

## ONLINE EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET NAGLE

**HBO:** What drew you to the subject of FDR?



Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt at Warm Springs, Georgia.

**Margaret Nagle:** Well, it was actually quite personal for me, because my own brother, my older brother became disabled in a car accident when he was little. And he and I grew up sharing a room. He was in a coma for a long time. He had to re-learn absolutely everything. He did, finally, after years, get up and walk, and his speech was unintelligible but I always knew what he was saying and I would translate for him.

So our house was sort of like a 24-hour rehabilitation center. And that was my orientation to life in general. And it was interesting because I was the baby, I didn't know my brother before the accident. Everybody else did and they all had a kind of grief in their eyes that I didn't. I just took him at face value for who he was.



Roosevelt's first cottage at Warm Springs.

I've always loved Franklin and Eleanor and been fascinated and intrigued by them. I read somewhere five or six years ago that Franklin was actually a paraplegic. And I kind of went, "Hey, whoa." So I started going through the stacks at the Beverly Hills Public Library and I found two books that were way out of print that had been written by people who had gone to Warm Springs (where FDR went for treatment) and who themselves had polio.

I started to look at all these books and realized no one's really covered this. And the reason was is that no one really wanted the extent of his disability to be known. And I understood this instinctually, because people are really afraid of disability. And they are afraid of people with disability. And it is still, even today, I know from whenever I go in in public with my brother, just how fundamentally uncomfortable people are with all of that.

So of course his disability wasn't discussed or made public, not just because he was a public leader, but because people connote a lot of other things with disability. You have to put polio in its frame of context, which was it was the AIDS of its time.

You did not know how you got polio. There was no cure for polio. Most people with polio died. If you were left a paraplegic or paralyzed, you usually died within a couple of years. People thought that polio went to your brain. That was one of the misnomers. They thought you got it potentially because of some moral failing, that you were maybe being punished by God. If you were a handicapped child in the United States at that time, you were denied public education. You were not allowed to go to school.

"His disability wasn't discussed or made public, not just because he was a public leader, but because people connote a lot of other things with disability. You have to put polio in its frame of context, which was it was the AIDS of its time."

— Margaret Nagle

People thought that if you had polio, you were probably still contagious. Because, again, they didn't know how you got polio. So there were all these very scary myths surrounding polio in general that would make it something that you would not discuss. Ever. Publicly. When someone becomes disabled that you love, your whole perspective on life changes. You revalue your values... just like the person who becomes disabled revalues their values.



FDR (far right) at a poolside picnic at Warm Springs in 1932.

And so I took what I knew out of my own life, and then started to dig up all this information. And of course, they went through that that, too. Eleanor and Franklin and the children and Sarah. They all went through the incredible depression. They went through denial. They went through feeling completely lost and powerless.

Everybody that becomes a paraplegic pretty much, in my research, goes through periods of great suicidal thoughts. All those things happened to him. So it was sort of like I opened this box that no one had opened and it was just filled with stuff. And all of this was such a big part of who he was and part of what made him a great leader. It gave him this incredible perspective on suffering.

"This was a man who'd been given everything, and was just 39 years old. His personality was formed. And then came these seven years -- years that no one wrote about. This is really heavy, heavy stuff that he went through. And, of course, no one wrote it down."

— Margaret Nagle

This was a man who'd been given everything, and was just 39 years old. His personality was formed. And then came these seven years -- years that no one wrote about. This is really heavy, heavy stuff that he went through. And, of course, no one wrote it down.

**HBO:** This was in the '20s.

**Margaret Nagle:** Yeah. From '21 to '28.

**HBO:** How did you approach the process when you decided to do this? Did you go to Warm Springs?

**Margaret Nagle:** You know, I didn't actually go to Warm Springs until we started filming there. You might think that's funny, but you see I had been in rehabilitation centers my whole life because of my brother.



I learned that at Warm Springs the kids stayed up all night. They'd play jokes. They had a very dark sense of humor. They had incredible fun. They went there depressed, scared, lost, and they found this sense of community...this healing community.

It wasn't healing because of the water, it was healing because they were together, creating this community in the back woods where anything goes, and you could start to talk about stuff you hadn't talked about before. And you found that you weren't alone.

And when Franklin got to Georgia, he looked out his train window and saw that he wasn't in Kansas anymore. I mean, he stepped out of the world of Hyde Park and New York City and Washington, D.C., and stepped into a place with no running water and no paved roads, and racism and illiteracy and famine... out and out famine. And all that time he had been thinking that he was the one that had it bad.

So I understood that intuitively. And I went to the Presidential Library. And I went to Hyde Park. And that was where I began. And I began by just going on the tour that everybody goes on of Springwood, his home.

"When he was a politician, he hid the fact that he couldn't walk. So he would be wheeled into a room, lifted out of his wheelchair, put in a chair, and they would cross his legs, lift one leg over the other... put him in the pose, then they'd take the wheelchair out. And then if you were his guest, you would be walked into the room to meet him."

— Margaret Nagle

And then I went to the Presidential Library, and they started pulling all the materials they could for me. They were so nice there. And I just sat there going through the materials. And the rehabilitation center at Warm Springs had just recently had a reunion, like a fifty-year reunion, and everybody that had gone had posted their memories and everything they felt about the reunion online. That was very powerful for me to read, these memoirs.

Everybody goes through that really, really, really dark period, when you realize you don't know how long you're going to live. And this is the shape your body's going to be in, and you don't know for how long, if you're going to get better. And everyone in the family has to adjust around that. And the roles in the family all shift,

because that person's role has now shifted so dramatically. And everybody has really intense grief and feelings about that.

People would talk about Franklin Roosevelt as someone who was not forthright with the truth. Well, he wasn't forthright because he was hiding this big part of who he was... which was the fact that he couldn't walk.





And when he was a politician, he hid the fact that he couldn't walk. So he would be wheeled into a room, lifted out of his wheelchair, put in a chair, and they would cross his legs, lift one leg over the other... put him in the pose, then they'd take the wheelchair out, they'd take the attendants out. And then if you were his guest, you would be walked into the room to meet him.

And then if you went to a dinner at the White House, Eleanor would slowly walk you through the halls, taking the longest way possible to the dining room after cocktails, while Franklin was picked back up, put into a wheelchair, wheeled down a back hallway, brought into a back entrance of the dining room through the kitchen, carried and put into a chair. The wheelchair was taken out, and then Eleanor, a minute or two later, would come strolling in, and he would be all seated and ready to go at the dining room table.

**HBO:** Amazing.



Portrait of Roosevelt at Warm Springs.

**Margaret Nagle:** They created a system. The people around him always said it was so hard to ever know what Franklin was really thinking. Well, of course it was -- he had to learn to hide this part of himself, which I thought was such a fascinating part of the character. But that's not what the movie covers. The movie covers those years where he is still so raw.

And in any recovery from spinal cord injury, there's a lot of insecurity. Your mood goes up one day, your mood comes down the next. And when you get a little hope, you grab onto that really tight. And so there's almost a manic emotional quality. There was a quote about Franklin when he first came to Warm Springs, he was "walking on his tongue." And what they

meant was that he couldn't shut up. He was nervous, he was high-strung.

One of the doctor's reports said, 'He is a sensitive, emotional mechanism.' And often people who had polio, afterwards there was a lot of nervous chatter, because it was so scary to just sit there and feel the feelings they were feeling... which was a lot of sadness and a lot of grief and anger and it's dark, it's dark...

And Warm Springs became this place where you could go. And Franklin created it, where you could go and you could have those feelings... where it was okay for it to be dark. And he understood. And they'd bring people in who had been suicidal. And Franklin would take them in his car and drive up to this mountain that had an incredible view, and talk to them.

"They understood Franklin when he said, 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself.' He knew exactly what he was

And they understood Franklin when he said, "We have nothing to fear but fear itself." He knew exactly what he was talking about. He'd been there. He'd been down that road.

So getting Franklin there was a big thing because at the time he was the fifth cousin of a former President, and a failed Vice-Presidential candidate. He wasn't Franklin Roosevelt yet. I'm always amazed that people think he got polio when he was President. He got it before he was President. But people don't know that. And they never made any effort to make that known.

**HBO:** One of the things you show in the film is how difficult it was for Franklin, at first, to relate to the poor and working class people of Warm Springs.

**Margaret Nagle:** Both Franklin and Eleanor lived in Victorian society, which was very much class-based. One of the things that they shared, that made them a couple, that people overlook is they were both on the very outside of the inner circle.

Eleanor did not have money. She was an orphan. Her brother had also died. She lived on the kindness of her relatives. She was very smart, unusual, very, very, very intelligent. She was tall. She wasn't pretty. And she never fit in. She was deeply shy, almost pathologically shy. So she never fit into that world.

And Franklin was also on the outside of the inner circle. He went to boarding school, but the boys did not like him. He was not accepted. He was always trying too hard. And they never accepted him. And at Harvard he was not accepted. He was able to write for "The Harvard Crimson," but he was not accepted into the elite private clubs. He was, in fact, blackballed from the clubs. He was a very lonely guy.

**HBO:** Was it a money thing?

**Margaret Nagle:** No. He had money. He came from a lot of money. He was socially awkward. People said something went really wrong for him at Groton, and at Harvard. At Harvard he was able to rescue it with his writing, but you know the phrase 'blackballed?' Well, that actually comes from those Harvard clubs. When they would vote on who would be able to be in a club they'd put white balls in a big glass bowl, and if one person put in a black ball, then that meant that person they were discussing would not be a member and was therefore 'blackballed.' And Franklin was blackballed.

So Franklin and Eleanor were both on the outside of their class, and then when he became disabled, it was over. You know, if you were of the upper middle class and you became disabled, you went off and lived in a back bedroom out of sight for the rest of your life. His mother wanted him to come home to Hyde Park and work on his stamp collection and build his model boats. It was a life with no future.



So both Franklin and Eleanor were ready for a change. And then he went to Warm Springs and saw suffering and disenfranchisement so much worse than what he was going through, and it - it snapped him into a kind of awareness that he had never known. I mean, it's not like he and Eleanor were out going to soup kitchens and going to see slums and these things before. They weren't.

It's also interesting that the people at Warm Springs didn't care about his disability. They just didn't care. And once he got the hand-controlled car, he would drive all over the countryside, not just for the freedom that it afforded him, which was very powerful psychologically, but being able to move on his own like that and have people he met there accept him.

It's also why he always loved boats. He loved boats because it was a way to move and be active that didn't count on his body. And it's the same with driving the car. He would drive up to people's houses. And I've found all these stories and accounts that people had written in Georgia where, you know, 'Franklin Roosevelt came up to our house today and we served him dinner in the car, and he talked to us for hours.' You know, he was lonely in that wheelchair. He was isolated and lonely.

So he'd pick anybody up for a ride -- black or white -- in his car and drive them home. And that was just a huge part of his evolution as a human being, as a thinker. And also because he was stuck in that chair, it forced him to think.

It forced him to be in one place and it forced him to sit and reflect and to think and to ponder, which was a great thing for him. He grew up. He basically had a prolonged adolescence. And he grew up because of the polio. That revaluing of his values... it was profound. And it was profound for Eleanor, too. I always think that they were this couple that were on the verge of being unhinged because of the Lucy Mercer affair.

Then polio came. Eleanor had stayed married to him so he could have this political career. But now that political career was seemingly over. And that's when she really dug in, because Eleanor already did understand suffering... because she had lost her mother and her father and her brother. She had had an absolutely Dickensian, tragic childhood. And so, she was ahead of Franklin.

And suddenly he was learning lessons that she had had to learn as a child. And they ended up becoming a far more connected couple than they used to be. They found a common ground. And he came to respect her and admire her and depend on her as he hadn't before. You know, they had one of these very unique relationships. She had known Franklin since she was four years old. They met at a family picnic. And she'd always really liked him. And he found her compelling because of her

"When they became President and First Lady, the people that hated them hated them because they felt they were traitors to their class. But what they didn't realize is that their class had been traitors to them."

— Margaret Nagle

intelligence, because she listened so carefully. She was very different from him, and yet they were from the same world and they were both on the edge of that world.

So when they became President and First Lady, the people that hated them hated them because they felt they were traitors to their class. But what they didn't realize is that their class had been traitors to them.



A patient party at Warm Springs.

Then it was very easy for them to step out of their class. In fact, it was a relief to move on. It was a release to have this purpose and leave their class and join the world. And they embraced the real world. That's their legacy, is how much they loved real people... how much the stories that real people told them affected them. Franklin heard stories from people down there that he never imagined. And there were faces to these stories.

And as much as their marriage was unconventional, there was an incredibly powerful connection between the two of them. You can't classically define their marriage. They really empowered each other and got their strength from the other one.

And from the first day Louis Howe (Roosevelt's political advisor) saw Franklin, he said, 'I know you can be President of the United States.' And he never gave up that hope. Kept it going even when Franklin became a paraplegic. And--here's something really important--in recorded history from the beginning of time in any country in the world, there's never been a leader of a country that couldn't walk. And of the 35,000 pictures that exist of FDR there are only two of him in his wheelchair.

**HBO:** That's extraordinary.

**Margaret Nagle:** And there's not one political cartoon of him in his wheelchair. In fact, most political cartoons had him leaping, rushing, running up a hill.

**HBO:** So the general public wasn't aware?

**Margaret Nagle:** They thought he was lame. That's what everybody thought. Franklin always put on a good show about his disability. He never let on how painful it was. Not emotionally, because polio - even though he was a paraplegic, he could still feel. Polio, when you're paralyzed, it's different than a spinal cord injury. With a spinal cord injury you can't feel your legs, but with polio, you cannot move your legs, but you have feeling and it is painful. It's nerve pain, so it's excruciating.

"Franklin helped create the March of Dimes. He said if everybody gave a



But, he never talked about his disability outside of Warm Springs. He rarely confided to anybody about his disability on the record, ever. It's so fascinating to me that he created a place that where-the only place in the world, where it was okay to be disabled. I mean, it's an incredible thing.

Franklin also helped create the March of Dimes. He said if everybody gave a dime, we could fund a cure. And he went out, speaking, 'We have got to find a cure. We have to find a cure. This can't keep happening.' And getting people to go out in their neighborhoods and collect dimes at night... You know, just one dime from everybody in the country. And he did it. The March of Dimes paid for all the research to find those vaccines. They found the vaccine after he died.

And that is the reason Franklin is on the dime. He's not on the twenty-dollar bill, or something fancy. He's on the dime. And again, he'd love that, because a dime is something everybody can have in their pocket. It's not a thousand-dollar bill, it's the dime.

And it connects him to polio and to the March of Dimes, which is still doing all this amazing work for spinal cord injury today all over the world. Franklin created the March of Dimes. And so his legacy is just huge. It's huge. But those were things that he didn't call attention to. And it was extraordinary. It was really extraordinary. He did pay for Warm Springs out of his own pocket, and he did leave his life insurance to Warm Springs, and he died at Warm Springs. He died there. In his cottage.



Brace making at Warm Springs.

And for the movie we used the original cottage that he first stayed in. We used the pools and filled them up with the mineral water. Kenneth Branagh's swimming in the actual swimming pool in the mineral water.

His braces are made in the Warm Springs brace and crutch shop-made by blacksmiths who are the sons of the original blacksmiths that made braces. Everybody's braces were made by these two guys. And they're 65, 70 years old now. They were trained to do this when they were 16.

Warm Springs is where he found his authentic self. It didn't matter who his family was. It didn't matter that he couldn't walk. It didn't

matter, it was not a class-based world. It was not a political world. It was where he could just allow the real Franklin to come to the surface... and he was so happy there. He was in love with the place. And he was in love with the people. And I know that there's a reason he died there, too. I know there's a reason he died in his cottage. He died right there, sitting in his cottage. I don't think there's any place he would have rather died.

It's where he got to go back and experience that authentic self without all the trappings of politics and his birth. I think it gave him the ideal for what he wanted to achieve in government. And people can be real cynical about him with me, but I say, 'Go down there to Warm Springs. Read the stuff I've read. Spend time with people in rehabilitation for spinal cord injuries. Go see what it's like to hit rock bottom.' It's part of FDR's legacy and what made this guy great.



FRD with child patients at Warm Springs.

Franklin went to Warm Springs, October 4th, 1924. And we started shooting October 5th, 2004, so we started 80 years to the day he arrived at Warm Springs. So the weather, the leaves - everything was exactly as it was, just like when Franklin got there.

**HBO:** That's amazing.

**Margaret Nagle:** It was amazing. And it was a total fluke. And then Franklin died April 12th, 1945, at his cottage at Warm Springs. And we're airing the movie in April. It will be 60 years in April. And it was just a fluke that April was available to air the movie. It had nothing to do with "commemorating his death." So we all kinda felt like, um, Franklin was sort of "out there." Something was "guiding us" that was sort of "bigger than we were."

**HBO:** What do you want audiences to take away from the film?

**Margaret Nagle:** I think it's about finding yourself through suffering. Because we all suffer in this life, and some of us make it through the horrible things that happen to us - and some of us don't. My "logline" for the movie was: "What if the worst thing that ever happened to you was the best thing that ever happened to you?"

"The 'miracle' is that - he is reborn in his soul. And finds out who he really is. And so, this 'trust fund playboy' decides to run for President of the United States. And be the first world leader who can't walk. And he runs. And he is elected - four times."

— Margaret Nagle

I thought, "You have this trust fund, Ivy League, playboy, who wakes up one morning - and can never walk again. And then he goes off to seek out a 'miracle cure.' And the 'miracle,' is not that he will walk again - because he won't. The 'miracle' is that - he is reborn, in his soul. And he finds out, who he really is. And so, this 'trust fund playboy' decides to run for [LAUGHTER] President of the United States. And be the first world leader who can't walk. And he runs. And he is elected - four times." And I'll never forget, pitching it like that. And the person goes, "Wow, that's a great story. Wouldn't that be incredible if it were true?" And I would say, "It is incredible... and it is true."



FDR at a political rally in 1932.

What if your suffering, didn't just transform you - it transformed, hundreds of thousands of people. How can a life be transformed through tragedy for the better? Franklin never would have been elected president if he hadn't had polio because he was going to run in 1924 or 1928 - and those were Republican years, and he would have lost, and it would have been over for him.

The fact that he had to wait 'til '32, was because of his polio. And it was divine luck that he ran in '32, because the Depression had hit, and Hoover was incapable of dealing with the Depression, and dealing with how people were feeling about the Depression. And Franklin instinctively knew what depression was. And he knew that with the Depression that the economy would ultimately fix itself. But he had to keep people busy and working towards "healing the economy" - even if those weren't the steps that were gonna heal it.



So the seeds of the "New Deal" were all planted out of the experience at Warm Springs. So that if people were put to work, building roads and building schools and building bridges - and they were feeding their family, and their life was useful - they would "repair" themselves. And that this would help us "wait it out," while the "economy repaired itself."

Warm Springs never taught Franklin to walk again - but it "repaired his soul." And it repaired him to go on and keep his life going, and to do important things.

**Images courtesy of the Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute and the Roosevelt Little White House.**