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INTERVIEW OF THE FIRST LADY
BY JANE CHESNUT OF
WOMAN'S DAY MAGAZINE

The Map Room

(In progress.)

Q -- live in the White House.

MRS. CLINTON: It is. We are slowly figuring out how to have private time and private space. And I feel much more at ease about living in this extraordinary piece of American history. So it is.

Q One of the things our readers tell us over and over again is that they have no time for themselves. What about you? What are you doing to find time for you?

MRS. CLINTON: I am a typical American woman in that I never have enough time for me after all of my other obligations. And what I'm trying to do is to block out some time, block out that time when Chelsea's with her friends and Bill is otherwise occupied, you know, don't fill it if I can. Try to look ahead during the week to find some blocks of time when I can call up a friend to come over and see me, or I can go for a long walk, or read a book, do the kinds of things that help to replenish the spirit.

Q And you still find it possible to do that?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I'm working on it. I mean, it's not something that comes easily to any of us, but at least I know that I have to try. And I think that every woman should look for those opportunities, even if it's just 15 minutes a day, try to hang on to it.

Q The death of your father -- very, very sorry about what you have been through -- came at such an extraordinary time for you. And you were plunged personally into the health care system

at a point when you were plunging into it professionally. That must have shaped your thinking in various ways. Did it, and how so?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, it did. Well, it was just such an extraordinarily personal encounter for my whole family because, up until very recently, my father had been healthy until about his 70s and then things started going wrong. But we've been blessed by good health in our family for a long time. So none of us had ever spent the kind of time we spent in the hospital after my father's stroke. And it was very reassuring to me that there are so many good, decent, hard-working, committed people at all levels of the medical system.

Yet, the way that the system is organized often undermines their ability to do their job as they would like to do it. So among the many hours that I spent in the hospital with my family and my father I spent time talking to doctors and nurses and hospital administrators, and it was just a microcosm for all the problems that you see around the country. You know, hearing about how doctors would discharge patients with prescriptions and the patients couldn't afford to fill the prescriptions, and so the doctors knew that the patients would be back in a short period of time in the hospital because after their prescription ran out they wouldn't be able to afford to refill it. Or hearing about the very difficult problems that come when a family that faces the situation in which you have to make a decision about life-sustaining systems and what the right decision is and how you try to fulfill the beliefs and wishes of the patient.

We're talking to nurses, who are often on the front lines of delivering health care and need to have more of a say in how that's done so that they and the entire team operates better. I just was very gratified by the kind of experience I had because it was such a positive one for my family, but also because of the way people talked to me about what they saw as the big problems in the system.

Q In your travels around with health care and in talking to the American public, is there anything you could point to as a real misconception that people have about our health care system as it is?

MRS. CLINTON: I think many people don't understand how the fact there are so many Americans without any payment system for their health care raises the cost for all the rest of us. Because if someone is uninsured or underinsured, it's not true that they don't get care in America; it's true that they get care at the last possible moment from the most expensive source, usually by showing up at the emergency room; which is why the hospitals, in order to take care of people who come with no government support, no insurance, have to charge the rest of us

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what appears to be exorbitant costs for Tylenol or some other minor service that we need in the hospital. Well, that's because they have to make up from us who are insured, either by Medicaid or Medicare, or by private insurance to pay for the nearly 40 million Americans who are not.

I think as more Americans understand that until we have everybody in the system and until everybody is participating and has a payment stream behind them, we will not be able to control health care costs.

Q We, in preparing for these interview questions, we spoke to about 40 Women's Day readers and asked them what they would ask you if they were in the room. And the specifics vary, but the common denominator was fear. Fear that they would be paying more for less, that they wouldn't have any access to specialists, that they would have to wait longer for health care under a new plan, that it may be even more personal than they perceive the system to be now. Do they have reason to feel afraid? Can you make them feel more reassured?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I hope not because I want a health care system that I feel good about personally and those would all be concerns that I would have. But I think the way the system is going now, nobody can feel secure about it. Even people with insurance today cannot be sure that they will have any insurance or as much insurance at the same price next year.

And what I feel so strongly about is that we have to give everybody security. We have to remove the fear that either you won't have insurance or you won't have enough so that you'll be thrown into bankruptcy if you have some kind of catastrophic problem.

And what the whole idea behind the reform is, is to provide a positive level of security by ensuring every American will have a basic benefits package that really is comprehensive. I mean, it's not going to be the Cadillac package. It's not going to be everything for everybody. But it's going to have primary and preventive health care. It's going to have hospitalization. It's going to have outpatient care. And we're going to start on long-term care -- as we all age that becomes important; prescription drugs, we'll have some coverage which they don't have now.

I can't tell every American that it will be exactly what he or she wants, but I think I can say that it will be better for every American to have this kind of secure health care system

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that will be acceptable, that will remove a lot of the impersonality by getting rid of the bureaucracy and that it will be better for the country as well as well as for us individually.

Q You spoke to two real hot buttons for our readers, prevention and long-term care, which I think any of our readers perceive, and rightly so, as real weaknesses in the current system. Can you offer me any information on how prevention in particular may be folded into the system?

MRS. CLINTON: Because we will have for the first time a benefits package for every American that pays for prevention, which we don't have now. A lot of insurance policies still don't pay for prevention. We've had to pass laws to require states to mandate that insurance companies pay for mammograms or for pap smears or for a lot of the diagnostic tests that are so important.

Well, we don't have to do that anymore. We're going to have those covered, those are going to be part of the benefits package. Well-child care will be part of the benefits package so that we will have a series of visits to the pediatrician that will be part of what you get when you get the benefits package. We will be emphasizing primary and preventive health care because we know it works.

Up until now the way insurance has developed the whole idea was to take care of the disaster, of the catastrophe, not to try to prevent it. We want to reverse that. We want to try to prevent it and, of course, take care of the disaster if it occurs, but do what we can on the front end to make it less likely that it will occur.

Q All the things you could have picked to have done as First Lady -- (laughter) -- you chose what I certainly think is probably the most difficult and the most daunting and, in some ways, perhaps the most, in the short-term, thankless. Why did you do it and what made you think it could be done?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I did it because my husband asked me to do it. (Laughter.) But I think he believes it can be done and has to be done, that we have put off for too long doing it, and that even if it's very complicated and it will be difficult to do, that there isn't anything more important.

And, personally, all during the campaign and even before that, I kept running into so many situations that didn't make sense to me. And when he asked me to do it I really felt that it

was something that I cared greatly about. I knew it was going to be hard, but I just didn't want to have to go out in the country in the next couple of years and run into the people who have the child with the health condition that prevents them from getting insurance, or the small business person who, out of the goodness of his heart, keeps on the family with the serious health problem, knowing that it's going to raise the cost but can't turn his back on people.

I don't think we should have to do that. And I don't think it's fair that most of us are paying either through our own insurance premiums or taxes for health care while other people aren't paying their fair share. And so, the whole system gets out of whack. So I want to have the security in my own life and for my daughter that many people in other countries take for granted. And I think we can do that in America.

Q Were you shocked at the number of problems you found out there?

MRS. CLINTON: I think I was. I had visited with farm families who are self-employed who literally have to pay more for their insurance than they make in a year on their farm. I've sat in rooms talking to women who have no health insurance, but try to take care of themselves, so go for a physical every year -- and one woman, I'll never forget her face, she said I went to the doctor, had my physical, he found a lump, he referred me to a surgeon. I had the surgeon say, you know, if you had insurance I'd biopsy this. But because you can't pay for it, we'll just watch it. I mean, I can't imagine living like that. And this is a woman who gets up every day, a single mother, raised her kid, goes to work, and she's having to sit there with a lump in her breast because she can't afford to have it biopsied.

I've talked to people who have been paying their insurance premiums faithfully. Their employers contributed. And zap, they're laid off. The employer's shut down. They're out of luck. And I just don't want that to continue. I don't think it's right. And for any of us who are lucky enough to be insured, there's no guarantee anymore. There's no guarantee our employer is going to keep insuring us because there's no requirement that the employer does. There's no guarantee our employer will even be in business next year, given the way the world is going. So I just don't want that kind of insecurity in my own life, and I don't want it in the lives of Americans.

Q Will there be -- I know there's been a great deal of talk about various sin taxes, which seems to be quite popular

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certainly among my readership, which believes very strongly in taking care of yourself and doing things to promote your own health care. Will there be perhaps other incentives there to encourage people to eat well, exercise, do all the sort of things that can help cut health care costs in the long-term?

MRS. CLINTON: I hope so, because I think that changing behavior is very important. I think putting an emphasis on primary preventive health care is the most important way to save money and make people healthier in the long run. And if more people are seeing medical professionals on a regular basis, they're going to get more good advice and more good information. And if there is some financial incentive for changing your behavior, I think more people will be willing to do that.

So all of that needs to be part of changing the behavior and the culture of our people so that we do stay healthier longer, we do take more responsibility for ourselves.

Q Switching gears a little bit, our September issue is devoted to the American family. And it's the first time in the history of the magazine that we have devoted a single issue to a single topic, to show how important we feel it is. We've all heard the awful statistics -- I mean, is the American family in deep trouble? You have certainly met more families than we have.

MRS. CLINTON: I think the American family is under a lot of stress. And I think that we have to change ourselves personally and our society has to change to help reduce that stress so that we can keep our families together. Because I think our children are paying the real price for the stress that families are under today. And what I hope is that adults will take very seriously their parenting responsibilities and their overall family responsibilities, because, really, given how we're living today, most of us will be caring for a dependent older relative longer than we would care for a dependent younger child. And so we have to see the whole continuum of the life span and the way a family encompasses that if we're going to support and shore up the American family again.

So I think there are things each of us need to do in our own homes to be more responsible, to be more caring, to be more loving with one another. And I think it's very important that parents do everything they can to keep marriages together -- to understand how difficult that is, but to try to work through and be honest about problems. I think children have to appreciate their roles in helping families where both parents have to go out to work or a single parent is the sole source of income.

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So there are a lot of things that need to be done on the family level to help strengthen the family, but that there are also things that we have to do on a society level. You know, the best family policy is a good job. And for many people today, keeping a job even if one finds it is no longer a secure future, because our economy is changing so much. And that's one of the reasons my husband is trying so hard to get our budgetary situation in the federal government on sound footing, so that we can begin to invest again and not just spend money that doesn't put people to work like we have in the past.

I think that the kinds of issues we've talked about with health care -- it's very hard for many families to struggle through the kind of health care challenges they face in today's world. And we need to recognize that and help them. So both on a family level and on a society level, we have to begin to help strengthen families, I think.

Q What special strengths have you found in the American family, looking at it from the other side of it and something we don't hear very much about.

MRS. CLINTON: I think that the American family is incredibly resilient and basically very committed, often against extraordinary odds. When I think about the conditions that some people are raising children under and trying to do the best they can, I am in awe. And I think the real heroes of America are the American families who get up every day and work hard and keep their families together, often in violent and difficult neighborhoods, without adequate police protection, often in the face of tremendous personal challenges.

So I think that the ingredients are all there -- I mean, the stability, the strength, the resilience, the commitment. But I think most American families feel like they're kind of out there by themselves. Nobody else is struggling with the problem that they're dealing with. And that's one of the great benefits of a magazine like yours, is to bring those problems into everybody's life and to give people some ways of solving their problems that worked for others.

I can't stress how important that is, because we've all become kind of isolated from each other. So rebuilding the family structure and reconnecting people in communities to support families is going on right now. There's no organized effort, but people are trying to knit themselves back together. And I see that as a tremendous strength.

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And I also think that for many people, they know that the ethos of self-gratification and selfishness of the '80s doesn't lead to personal satisfaction or fulfillment, and it's not good for families and children. So taking a deep breath and kind of recommitting ourselves to what are the eternal truths that we all just have to keep rediscovering I think is beginning to take hold in our culture. And I'm very optimistic about that.

Q Which leads into religion. And your faith has been much commented on. Our readership tends to be very, very deeply religious and we are probably the only magazine out there right now that covers religion as a matter of course, the way we cover jobs and health and other matters. Do you think the churches could be doing more to promote the strength of the American family -- or a proper role for them?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I think it is a proper role. And I think many churches are trying to do that. And I bet there are wonderful models around that other churches could learn from and implement. Many churches I know do things -- everything from providing mothers day outs and child care centers for both members of their congregation and other people because they want to help support the working family, to providing parenting courses and courses in discipline so that families can learn better how to deal with whatever problems that might occur with their own children.

And I think that for churches today, in order for religion to be as powerful as it can be in the lives of people, they have to stand as witnesses to how they're faith helps people deal with the real-life problems that they find themselves confronting. And many churches are trying to do that. And many have a long and rich tradition of doing that. But I personally benefited so much in my life from churches that really did witness and make a statement on behalf of the realistic strains that their members and others in the community were suffering under, that I would urge churches to take that extra step, to be out there reaching out to their own members, but even beyond that.

There are so many ways -- most churches, no matter how small or how grand, have facilities that are there and need to be used all week long and which can open doors literally and well as figuratively and bring people into the community of faith who would otherwise be on the outside. And that certainly has been my personal experience. And I think the more that members of churches can reach out to their neighbors and be supportive -- and it doesn't have to be any grand program.

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I had a man tell me the other day that a number of years ago he went through a very difficult divorce, and he ended up with the custody of his small children and his wife moved away from their community. And it was people on his street whom he had never really knew before, who began to visit and offer to take the children places and cook meals for him, who really got him stabilized and brought him back into the life of the church.

So it can be something as personal as just reaching out to an individual in need, as something on a much grander scale with some program that the church can administer. My church in Little Rock had a program that was providing transportation to medical appointments and treatments for people who were elderly or without transportation. And people would take turns every day -- you'd go pick up somebody and you drive them in the car and you take them to doctor's office and you wait with them, and then you take them home. And for many of those people, particularly elderly people, that was one of the few human contacts they would have. So they not only got a lift, as we call the program -- Lift -- they not only got a lift to their doctor or hospital, but they got a human lift as well.

And there are so many people who want to give something back, and the church is such a great place in which to organize and do that.

Q We live in such a fragmented society, with our time split up in so many different ways. Do you see any ways to lessen that?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes, I think people have to do that for themselves. I really think that the constant barrage of -- I'll get in trouble for this -- but the constant barrage of stimuli that go on in many homes today -- the TV is turned on when people get up, the radio is playing -- it actually makes our lives more fragmented and less coherent than ordinary. It also deeply interferes with family communication.

I really think that if people kept that TV and that radio off for certain periods of time, where they had to talk to each other, or where they could even just think to themselves without that barrage, because I think it's very disorienting to be constantly hit with information and stimulation when what we need is to center ourselves and take some deep breaths and relate to the people nearest to us. Our lives are frantic enough. Most people jump out of bed before they've had enough sleep because they probably have stayed up too late trying to get things done

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or watching TV to relax. And then they're on a mad dash to get the kids to school, to get the kids to day-care, to get people to work. There's this constant frenetic motion. And I think the more we can kind of slow it down a little bit, the more likely we are to be able to capture some of that time for ourselves.

And I think also sitting down and thinking through your week and -- it makes such a difference if you can have some idea in mind of how you want to spend your time. We all know it's going to get blown apart 10 or 20 times. But at least you have a base off of which you work and what you think you can do and to look forward to doing things.

I also think quiet time with members of your family --not organized activity, but just kind of spending time reading together. Until she got older, Bill and I always read to Chelsea every night before she went to bed, unless we weren't home. And we always tried, one of us, to be home. That wasn't just something we did for her, it was something we did for us. That decompression, just take a deep breath, kind of find out where you are again, get in touch with yourself.

I think prayer is an important part of that. Exercise. So many women I know -- and I'm among them -- say, oh, I just don't have time for that. Actually, you create more time if you stop and fill a little bit of the time you're now spending reacting with that kind of centered activity, whether it's exercise or prayer or even just sitting down and reading something that you care about.

These are old lessons that we have to relearn it seems to me.

Q Do you exercise?

MRS. CLINTON: Yes. Not as often as I'd like, but I do.

Q Is there a woman in America who thinks she exercises as she should?

MRS. CLINTON: No, no. But I do. And it makes a big difference to me when I do. It really does.

Q We have time for one more question.

MRS. CLINTON: These are things I love to talk about. I read your magazine all the time.

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Q Thank you very much.

MRS. CLINTON: I'm a big believer in women's magazines.

Q I think they are terrific.

MRS. CLINTON: I think they are -- I've learned so much over the -- I guess now, 35 or so years that I have read -- my mother always brought your magazine, Women's Day, home from the supermarket. So she'd read it and I'd read it. And when I got out of touch with doing that, I'd go over to her house and she'd have stacks of the magazines that she'd read, and I'd go through them and catch up on all that's going on.

Q I just wanted to ask you, what the biggest joy as First Lady has been?

MRS. CLINTON: I think watching my husband and daughter get their lives adjusted to living here and feeling good about it. That means more to me than anything. When my daughter runs out the door because she's got friends now to go visit. When my husband does something like he did last night when he spoke at the Robert Kennedy memorial, and I just know what a great person he is and I see what he's doing and how he's trying to struggle with all these problems. I mean, that's my greatest joy. I love that.

Q That's terrific. So it sounds as if the awkward period of moving in --

MRS. CLINTON: We're getting that behind us, yes. It was very difficult, too -- moving in and so much to do at one time. We still haven't got all the boxes unpacked. Then my father getting sick and being gone -- it's just been a real period of adjustment that I think many women can relate to because -- the most important thing for me was to get my husband and my daughter settled. And that's really been the thing that I've cared most about because I wanted all of this to go well for them, so that whatever my husband had to worry about, it wasn't where are my socks or where's the book I need.

And with my daughter making new adjustments, I wanted her to feel as secure as she could. So it's worked out well.

Q Thank you very much.

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