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2 friends of Clinton speak at LR event

by [Jordan Gass-Pooré](#) | August 17, 2015 at 4:18 a.m.

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Just minutes before then-President Bill Clinton announced in 1992 that his friend and fellow Arkansan Thomas F. "Mack" McLarty would be his White House chief of staff, McLarty's mother, Helen, beat him to the punch, Skip Rutherford said.

The Clinton administration had kept the news hush-hush, that is until Helen McLarty, who Mack thought was ill at home, knocked on the door of the Old State House unexpectedly and was greeted by CNN reporter Wolf Blitzer, Rutherford said.

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Helen McLarty introduced herself to Blitzer, he said, and let the cat out of the bag.

Rutherford remembered being in a bathroom stall and hearing Blitzer throw open the restroom door.

"He said, 'It's McLarty in the White House. Break in. Announce. I don't care what's on. My source? His mother,'" Rutherford said.

That was one story Rutherford, sitting beside McLarty onstage, told an audience of about 200 during Sunday afternoon's "Mack and Skip: Swapping Stories About Arkansas, The USA and The World" at Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church in Little Rock.

Sunday's event was recorded by the *Tales from the South* radio program and will be broadcast at a later date.

Rutherford, 65, and McLarty, 69, have known each other for years. Both are members of Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church, worked with the Clinton administration and with Arkla Inc., a Fortune 500 natural gas company.

Through one of Rutherford's yarns, McLarty learned Sunday that his reputation at the University of Arkansas, the duo's alma mater, preceded him.

As editor of the *Arkansas Traveler*, the university's student-run newspaper, Rutherford said he was almost fired by administrators for publishing a review of the play *Hair* that included curse words. This play, he said, was the result of the symposium speaker series, an initiative McLarty instituted when he was student body president years prior.

Blame him as Rutherford may, McLarty said the speaker series helped fund the university's first mass transportation system, a move that may have earned him votes and respect from the freshmen women who lived in dormitories some ways from campus.

McLarty did catch the eye of at least one female University of Arkansas student: his wife of 47 years, Donna McLarty, he said.

After graduation, McLarty returned to his hometown of Hope. There he helped expand McLarty Associates, a truck leasing business started by his grandfather, of which he remains chairman.

This is also where, at 23, McLarty campaigned door-to-door for a seat in the Arkansas House of Representatives.

It was the early 1970s, and McLarty naively thought that everyone who told him they would vote for him would be true to their word, he said.

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Until McLarty went to the porch of an elderly man who set him straight.

"Son, I just can't vote for you," McLarty remembered the man telling him. He asked the man why he would not vote for him. The man looked down the gravel road lined with the houses McLarty at which had spent hours campaigning door-to-door and told McLarty that he was in the wrong county.

Despite the geographic challenges, McLarty did serve one term in the Arkansas House of Representatives.

Although encouraged by some Democrats to run for governor in 1978, McLarty instead supported his childhood friend and fellow Hope native Bill Clinton.

McLarty and Clinton met as students in Miss Mary's Kindergarten, McLarty said.

Rutherford met Clinton in Fayetteville in 1974. When Clinton began his presidential run in 1991, Rutherford served as a volunteer fundraiser, later joining campaign staff as a senior advisor to the campaign manager.

When asked what he thought of Clinton's initial presidential prospects, Rutherford said, "I thought it was the dumbest, stupidest thing."

Then-presidential incumbent George H.W. Bush was leading the polls after Desert Storm, McLarty said.

So, McLarty told Clinton that he was not sure a governor from a small Southern state could raise the funds and run a successful presidential campaign.

Neither McLarty nor Rutherford anticipated serving in the Clinton administration.

And those negative comments they told Clinton? Well, they said he got over that.

McLarty served as Clinton's chief of staff from 1993-94 and later as his special envoy for the Americas.

Rutherford coordinated the effort to build the Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock.

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