned federal policy?

Kate Stepleton: I did. Well, I learned what facilitates policy and what is a barrier to policy and how policy with a small "p" gets made as opposed to Policy with a big "P" which is legislative policy. I was working in the commissioner's office of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families which oversees the Children's Bureau which, today, mostly does child welfare and family support work and the Family and Youth Services Bureau which does run away and homeless youth services. But I worked directly for the commissioner who was the policy leader who came in with a plan and a vision. His specific mandate was to move child welfare from thinking about permanency almost exclusively...the three pillars of child welfare: safety, permanency and well-being have existed for a long time but permanency which is connecting children and foster care, with adoptive families or returning them home, has really been where policy is focused for the last 20, 30 years and while finding permanent homes for these children is imperative, the trauma that they're put through, being in the system, having experienced abuse and neglect, is such that no matter what family a lot of these kids go to, they're going to have mental health problems, physical health problems. So his goal was to really switch the conversation from permanency to well-being and talk about when we have these kids in our system, how can we connect them with the mental health services and with the educational services, the whole sort of comprehensive package of things that go into building healthy, successful adults.

- Blanche Touhill: So, safety would be first, and well-being would be second and, if permanency was possible, permanency but if there was no opportunity for permanency, they would treat the child as the child needed it?
- Kate Stepleton: Yeah, exactly, and I think it is almost not even that linear. Safety, of course, if a child needs to be removed, a child needs to be removed. Safety is the first...
- Blanche Touhill: Well, let's say that. You remove the child...
- Kate Stepleton: But permanency and well-being...permanency, in some ways, is a part of well-being.
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah, I understand that but I know the philosophy that it's better to put the child back in the home for permanency but the reality is sometimes it isn't.
- Kate Stepleton: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: So this is a new thought, isn't it?
- Kate Stepleton: Mm-hmm, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: And so, are you talking about orphan homes?
- Kate Stepleton: No.
- Blanche Touhill: You're talking about still keeping them in the foster care system?
- Kate Stepleton: As long as is necessary.
- Blanche Touhill: As long as is necessary. As long as it's good for their well-being, is that it?
- Kate Stepleton: It is, but also making sure that instead of, say, waiting until the child manifests behavioral problems that are cause for expulsion, we're really bolstering all the supports we can around that child to make sure that we don't get to that crisis point.
- Blanche Touhill: So, the placement in a foster care home, you'd get the treatment right away?
- Kate Stepleton: That's the hope.
- Blanche Touhill: And then it wouldn't be necessary to keep moving the child from one foster home to another.

- Kate Stepleton: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: And it wouldn't be necessarily a focus to get the child out of the system by putting them in their own home?
- Kate Stepleton: I think we're not going to get away from focusing on permanency...into returning but, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: I understand permanency. If permanency is second and well-being is third, it means you're really focused on placing that child someplace...
- Kate Stepleton: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: ...even though it may not be the best for the child.
- Kate Stepleton: Right, right.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, that's fascinating.
- Kate Stepleton: It was very interesting work.
- Blanche Touhill: Did he succeed or he's working at it?
- Kate Stepleton: He's working at it. It's such a paradigm shift that I think it will be another 20 years...
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, but ideas take a long time...
- Kate Stepleton: Exactly.
- Blanche Touhill: ...to permeate.
- Kate Stepleton: But I do think we had some successes.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, talk about a success or two.
- Kate Stepleton: One thing that I was very proud of and that we were proud of as the team, was we wrote an information memorandum which is, it doesn't have any policy requirements associated with it but it essentially sets the direction...
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, and that social workers who understand the field, those who see it coming, can take that path without any big "P."

- Kate Stepleton: Right, right. So we wrote an information memorandum that outlines this vision and I wrote the majority of it.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, how proud you should be.
- Kate Stepleton: I'm awfully proud of it. It's funny to have done that and to now be in academia where having your name attached to things in academia is very important.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes.
- Kate Stepleton: I worked for three years where I was the official writer of this part of the administration. So a lot of what I wrote has someone else's name on it.
- Blanche Touhill: I'd like to ask you: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life be like?
- Kate Stepleton: Very different, I'm sure. I would have lived through a world war. I was born in 1983 so I would have...
- Blanche Touhill: Born in the American Depression.
- Kate Stepleton: Exactly.
- Blanche Touhill: Of the '30s.
- Kate Stepleton: I would have had far less opportunity but I think also far less encouragement to explore the opportunities that were available even. I'd like to think that I'd be told anything is possible but as a woman born at that time, I think I'd probably be a teacher because that was a common path for women at the time and I doubt that I wouldn't have worked. I think I would work. I think I'd have a fairly traditional family at this point, with a husband and children but I'd like to think I would find opportunities to participate in politics or social justice movements. That would depend a lot on where I lived also 50 years earlier. Growing up in St. Louis 50 years ago, I'd like to think I'd be involved in some civil rights activism.
- Blanche Touhill: If there was a special award you've received or a special goal you've achieved, do you want to talk about that? Is there something that you're really proud of?
- Kate Stepleton: I think there's a lot that I'm proud of.

Blanche Touhill: Well, name one or two of them.

Kate Stepleton: Yeah. One, even though this is from such a long time ago, something that just sort of...that I remember, is when I was in high school, my senior year, I was given what was called the "Arete" award. In my high school, we studied classical Greek so "Arete" is the word meaning honor and strength and it was what we shouted before sports games. We put our hands up and say, "Arete." The "Arete" Award was given to one male and one female in the senior class who exemplified the scholar athlete and while it was understood that I was going to be a scholar in my family, I think it surprised everyone that I was an athlete.

Blanche Touhill: What was your sport?

Kate Stepleton: I played soccer primarily but I also played basketball and volleyball.

Blanche Touhill: What did your brother end up doing?

Kate Stepleton: My brother, he currently works for Google in Pittsburgh. He went to Swarthmore College and then immediately after that went to Carnegie-Mellon University and got a Ph.D. in robotics.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, wonderful. So let me ask you: The fact that both your mother and father worked, did that affect your growing up?

Kate Stepleton: It absolutely affected my growing up and I think in the most positive ways. My parents didn't just work when I was growing up; they worked a lot. I was dropped off at elementary school at 6:30 in the morning and was in the before and after school program. I was picked up around 5:00 o'clock...5:30, and most nights we'd have dinner together as a family. Some nights we'd be picked up by a babysitter. I felt like, first of all, just on a very basic level, sometimes nights with a babysitter are a lot of fun but also I'm proud. I've been proud and I remember being proud as a child that my parents works. Every once in a while I'd get cranky about the fact that maybe they weren't at a soccer game or they had to go somewhere on the weekend or something like that, but for the most part, I felt like I have a mother and father who are really successful, who are really driven, who work, so that we can have what we have but also so that we can give back. That was the message that really permeated my childhood. We don't have a boat because we are giving back. We don't

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have the most enormous house because we choose to do these things  
and I just couldn't imagine growing up without them working.

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you very much. It was a wonderful interview and experience  
for me to meet you and I do wish you well in your life.

Kate Stepleton: Thank you.