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**Adia Samba-Quee:** [00:00:00] Civics 101 is supported in part by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:00:04] Hannah here from Civics 101, the following is an episode about how things usually go during the presidential transfer of families, and it's a pretty lighthearted one, but we are also releasing it days before a presidential family transfer that will occur amidst a health crisis and political strife here in the country. So listen on if you'd like a little lift or save this one for sunnier days. Thanks for being here.

[00:00:31] We made a whole episode about this long doldrums period between Election Day and Inauguration Day. We vote for a presidential candidate and the winner does not actually get the presidency for two and a half months, however, there is one element to all of this that is so vast, it is hard to believe the civics one one. I'm Hannah McCarthy.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:00:54] I'm Nick Capodice.

[00:00:55] And today we're tackling the enormous behind the scenes magic trick that is the White House family transfer, otherwise known as moving day.

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:01:05] This huge, chaotic, six hours, organized, chaotic, six hours, I guess I should say, on Inauguration Day.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:13] This is Bonnie Berkowitz.

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:01:15] And I'm a graphics reporter at The Washington Post. That means I write stories that tend to have a lot of visuals with them.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:21] One such story being that of how you get one first family out of the White House and another first family in.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:01:27] And did she say this happens in six hours?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:01:30] Well, there's a good deal of prep that can happen as soon as the election is over. Bonnie says the extent of that might depend on how the outgoing president feels about the transition.

[00:01:39] Like if the incumbent lost the election or is simply at the end of a presidential term.

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:01:44] They start compiling a big binder for all of the planning and just various things. And then as soon as the election happens, that's when it really rolls into gear. They start talking to the incoming family. The first lady's very, [00:02:00] very involved. They send a detailed personal questionnaire. About just anything you can think of, what kind of shampoo you like, what kind of dental floss, what's your shoe size, because the White House has a bowling alley, so you need bowling shoes. What kind of movies do you like? Do you have midnight snacks? What do you like to snack on? What are you allergic to? What are your family's newspaper preferences? What kind of movies should we put in the theater? The linens. You would like the temperature in the White House. Do you like it warm? Do you like it cool. All of these things that they will eventually use to make the White House home for the new family for four or eight years.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:02:43] The first family, usually the first lady, also gets to select whatever furniture and art they want from a top secret White House warehouse in Maryland that has every piece of furniture ever used in the White House that wasn't a personal belongings of the first family.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:02:59] That's fascinating. OK, so how on earth does this all get loaded in in the space of six hours?

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:03:05] Around 4:00 a.m., the staff shows up.

[00:03:08] They may start packing. Everything they're going to be doing, though, until the outgoing family leaves is going to be very much behind the scenes because they don't want the family brushing their teeth and seeing somebody packing the shower caddy or something like that.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:03:25] So it's just White House staff doing this. No outside moving companies or anything?

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:30] Right. For security reasons, the whole thing is run by the White House chief usher, six or so ushers who work for the chief and the 90 to 100 permanent White House residence staff.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:03:41] A lot of these people have worked there for decades. Anyway, it's about four and a half hours of behind the scenes work and then around 8:30...

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:03:50] The outgoing family has a good bye with the White House staff, the whole staff gathers and this is apparently very moving because these are the people [00:04:00] who have worked with them every day for four years or for eight years, and they just grow so close to them. And it's apparently I mean, people cry. It's very, very sad because think if you've been with somebody for four or eight years and suddenly you're leaving and you're probably not going to interact with them very much anymore, ever, that's about half an hour of tearful goodbyes. And then the first family gets dressed for the inauguration, assuming they're attending, the new president and his family come in for a coffee, a traditional coffee at the White House. There's usually a few people with them, a congressional delegation and around 10:30, they usually leave together for the Capitol for the inauguration.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:04:45] 10:30 hits.

[00:04:46] And then it happens.

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:04:49] And literally the second that car pulls away, like the staff waves goodbye and then all heck breaks loose in the White House. The moving trucks come in, everyone splits up into their duties, which they have been prepared. Exactly what they're going to do every five minutes. They have got from 10:30-ish to somewhere between three and five. When the president and first lady come back after the parade, the house has to be done.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:05:16] Staff picks up whatever's left and the outgoing first family's boxes and furniture are loaded into one moving truck. The incoming first family stuff is loaded out of another moving truck and a third moving truck shows up with a treasure trove from the secret warehouse.

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:05:30] The president is supposed to take office on day one and be hit the ground running so he doesn't have time to organize his sock drawer. So people do that for them. And it's astonishing the things that they do. The Obamas had to have wifi installed during that six hours. They change out light fixtures, all kinds of things. They may have to make repairs. They may have to repaint, touch up a little bit. They can't repaint a whole room that they might have to. They might do some touch up. They might fix [00:06:00] some wallpaper, hang clothes in closets, cut out all trash flowers, fresh flowers after flowers everywhere, all kinds of things like that, and the Oval Office, of course, gets a major overhaul.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:16] But what if because, come on, it's only six hours, what if it's not done in time?

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:06:21] Oh, no, it's ready. And I even asked, what if they run out of toilet paper, and it was as if I asked, how often do you let raccoons run through the wall or something?

[00:06:33] I mean, it was as if they could not conceive of the question I was asking.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:39] Ok, so that is the residence and that is truly hard to believe. But what about the whole West Wing?

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:06:44] Yeah, and that's interesting.

[00:06:45] The East and West Wings, the offices are the General Services Administration, and they do a lot, a lot of mostly cleaning, getting rid of papers, any leftover junk.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:06:57] Now, I have to know if the rumors are true about pranks from outgoing staffers. I heard once that the Clinton administration removed all the WS off of the keyboards before George W. Bush went in office. Do they joke around like this? Are there pranks pulled like this one?

**Bonnie Berkowitz:** [00:07:14] Apparently somebody left, you know, those drop ceilings.

[00:07:18] Somebody put a tuna fish sandwich up in one and left it there. So there was a big mystery trying to figure out where the smell was coming from.

**Nick Capodice:** [00:07:26] It is nice to know that even in today's world, there's still someone leaving a fish sandwich in the ceiling as a Partheon shot.

**Hannah McCarthy:** [00:07:33] That's the traditional transfer in a nutshell. I should add, it turns out that in the middle of a pandemic, the government also plans a half million deep clean before the new first family arrives. We've got plenty more on the strangeness of American politics and government. You can check it out at our website, civics101podcast.org.