**Civics 101**

**Episode 14: THE OFFICE OF PRESIDENTIAL CORRESPONDENCE**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:17] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101. The no shame podcast refresher course on some of the basics that you may have forgotten from middle school. Today we're going behind the scenes of the Office of Presidential Correspondence or OPC the men and women who work in that office are in charge of sorting through all of the mail that is sent to a president. Jeanne-Marie Laskas is the author of several books including Concussion and she spent many hours at the White House Office of Presidential Correspondence at the end of President Obama's tenure and got a firsthand look at how the arduous task of reading and sorting letters addressed to the precedent is handled. Hello there Jean Marie.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:00:59] Hi there.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:59] How long has there been an official office of Presidential Correspondence.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:01:05] An official office dates back to the end of the 19th century with President McKinley. Prior to that it was just sort of like like George Washington got five letters a day. They didn't need an office but by the time you move up through time McKinley was getting a hundred letters per day and he needed help. And so he started this official office.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:25] So this was called the OPC.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:01:27] Correct Office of Presidential Correspondence.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:30] And then as the country's growing Postal Service expanded. And then we had broadcast media. Did that change the interaction between the president and the public.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:01:40] What happened when everything sort of exploded in terms of the conversations between constituents and the president was Roosevelt in his fireside chats. Remember that? He was inviting people to please you know tell me your stories. Tell me your problems and that's all they needed. I mean people just flooded Roosevelt that became the real origins I think of what we see today or at least what we saw under Obama.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:08] So how many the mail was FDR getting?

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:02:12] Roosevelt was getting a half million letters a day. It was, the bulk of it was so extreme that it was a fire hazard in the White House.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:20] Any the rules or statutes now about how presidents deal with mail you know do they have to keep track of it, keep records of it?

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:02:28] It's completely individual for each president has their you know forms their own relationship with the mail. For example Richard Nixon. He did not want to read any mail that was critical of him. And he had you know that was the official stance. Reagan for example he loved the kid mail. And he was known to stop in the mailroom and you know he wanted to sort of personally look through that. That's the greatest mail.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:56] Who who doesn't love the kidmail?

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:02:58] Yeah well he loved it and he took great pleasure in it. So that's the way it was. It was kind of like it was the president's taste that set the tone for what they would do with the mail.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:10] And now with the Obama administration. You spent some time in there. And of course we don't yet know how the Trump administration will be handling this. So this is a good reference for us. Tell us about what goes on in that office. First of all how is it staffed how many people work there.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:03:24] So it's a large office actually set over different locations around the White House grounds 50 staffers more than 300 volunteers coming in and out reading mail and about 50 interns.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:40] So how many messages was he getting a day.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:03:44] Well you have to combine the paper mail. Now there's e-mail and they also opened a face book messenger app. So if you combine all that incoming it was something like 200000 messages a day.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:57] Wow. That is a huge number.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:01] How about how about the people who are working there now would they likely stay on from administration to administration.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:04:06] No. You're a political appointee if you work in the correspondence office so all the folks I was with they had all worked for the campaign actually either one of his campaigns and they were appointed by then President Obama. And when his time was up their time was up. So they all left.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:27] Do historians look at this stuff I mean do they keep these as a record that's hundreds of thousands of stacks of letters you know over or over a president's tenure.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:04:37] It really depends on the focus of the president. I will tell you that correspondence from heads of state and you know the fancy people, that stuff you can find. But correspondence from just you know average Joe and Mary Sue from Montana writing about a question about their health care. All of that stuff has not been preserved until now. And that really goes to Obama's relationship with the mail. To him it was really central to the way he felt he could connect. I mean he set up I want to read 10 letters a day at the very beginning of his administration and that had never been done before. So this office of correspondence had to figure out how to do that and what were those 10 letters a day. Many of those who would answer in his own hand actually.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:26] How did they how did they decide inside of the office out of these tens of thousands of letters to which ten to show to the president.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:05:33] So imagine you've got this room. I mean the paper mail room for example they called it the hard mail room, just stacks and stacks and stacks of letters all kinds all kinds. And interns going through them going through them going through them coding them according to subject matter and then pulling out anything they found was particularly moving. It was called sampling. You were encouraged to sample as many letters as you as you felt you know maybe the president should see this. Whatever you thought now you're just an intern. What do you know. Right. That's OK. That was the message. You know you're a person just like these people are people and just like the president as a person. Just be a person. So it would go through that process of screening and then it would go to one person in the office. Fiona Reeves who was the director of OPC she would take that stack of samples. It would be about maybe 300 today and sit on the couch in her office and go through them one by one and choose which ones she thought were representative that the president should see.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:36] You must have seen quite a few letters while you were there. What were people writing the president about?

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:06:42] I gotta tell you I sat in that mailroom and you become immediately addicted you can't stop reading. It is so fascinating because there's nothing sordid. I mean it's just mail it comes in and it's so random. One person is writing about their dad who's in prison and they just want some help understanding the system. One person's sending in their medical bills to show how hard their life is. One person is writing in to praise the president for his decision on gay marriage. The gamut and it's letter after letter after letter a surprised how many people wrote You know I thought it was like who writes to the president. A lot of people.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:26] Did you get a sense of whether a handwritten letter or an e-mail is more effective at communicating I mean which which made it to the 10 letters a day more often.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:07:35] I think it was pretty evenly spread although certainly the that the handwritten mail was the most the thing that got you emotionally. Because there was so much extra stuff in in a handwritten letter you know there was the penmanship. There was the choice of letterhead. There was the chance to put enclosures in there. That stuff I think really got. Maybe it just was. It was an object you know the thing though that was wonderful about the e-mail was it was immediate. So if there was an event going on the day before like Trayvon Martin you know all of a sudden you're getting immediate feedback of what what it's like the pulse of the nation through the e-mail.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:17] So so they had their different roles. How about the balance of kids letters to adult letters and making those 10 letters a day.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:25] The kids letters tended to, that were like incredible. Just like adorable like they would be Fiona Wood talked about often using the kid letters like she could she would order the letters one through 10 that she thought the president should read them in this particular order. And often the number 10 would be a kid letter you know something that left him feeling you know left him smiling at the end of what could be a depressing bunch of reading.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:54] Did you ever see any of the president's responses to people.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:08:58] I did. They were lovely. I mean some of them were just you know he would hand write on a card saying thank you for your insights. You're right. I should be you know waterskiing more. I mean because people would say things like that to him. Give him advice but other ones were really supportive of you know I'm sorry what you and your family are going through. And you're right we don't do enough. And here's what you can do in your community to help me help you.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:24] Is there is there any evidence that these letters helped inform his decisions on policy.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:09:30] Most definitely. I talked to him directly about that and not only to him but also to for example his speechwriters. Those letters were used they call it the letter underground. You know it was like a source it was an unfiltered source the speechwriter told me you know we will pull from you know here's this person suffering from something and their health care is going to get taken away from them. Do something about this. I mean it was that immediate.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:58] Do we have any ideas about how the Trump administration is going to be handling mail.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:10:05] The only thing we know for sure the OPC also handled the comment line which is a phone bank basically which was also near the mailroom and that was staffed by interns and volunteers and people would call in and OPC would take notes basically anyway that's been shut down. So if you call that number now it leads to nowhere. I mean I know they're just staffing up. I don't know what's happening to the mail.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:34] What do you think the most important thing is that citizens constituents should know about the Office of Presidential Correspondence.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:10:44] I think that it exists. You know and that it's the power of a letter. If you feel that you need to talk to your president that is your right as an American and write it down and send it in. I mean prior to doing this research I would have said well that's really kind of like writing to Santa Claus. Like why would you do that. But now it's like wait a second. No that's it. That's that's why we have a president I mean he's there to serve the American people. So I feel like the power of a letter that was that was the strongest message that came through to me.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:22] Jean-Marie Laskas author of several books including Concussion. She's also director of the writing program at the University of Pittsburgh and contributor to The New York Times. Jean Marie thank you so much for our lesson today.

**Jeanne-Marie Laskas:** [00:11:34] Thank you.