The Reporter

How Florence George Graves
Who Knew developed the Packwood story.
Too Much

Interview by Vicki Kemper

Ask Florence George Graves why she was so dogged in her reporting of the story of Bob Packwood’s sexual misconduct, and she’s likely to respond, with characteristic self-deprecating humor, that she had “bought the Common Cause line” about one person being able to make a difference.

In fact, the end result of the Bob Packwood—sexual misconduct saga is a dramatic representation of the truth of that almost-trite aphorism. If not for Graves’ insightful, persistent and principled reporting—fueled by her passionate commitment to truth-telling—it’s more than likely that the former

Vicki Kemper is editor. Florence Graves is founding editor.
Republican senator from Oregon would still be chair of the Senate Finance Committee.

The final outcome was also made possible, Graves is quick to point out, by the many other “one persons”—Packwood victims, former staff members, Washington Post editors, senators, Senate Ethics Committee staffers and others—who told the truth or worked to find it, often at great personal risk.

But it was Graves, working alone from her home in suburban Boston in 1992, who began to connect names, dates and details to the years-old rumors of Packwood’s sexual misconduct, and it was her reporting that uncovered a decades-long pattern of sexual misconduct by one of the nation’s most powerful senators. Graves eventually learned of more than 40 women who said they had been subjected to Packwood’s uninvited sexual advances, and with reporting that was both sensitive and tough she persuaded several of them to go on the record.

As difficult as that was, getting the story published was an even greater challenge. An early agreement Graves had with Vanity Fair fell apart, and other media outlets she approached didn’t want to pursue the story. Still, she continued to gather information. Finally Graves approached the Washington Post, which teamed her with investigative reporter Charles Shepard, and on November 22, 1992, the newspaper ran a front-page story on allegations of Packwood’s sexual misconduct. Packwood had succeeded in delaying publication of the story until after he’d won reelection to a fifth term, but he couldn’t stop the resulting furor, additional revelations and Senate Ethics Committee investigation. Not that he didn’t try.

By the time an aushen-faced Packwood announced in September that he would resign his Senate seat rather than face certain expulsion, almost three years had elapsed since publication of the first Post story. And amidst the pathos, drama and new revelations surrounding the end of the story, many forgot how it all began—and who had begun it. At her home in Massachusetts, Florence Graves sat in stunned silence, watching the events on television.

Graves has also been investigating other aspects of sexual politics on Capitol Hill. Last year she reported how some members of the Senate Judiciary Committee had prevented a key witness from testifying in the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings. A Radcliffe College public policy fellow and a visiting scholar at Brandeis University, Graves is writing a book about the intersection of sex, gender and power in Washington politics and media. Her research has been supported by fellowships from the Alicia Patterson Foundation and the Institute of Politics at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, as well as awards from the Pope Foundation and Harvard’s Shorestein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy.

And, all facetiously aside, Graves means what she says about “the Common Cause line.” After all, she helped create it. As the founding editor of Common Cause Magazine, Graves proved that a small public-interest magazine could make a big difference in political journalism and good government. Under her leadership the magazine helped set the standard for investigative money-in-politics reporting and won the National Magazine Award for General Excellence and several of the country’s most prestigious reporting awards. The magazine’s investigations prompted congressional hearings, government investigations and changes in federal policies.

Graves spoke from her home.

**Common Cause Magazine**: How did you get started working on the story about Sen. Packwood’s sexual misconduct?

**Florence George Graves**: The story is really a direct result of the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings. I watched those hearings, along with millions of others, in October of 1991, and it seemed to me that one of the most obvious follow-up stories was the problem of sexual harassment on Capitol Hill. It’s hard to have been in Washington and covered Congress and not have heard rumors that many women have been subjected to unwanted advances by some members of Congress.

Doing a story like that takes a lot of resources, so I waited for the big media. I assumed the story was so obvious that someone would do it. And by April of ’92, when no one seemed to be taking it on, I decided I would look into it myself.

**CC**: Was this a story about sexual harassment on Capitol Hill in general, or were you specifically looking into the case of Sen. Packwood?

**Graves**: Initially I was looking at the problem generally. But as I made phone calls on the story, Sen. Packwood’s name came up frequently. Within two or three weeks, I knew of one woman who said Sen. Packwood had aggressively come after her when she was working for him in 1969—had cornered her, tried to pull her clothes off, kissed her—and that she had had to wrestle her way out of his grasp. That was Jolie Williamson.

Then I learned of another woman whose problem had occurred in 1990, and it doesn’t take a Sherlock Holmes to figure out that there might be a pattern of improper conduct—that his conduct had not stopped in 1969 or 1970, but might have continued into the recent past. So gradually I began to focus more pointedly on him.

**CC**: If you had heard rumors of sexual harassment on Capitol Hill, doesn’t it seem likely that other journalists had also?

**Graves**: It seems very likely.

**CC**: What is your understanding of why they didn’t pursue them?

**Graves**: Well, it was interesting to me that after the first story was published in the Washington Post in November of 1992, some of the talking-head journalist commentators on television said that everyone kind of knew about Sen. Packwood. I wondered, if “everyone knew” about Sen. Packwood, why hadn’t any of them pursued the story?

Also, after the first story ran, the Post did a survey, I think the first of its kind, of women working on Capitol Hill and the problems with working conditions there. One in three women said she had been harassed by someone in power, whether it was a co-worker or a boss or a powerful lobbyist. One in nine said she had been harassed by a member of Congress.

That gives you some indication that sexual harassment has been a serious problem on Capitol Hill. And it raises some very important questions about the role of journalists and the fact that journalists didn’t seem to consider this a story.

In fact, I think it would have been very difficult to have gotten the story into a major newspaper before the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings. Those hearings forced the issue into the homes of millions of Americans and into the public consciousness. The hearings made Packwood’s behavior “a story.”

I also think that if there had been fairly serious questions about Packwood embezzling money, for example, whether it was Senate money or campaign money, reporters would have been more likely to...
follow that story. In this society we take the abuse of money more seriously than we take the abuse of women.

CC: What were some of the challenges you faced in reporting the story and getting it published?

Graves: There were several really difficult problems. One was getting people to talk. People are afraid of people in power, understandably. And so it was very difficult to get people who had information to part with it. They were worried about their jobs, they were worried about spouses' jobs, they were worried about being able to get future jobs, because there's sort of a code of silence on Capitol Hill, and people who work there are expected to be obsessively loyal to the member of Congress for whom they're working.

One of the most difficult things was getting these women to go on the record. As far as I know, it's the first time in history that more than one woman has been willing to make these kinds of allegations against a U.S. senator. In the case of Sen. Brock Adams (D) of Washington state, only one woman, Kari Tupper, was ever willing to be publicly named when she alleged in 1987 that Adams, a family friend, had drugged and fondled her.

The articles done in early 1992 by the Seattle Times that included several other women's similar allegations about Adams were very controversial because none of the accusers was named. You can argue about whether or not the Seattle Times did the right thing; nevertheless it was clear to me that it was highly unlikely that a major news organization was going to publish another sexual misconduct story about a senator based primarily on anonymous sources.

So the challenge was to try to get these women on the record. They had watched what had happened to Anita Hill. On one level that made women want to talk; on another, it made them not want to talk.

In doing the story, I had prepared myself by interviewing two psychologists associated with Harvard Medical School whose groundbreaking work is fundamentally redefining Freudian notions of women's psychology. One of them, Irene Stiver, explained that in our culture women are socialized when they're young girls not to talk openly about any form of abuse involving sex, whether it's harassment, rape, incest or battering. She explained that young girls are socialized to understand that "they must honor relationships, understand the other person's point of view and accommodate the men who have the power." She said that men, "even those who are trying to be fair, really don't understand what it takes for a woman to be the accuser."

And I found that to be very true. So I knew it was important to give them time to talk and to think through their decisions.

CC: Since the Ethics Committee's report and parts of Sen. Packwood's diaries have been made public, we know about some of the specific cases of sexual misconduct. Are those the most egregious cases?

Graves: There are many other serious cases that women who did not go to the Ethics Committee told me about, and therefore their stories are not reflected in those 10 volumes of documents. I know of more than 40 women who have made allegations that Sen. Packwood made inappropriate sexual advances toward them. Women with some of the most serious stories—including one who said he reached into her blouse and grabbed her breast as she was typing her resume to try to get out of his office—decided they could not take the risk of coming forward.

The women who allowed their names to be used and went to the Ethics Committee and told their stories were women of really great courage who deserve a lot of recognition from the American public, because they were out there on the front lines. They were there to take the bullets if they came, and in some cases they did come, because he did try to discredit some of them.

CC: You are not criticizing the women who did not want to come forward, but are acknowledging the huge difficulties they faced.

Graves: Precisely. Another psychologist I talked to, Judith Jordan, said, "Every time a woman finds her own voice, there is a vigorous effort to discredit her and to shut her up." Talking with her about this kind of cultural code of silence made it easier for me to understand why some women did not feel they could take the risk. Some women were the sole breadwinner for their families, or they had children they didn't feel they could subject to the kind of abuse they feared would be thrown their way.

CC: There must have been many times when it felt like doors were being closed in your face. What made you stick with the story?

Graves: The summer of '92 was a very trying time in my life, because I was working on this story by myself at the time. I had no financial support; I had no institutional support. I was working from my home in Massachusetts on a story for which most of the sources were in Oregon and Washington, D.C., and one month I had a $400 phone bill. I had gone to several news organizations, but they were not interested in financing the story. And so most of the time I worked on it, before I finally decided to go to the Washington Post, I thought the story would never be published.

But I can remember saying to my husband, Sam, at one point, "I know too much. I can't know what I know and walk away from this." I was finding out more and more about what appeared to me to be a serious abuse of power, and I began to realize that it apparently had been going on at least since 1969. I began to realize that many people knew about it and had done nothing. And now I knew about it, and I didn't feel I could just do nothing. I felt that I had a moral obligation to pursue the story as far as I could take it, even though...
it might cost us thousands of dollars.

And Sam agreed. He said, "You have to do what you think is right." I also told myself that if I were unable to find an outlet, I would try to interest another reporter in the story. But I was not especially sanguine about that possibility either.

A part of the story that's never been told fully is the role that so many men played in making the story happen. Some of my best sources were men; there were a number of men who had known or worked for Sen. Packwood who gave us very important information, men who were outraged that he had gotten away with this kind of behavior for years. And, of course, my reporting partner at the Post, Charlie Shepard, was fabulous to work with.

CC: Some have portrayed the outcome of the Packwood case as evidence that Congress finally "gets it" about sexual misconduct. But they seem to be assuming that sexual misconduct was the primary reason the Ethics Committee recommended Sen. Packwood's expulsion from the Senate. In your view, was he penalized primarily for his treatment of women or for the combination of abuses the Ethics Committee found?

Graves: My belief is that it was a combination of the abuses. I don't think we yet know whether a story about sexual misconduct of this depth and breadth by a U.S. senator is grounds for no longer remaining in the Senate. That question has not yet been answered. But it's really important to understand this: Because of the allegations that the women made, these other allegations about his abuse of power came to light. Those abuses of power existed for a couple of decades too, and they had not been revealed.

In fact, the depth of his abuse of power would not have come to light had the door not been opened by these women's allegations. When the Ethics Committee got its hands on the diaries, they showed that he had had a number of conversations with several lobbyists and business people (who had interests in legislation over which he had jurisdiction), trying to engineer jobs for his wife, Georgie Packwood. He wanted these jobs so that he could minimize the amount that he would have to pay her in alimony. The diaries also raised serious questions about supposed independent expenditures on behalf of Packwood's reelection by groups such as the Auto Dealers and Drivers for Free Trade PAC, which appear not to have been independent at all. He even says in one entry that he must remember to destroy any evidence suggesting that he had been involved in directing the PAC's money to his campaign.

As the Ethics Committee investigation proceeded, the abuse of power appeared to continue. To defend himself against the women's allegations before the Ethics Committee, the diaries show that Packwood was aggressively pursuing contributions to his legal defense fund from special-interest groups. At one point he recounts a conversation he says he had with Oregon home builders with whom he had been feuding. He remembers telling them they could get on his good side with a contribution of $10,000—the legal annual limit—to his defense fund.

So the abuses of power in this case are all tied together. And one thing that ties them together is the sense of entitlement he apparently had internalized—that women, whether his wife, his staff or his campaign workers, were commodities to be used by him. His office was also a commodity to be used for his own enrichment. He even used campaign funds—and he received millions of dollars over the years from women who counted on him to be a supporter of women's rights—to pay the former staffer who transcribed his diaries.

It's also interesting to remember that the clues about Sen. Packwood's potential for abusing the campaign finance system were there all along.

CC: What were some of those clues?

Graves: In 1986, the Wall Street Journal called him "Senator PACwood" because of all the money he raised from PACs in that election, when he was chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and was working on the tax reform bill. And when the tax bill he was writing threatened loopholes for the insurance industry, almost 300 insurance salesmen bundled more than $215,000 in contributions to him, effectively skirting the law on contribution limits. The Wall Street Journal called him "Senator HACKwood" for that. He also made headlines for charging PAC directors $5,000 to have breakfast with him. His record over the years shows that he was obsessed with raising campaign money.

The Oregon newspapers started to become more aggressive in their reporting on Sen. Packwood after the Post broke the story. Looking at contributions to his 1992 election, they found that many of them were not identified properly as required by law, and many of them turned out to be from corporate business people with very specific interests in legislation. The Oregonian wrote that Packwood was "a chronic offender in this area."

Perhaps not so coincidentally, he offered the 1976 amendment to the 1971 law that required candidates to identify contributors. His amendment changed it from requiring candidates to identify contributors to having them make only their best effort to identify them, effectively negating the law.

Packwood was a top honoraria recipient, and he vigorously defended his right to speak for money in front of people possibly seeking legislative favors. There's much more when you look at the history of his raising and spending campaign funds. The clues were there, just as they are right now about a number of other members of Congress.

But there's nothing like having the diaries. They are a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see in his own words what he was actually thinking, and it becomes clear that he knew he was abusing the campaign finance system. At one point he says about a conversation, apparently with Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Texas), that "what was said in that room would be enough to convict us all of something." Gramm denies this, of course.

The Ethics Committee also found that he altered diary passages having to do with possible campaign finance violations. And he altered them in such a way as to make his actions look benign.

It's important to realize that, had these women not had the courage to speak out, we wouldn't have known about these other serious abuses of the system. It took an extraordinary circumstance for us to find out what was really going on, and I think his case really argues all the more for campaign finance reform and for cleaning up the system.

CC: So you're saying Packwood is not unique?

Graves: It would be really naive to think that he is the only one who skirts the laws. There are many members of Congress who are there because they really believe in trying to change the world; they have noble goals and altruistic values. But I'm not the first one to say that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. It's just clear historically that there's an enormous temptation, when people have a lot of power, to abuse that power.
CC: How will this case affect sexual conduct and gender politics on Capitol Hill?
Graves: It’s hard to know. Don’t forget that until very recently (as part of the “Contract With America”), Congress had exempted itself from many workplace laws. They had sent a signal, essentially, that sexual harassment was not an important issue.

Women who work on Capitol Hill have told me they feel that things have changed somewhat. It’s a process of changing consciousness. Each event like this—whether it’s the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, Tailhook, the Brock Adams story—serves to raise the consciousness of everyone in the country.

But there’s always the tendency for the press to say, “That story’s been done, we’ve covered that problem.” I hope that doesn’t happen. I hope the media won’t be reluctant to continue to do these kinds of stories if they’re there, and to give them major coverage.

CC: Is there something that makes journalists reluctant to expose abuses of power?
Graves: It’s really scary to take on people in power, and it’s scary even for huge news organizations. And there is a reluctance to be the first to take on someone in power. Once a news organization has taken on someone, you often end up with what Larry Sabato has called a “feeding frenzy,” where suddenly it’s safe and everyone jumps on it.

In terms of the Packwood story, the Oregonian had a reporter looking into his behavior about the same time I began. In his deposition with the Ethics Committee, Packwood indicates that he and his chief of staff, Elaine Franklin, had made calls to the Oregonian trying to convince them that there was no story. Obviously the largest newspaper in Oregon didn’t do the story, for whatever reason.

CC: When you and Charles Shepard interviewed Packwood for the Post, he talked to editors there and tried to kill the story.
Graves: That’s right. Bob Packwood is a person with a very good understanding of power and how power is exercised, and his tendency was to go straight to the top when he wanted his way.

CC: Do you think the results of the Packwood case might encourage other women to come forward with their stories of abuse? Have you seen any evidence of that?

Graves: Not yet. But the fact that the Ethics Committee did take this very seriously is extremely encouraging to women all over the country, even though we don’t know whether the abuse of women alone would have been enough to have gotten them to recommend that Packwood be expelled. They did a very thorough investigation and treated these women with great respect. And whatever the reality is, the public perception is that he was forced from office primarily because of sexual misconduct.

CC: Some people look at the results of the Packwood case and are encouraged to see that the system works. It took care of the abuses of power. Others say, “This just goes to show what everybody does. He’s just the only one who actually put it down in a diary,” and they become more cynical than ever and less likely to vote or get involved in the process. How do you respond to that sort of argument?
Graves: I understand both viewpoints, and I think both viewpoints are legitimate responses to the revelations. But more than anything I think that seeing how the system can be abused like this, without the public finding out about it, argues all the more for the need for vigilance.

All the clues were there, but it seems they weren’t enough. Those involved in campaign finance abuses are always going to deny and obfuscate. That’s why it argues even more for the need to have meaningful campaign finance reform, to have laws that would make it more difficult for people who aren’t well-meaning to take advantage of the system.

What made this case so different is that the diaries were there, and that’s what reporters who cover campaign finance stories are always looking for—the “smoking gun.” Now that we have it, this should be a wake-up call. As I said before, we would have to be very naive to think that Packwood is the only one.

CC: It was your story that got everything started, and in the end a U.S. senator was forced from office. How do you feel about your role in this? Have you heard from some of the women since Sen. Packwood resigned?
Graves: I’ve heard from just about all of the women. They were really stunned, as was I, when they heard that Sen. Packwood had decided to resign in the face of expulsion. They had taken a big risk, and after a long, difficult period of time, they now feel validated. It was almost three years from the time of the first story to the decision by the Ethics Committee, and that’s a long time to be hanging out there wondering whether you’re going to be the one who ends up getting smeared.

One of the most telling quotes was from Julie Williamson. She said, “The character flaw that I saw in Bob Packwood when he attacked me ran deeply through all his life.” She said, “It is absolutely incredible to me that it took however many of us it took, who were considered nobodies from the hinterlands, to blow the whistle on Bob Packwood. So many people must have known and conspired and been part of all of it. It took those of us who were too naive to know that his power was too great to be challenged to challenge him.”

And as comy as it sounds, that is also the message of Common Cause: that individuals can make a difference, that it often takes people outside of the Beltway, outside of the system, to challenge the system—people who are “too naive” to know that the power of Washington can be challenged.