

INTERVIEW OF BARBARA J. SABOL BY JOAN WAGNON, 01-14-22
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Joan Wagon: Today is January 14th, 2022. I'm Joan Wagon, Project Director for the Kansas Oral History Project. I am substituting today for interviewer Frances Jackson of Wichita who was delayed and derailed by the weather. We also have COVID concerns, and since our interviewee, the former Secretary Barbara Sabol is a public health person, I want you to notice that we are all boosted, vaccinated, and distanced from each other, and wearing an appropriate mask. We think you hear us well enough, but we decided we'd be safe as COVID is raging in the environment right now. Is that correct, Secretary?

Barbara Sabol: That's correct.

JW: With me today is our videographer, David Heinemann, former Speaker Pro Tem of the House, and we are in a private home to conduct this interview that's part of the Kansas Oral History Project collection, "Examining the Diversity of Voices Active in Public Policy Making." We hope to learn today about policy development in Kansas through the eyes of someone who was directly involved. Our interviewee today is former Cabinet Secretary Barbara J. Sabol who was a Cabinet Secretary under former Governor John Carlin for the Department of Aging and then Public Health and Welfare [Kansas Department of Health and Environment].

We will focus principally on your Kansas experience today, but Secretary Sabol, you have had quite an illustrious resume, and I'm not going to read the whole thing, but you were on AARP's National Policy Council.

BS: That's correct.

JW: You were a program director for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, one of the most respected foundations in the country. You had high-level administrative posts in Kansas as well as holding local, state, and federal posts. In addition to all that, you're a nurse, and I want you to take a few minutes and look at the camera and introduce yourself today and tell us why you think this interview is important to do.

BS: Well, I am Barbara J. Sabol, and I am a nurse, and all those other things that you mentioned follow from being a nurse first. I'm the daughter of Phoebe and Franklin Watkins, both of whom were life members of the NAACP. I'm the sister of Sonja Johnson, and I'm the mother of two daughters, Njeri and Frankie, and I'm the wife and now widow of Joseph Sabol, and it is these individuals who have shaped my journey and that have supported me in doing the kinds of things I've been able to do in the workplace. So I'm pleased to be able to do this interview and hopefully something we say here and the information we exchange here will be helpful to others.

JW: That's our hope as well. I need to give a commercial about our funders and our project. The Kansas Oral History Project is a not-for-profit corporation created to collect oral histories of Kansans who were involved in shaping and implementing public policy. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are available to researchers, educators, and other members of the public through the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library of Kansas and on our website, ksoralhistory.org. Funding for the project is provided by volunteers, individual donors, and Humanities Kansas, a nonprofit cultural organization connecting communities with history, traditions, and ideas to strengthen civic life.

So you gave us a little bit about your background. Tell me one thing that people ought to know about you above all else.

BS: I have a basic question that I ask related to policy making and leadership, and that basic question is, is it good for the children?

BS: Is it good for the children? If it's not good for the children, we ought not be doing it.

JW: Now your educational and professional background, you've got a very long list of all the things that you have done, the degrees you have, the places you've been. Could you summarize those for us?

BS: As I say, I'm a registered nurse. First of all, I'm an LPN. I became a registered nurse. I have a bachelor's degree in psychology, a master's degree in counseling and guidance, and I have worked for local government, state government, federal government, and I've been a volunteer for many, many organizations. And in fact, in trying to review to get ready for this interview, I found that from 1994 to 2010, when I finally retired from paid work, I have volunteered in the private sector. I have volunteered in the not-for-profit sector and at the community level, always encouraging people the importance of the vote, always.

JW: Did you think when you were growing up that you would become a nurse?

BS: No, not really. My mother wanted to become a nurse, but she was not afforded that opportunity. I think somehow that has something to do with me becoming a nurse. But I started off as an LPN. It was kind of a thirst to know more, to do more, to do better. I went on to RN training, and I was in the first class at Kansas City General Hospital and Medical Center in which the class was integrated. There was General #1, General #2. You can guess for whom General #2 was for.

JW: Yes.

BS: Everything was integrated at the time that I went through except ObGyn. As I look back, I was born at General #2.

JW: Really.

BS: Really. What was the question?

JW: The question was, "Did you ever think you'd become a nurse?" and it sounds to me like—

BS: It's preordained.

JW: It was ordained. Your mother wanted to be a nurse. That was a noble profession, and it certainly was one that was available to persons of color as well as white folks.

BS: Exactly. And it gave you the opportunity to go anywhere in this country or out of it to practice your profession.

JW: At what point did you decide, “Okay, I’m a nurse, but I now want to be a Cabinet Secretary for a Governor”?

BS: I didn’t make that decision. The way the process worked, you remember Senator Jan Meyers?

JW: Of course.

BS: Senator Jan Meyers introduced a bill creating the division of services for children and youth in the state of Kansas. Now, somehow Dr. Robert C. Harder got my name. I ended up being interviewed for that position. And I got the position, and I was the first Director of Services for Children and Youth under the legislation created by Senator Jan Meyers.

JW: Do you remember what year that was?

BS: I can tell you. You’ll have to give me a minute here.

JW: Sure.

BS: I do remember. The Division of Services to Children and Youth, I worked there from 1974 to 1979.

JW: And then in ’79, that’s when John Carlin became governor. Did you go to work immediately for him as Secretary of Aging?

BS: No. This is an interesting story, particularly if you’re looking at policy development and leadership. I was working for Dr. Harder who was the Secretary for Social and Rehabilitation Services as the Director for Services for Children and Youth. Dr. Harder was a tough taskmaster. He was committed to serving the clients, and I learned a lot. And one of the responsibilities that I had was interacting with the legislature on the revision of the Juvenile Code, along with Charles V. Hamm who was the General Counsel for SRS.

BS: So I had a lot of interaction with the legislators that I would not have ordinarily had except for my responsibilities as Director of Services for Children and Youth. So when John Carlin became the governor, somehow my name came up. I don’t know how these things happened at that time, but my name came up, and you’ll love this story because you probably remember some of these actors and actresses. But he submitted my name to be Secretary for the Department on Aging. That meant I was a subordinate of Dr. Harder’s, soon to become his peer. You talk about an interesting transition. That was an interesting transition.

But the most interesting thing was, the aging community was not totally receptive to my appointment.

JW: Well, you were a young woman.

BS: It wasn't that I was young. It was that I came from SRS. The Department on Aging was created because aging used to be under SRS, and then they created a department. So the aging advocates weren't interested in having SRS be their leader.

I went to a meeting in the Governor's Office. There was a Sister Jean Marie there, and the advocates were there, and I was there. Sister Jean Marie turns to these advocates. I've just accepted the job. She says to them as part of a conversation, "Well, if you're not satisfied in six months, come back."

Now that's an interesting way to start off your—

JW: It puts a little pressure on you, don't you think?

BS: Yes, but it all worked. Just as I asked the question, "Is it good for the children?" I could ask the question, "Is it good for old people?"

JW: Sure.

BS: Is it good for the elderly? Is it good for our state? I developed an excellent relationship with the advocates and the area agencies on aging. These names you may recall, Bea Bacon.

JW: Yes.

BS: A silver-haired legislator, came out of that activity--Petey Cerf.

JW: She was a dynamo.

BS: Yes, and we worked on nursing home reform and other issues. So while it was an interesting way to be introduced to your advocates, I was able to develop a relationship with the advocates that led to improvements for the elderly. And just skipping ahead, when I left the Department on Aging, probably one of my greatest tributes was an editorial in the Kansas City Star, which said, and I'm paraphrasing here because I couldn't find it, "Kansas Elderly Lose A Friend," and then there was an editorial about my tenure as Secretary for the Department on Aging.

JW: What a lovely way to put it. I entered about that same time, and Sister Jean called me up one day because I was at the YWCA. They were having problems within SRS, and they created an SRS Review Commission. I was one of three non-legislators that was appointed to it. That's how I got my feet wet and involved in legislation and was over there much of the time [as a legislator] that you were Secretary, mostly in Health and Environment, serving on Public Health and Welfare, watching you work your magic.

BS: Well, it's not so much magic as it is a belief that you can make things better. If you work with people to make things better, it can happen.

JW: I'd like to switch gears just ever so slightly and then come back to this topic. It's of great interest to us. This is the time period as government was modernizing itself and actually working very well that we've done a lot of interviews in. You talked about being born into the hospital into the segregated part of it. You also went to the segregated Kansas City, Missouri public schools during that time. What about that experience motivated you or shaped your ability to be successful in government or prepared you for political activism?

BS: If I could just reframe that just a little bit—

JW: You sure can.

BS: It prepared me for activism, not just political activism, but activism to make the community better. My parents were both life members of the NAACP. I'm a life member of the NAACP. So we participated in and supported organizations that understood, cared about, and tried to implement an agenda that would result in full inclusion of African Americans.

But all my teachers were African American. The principal of my elementary school was a PhD. The principal of my high school was a Ph.D. or an ED.D. I'm not sure which category. So we had the best qualified people who were teaching us and training us and shaping us. All of them stressed the need to be better, to be better than white folks because that's who we would be working with, competing with, living with, and all of them stressed we had to be better. Neither of my parents graduated from high school.

JW: But they pushed you towards education?

BS: They didn't push. It was taken for granted. I'll tell you a little story about my mother, at Wendell Phillips, the school that I went to. The World Book Encyclopedia guy, the school would get a set of World Book Encyclopedias if so many parents bought the World Book Encyclopedia.

Well, my mother was very excited. My dad was very excited. So they bought the World Book Encyclopedia. My mother bought it because she thought it would give an opportunity to learn more about Black folks.

Well, it didn't. I think it was George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington were the two Blacks in the World Book Encyclopedia at the time. But at our high school, at the high school from which I graduated, there was a public library. I lived four blocks from there. We spent a lot of time in the public library, and on our high school campus was the Black community college. The junior college campus was on my high school campus. So one of the great honors that I've had is I've been able to go back and speak to what is now the Lincoln High School Academy.

So nobody really pushed education. It was just part of your being. One of my nurse role models was a Sunday school teacher. She was the school nurse in a Black school. I still remember her name, Miss Austin.

JW: I worked with Flossie Holland at the YWCA. I don't know if you ever knew her. Her husband, J. B., was the principal at the school that is now the location of the Brown v. Board. She would often talk about how the Black teachers had excelled in their educational achievements, and that she was sorry that they were not getting placed in the White schools the way they should have been after the desegregation came.

You transcended all of those barriers that society tried to put in front of you throughout your whole career.

BS: Yes, and at the time, I'm not sure I was fully aware that there were barriers.

JW: Sure.

BS: This was the neighborhood in which I lived. These were the people who cheered us on. I was a member of the Brownies and the Girl Scouts. I ultimately ended up on the Girl Scouts Board.

JW: The national Board?

BS: The national Board.

JW: So did I.

BS: I don't think we were there at the same time.

JW: No, we weren't.

BS: So I'm not sure I ever consciously perceived them as barriers, but everything in my environment said, "You've got to be your best," unfortunately all the time, and unfortunately I was not my best all the time.

JW: That's a hard standard. That's an interesting way to put it though. Let's go back and look a little bit at public service. What did John Carlin say to you when he asked you to be Secretary of Health and Environment because by now, you've been to Washington, and you've come back, right?

BS: Let's see. I have to look. It's been so many years.

JW: I understand.

BS: I was Director of Services for Children and Youth and then went to the Kansas Department on Aging. I had not been to Washington yet. I went to Washington from the Department on Aging.

JW: Right, and then you came back to be Health and Environment.

BS: Health and Environment Secretary. I don't remember what he said. But let me go back just a little bit. When I became Director of Services for Children and Youth, in 1974 and '75, I filed a lawsuit against the Kansas Department of Education and two individuals in their individual capacity. And I filed that lawsuit because at the time, I was working in my community, Lawrence, Kansas, to work with other parents to create an organization called the Lawrence Branch of Concerned Black Parents.

So when I applied for this job and didn't get it and it was clearly based on my race and maybe my gender, but certainly my race, I went to the Civil Rights Commission, filed a suit. It ultimately went to court. It ultimately went to appellate court and was upheld. I was upheld.

When I became Director of Services for Children and Youth, my appointment was slowed down. Eventually Colonel Richards, you may remember Colonel Richards.

JW: I remember Bill Richards very well.

BS: Yes, he was an NAACP man. He did his magic, and I was ultimately appointed. But, that particular lawsuit has followed me throughout my career because if you look me up, you're going to find that.

JW: Is that a negative?

BS: Not for me, but it may be for people who are doing the hiring. But it wasn't for John Carlin.

JW: Interesting, yes. He served two terms as Governor. You had the longest run as a Secretary in his Cabinet during the time you were with Health and Environment.

BS: Yes.

JW: That's when I remember you most vividly because I was on that Health and Welfare Committee. You just had a wealth of information, a lot of good ideas, and we were always passing bills out of that committee to do something to improve the health. Do you remember or do you have any recollection of something that you thought was particularly outstanding because health was not at the forefront of the public conversation at that time.

BS: Well, remember, I go back to that principle, "Is it good for the children?"

JW: Right.

BS: When I took over Health and Environment, it was a new experience for the people in Health and Environment, a Black, woman, nurse.

JW: And you reorganized them.

BS: I reorganized them, and it's interesting you should bring that up because one of the things that I did in preparation for this was to look up a study that was done on the reorganization. At

the time, I did not speak to that paper. I thought I brought it. I thought I had it, but I don't see it right now. It was done by Steven Maynard-Moody at the University of Kansas. He did it on the reorganization, and one of the ways he described me in that was as "Barbara Sabol, the outsider."

Well, I wasn't an outsider to government.

JW: No.

BS: I wasn't an outsider to working with the legislature, but what he did was to divide the work into two categories: Crumbine Era and what he called the Sabol Era. If you read that paper, you will see some very subtle—to other people, it wasn't subtle to me at the time—references to the reorganization that when they reviewed or interviewed the informants, the informants could give them no real reason why the Crumbine Era ended.

I could look at the department and give you real reasons. There were no people of color. The Black infant mortality rate was way too high. The location of sanitary landfills and others things were disproportionately in poor communities. And then on top of everything else, we had Furley. Do you remember Furley?

JW: I remember Furley.

BS: The residents of Furley^[1] contacted me right after I got the appointment. There was a woman there, a Sherilyn Dienst. She had been keeping records and had materials, and I think she was the first advocate that I met with when I took the job. Sherilyn Dienst came. She came with a group of her Wichita area people who were farmers in that area for the most part, and an older gentleman was making the presentation. He goes on and on, and he's describing this and that. And finally I said, "Sir, what you're saying must be important, but I don't understand a word you're saying." And one of the gentlemen spoke up and said, "Thank god!" He said, "He's got the map upside down!" So it helped me build credibility with that group because I was willing to say, "I don't know what you're talking about." So that's Point #1.

Point #2 with Health and Environment is that it was a change in culture. When I got there, two of the environmental leaders invited me to their office to welcome me and dah, dah, dah, and said the following, and I will never forget it. "Don't worry about a thing. We will take care of you." And I'm looking at this picture on his wall, which is a picture of John Wayne, and I'm thinking, "Okay. You're going to take care of me." I said, "Well, thank you very much. I appreciate it," blahdy, blahdy, blah, but I knew what that might mean, which was part of why we had to get that place reorganized as expeditiously as possible.

The other variable was we had Furley, and I had scheduled a visit to Furley with some of the environmental staff. I said to myself, "Sabol, these are all men. You're not hardly going to get in the car with these all men and go to Furley." So I invite one of the women attorneys, Pat Casey.

JW: Oh, I remember Pat.

BS: Pat was excellent. Pat went with me, and it was quite startling to my compatriots for Pat and I to walk out together. But, anyway, we get to Furley. I have read the regulations. I have read EPA findings. I have done my homework. And we get to Furley, and the first thing I notice is they're supposed to have a lock on the gate. No lock on the gate. We drive in.

The second thing I notice is the ambiance is one of friendliness and happiness and giggling. I'm going, "I thought we were regulating, not fraternizing." Again, that reinforced the notion that we needed to do a reorganization.

And in the paper that I thought I brought but I can't seem to locate here, Steven Maynard-Moody talks about that it's a status drama, these reorganizations, and that one of the things that you're doing is changing the expectations, and, yes, I was changing the expectation. It was a difficult, difficult dance, but we did it.

You'll get a kick out of this. When I had my first briefings, I invited Dr. Norge Jerome. That's not a name you probably know.

JW: I don't remember.

BS: Norge Jerome was on the faculty of the University of Kansas Medical Center. She was a nutritional anthropologist, and she just recently passed away last month, a brilliant, brilliant woman. I had worked with her before, and I invited her down, and I said, "Norge, I want you to come. You don't have to say anything. I don't want you to say anything. All I want you to do is just sit there with a notepad and act like you're taking notes. You don't even have to take notes." I said, "But what I want to know is, what are the interactions here?"

And one of the things that I learned is they wanted to tell me rather than do an appropriate briefing, which is "Here are the issues. Here are the statutes that undergird that."

BS: No, they just wanted to tell me what to do and tell me what I should do and tell me what they did rather than describing the situation in which we found ourselves and then trying to work together to develop some kind of strategy, strategic plan to address the issues. But I had done my homework. I'd get up at 2:00 every morning and start reading regulations. And in the EPA regulations, there was one line I will never forget. It was about below-ground burial and hazardous waste. The question was, according to EPA, the question is not **if** it will leak, the question is "When will it leak?"

BS: So for me, Furley was one of the major issues, and with the help of a lot of people across the state of Kansas, because remember I'd been Secretary for Aging. I knew somebody in 105 counties in Kansas. All I had to do was pick up the phone and say, "Look here, this is happening," and we got a prohibition against the below-ground burial of hazardous waste. And I think it still stands today.

JW: I think it still stands. David would know that for sure. He's nodding and saying yes. Environmental issues were very much a part of where David Heinemann spent time [in the legislature].

BS: I mean, come on, people!

JW: Yes.

BS: The lesson here is we have to listen to the people. We have to listen to the people. The people told them there was groundwater there. They said, "Don't worry about it. Don't worry. We can engineer this. We can do this." But EPA is saying, "No, you can't." The question is when it will leak, and it did.

JW: Do you think their treatment of you as a new Secretary was dismissive just because you were a female?

BS: I think it was because I was a nurse, I was a female, and I was Black.

JW: So you had it all.

BS: Three strikes, and you're out. But you can't, for me, I had to decide what was a petty nuisance and what was a real issue. And to the degree that you can get distracted by petty issues, you can't deal with the real issues. You can't.

JW: How did you learn that? That is so difficult.

BS: Well, I think I was learning it from K through on. You have to keep your eye on the prize. And the prize was the waters of the state belonged to the people of the state. You can't have people going around putting—

JW: Putting stuff in it, yes.

BS: And there were two other things I would mention. One is, the low-level radioactive waste compact.

JW: Yes, I remember that we did that.

BS: Oh, gosh. Well, here I'm representing Kansas in the compact, this Black woman nurse.

And the other issue was injection wells. Governor Carlin authorized the study group to look at the issue of injection wells. I'd like to read that study again because there were some minority reports, and there were some recommendations for follow-up action, and I kind of wonder in my mind what happened with that report. As administrations changed, priorities changed. That may not have been a priority.

But I had the good fortune of working with Pete Loux^[2] and Pete was good. Pete was good.

JW: He was a head taller than anybody else down there.

BS: He was good.

JW: He was very important to things getting passed in the Kansas legislature.

BS: So for children and youth, there were two advocates that stand out in my mind—SuEllen Fried^[3].

JW: Yes.

BS: And Forrest Swall^[4].

JW: Yes.

BS: Forrest Swall was an extraordinary advocate around the juvenile code and status offenders.

JW: And he came to the legislature.

BS: Oh, yes.

JW: I mean, he became a legislator.

BS: Oh, he did?

JW: He did. He finally got tired of being an activist, and he ran for office.

BS: I'll be darned. I missed, maybe I was gone by then. I don't know.

JW: I think you were somewhere off saving another part of the world.

BS: There's one thing I will mention about my tenure in New York. And the one thing I'll mention is I was sworn in on Harriet Tubman's Bible.

JW: Oh, my word.

BS: I put my hand on that Bible, and [New York City Mayor] David Dinkins swore me in. So the weight of the history of this activist, this person, this woman, and she was a nurse, not by the nursing standards of today, of course, but she was a nurse. So the symbolism and my grandson held the Bible for me. He was a little toddler. Now I'm a great-great-grandmother.

JW: That's impressive.

BS: So things have come together to move me along this trajectory, and it's been—I've gone to South Africa with David Dinkins as part of his delegation. I've worked for [Washington DC Mayor] Marion Barry through the Office of Policy and Planning in the Department of Human Services. I'll tell you this story, and I haven't told it in many places. When I worked in DC for the Office of Policy and Planning in the Department of Human Services, I was working for a gentleman, James Buford, who used to teach at the high school where I went. He taught my sister who was younger, although I don't admit that many places. I say she's the older sister.

So, anyway, I went to work for Mr. Buford. Mr. Buford was leaving, and the mayor called me up, Mayor Barry, and said, "Why don't you take this job?" So I interviewed with this one, and I interviewed with that one, and I interviewed with this one, but nobody made me a job offer. I wasn't seeking the job.

In the meantime, John Carlin calls and says, "Will you consider KDH and E? And it was a chance to get to Kansas. My parents were getting older. Yes. So I said yes. After I said yes and submitted my resignation, the mayor said, "Call him up and tell him you're not coming." I said, "No, my word is my bond. I'm gone."

And I often wonder if the timing had just been a little bit different, I may not have been Secretary of Health and Environment.

JW: But you were in the right place. He needed a Secretary. He knew of your work, and Kansas was home.

BS: Yes. Can I tell you a funny story?

JW: Sure.

BS: Governor Carlin and I were on some kind of trip, speaking to groups. I spoke at church groups. I spoke at League of Women Voters groups. Wherever two or more were gathered, I was willing to go and speak, as Mary Ann will tell you.

But the governor is saying something to this audience, and he's expressing his gratitude and his pleasure that he's been able to have two Blacks in his Cabinet. I'm thinking to myself, "I wonder who this other one was."

When I get up to speak, I say, "Ladies and gentlemen, I need to clarify one thing that the governor said. He has not had two Blacks. He's had one Black two times." And, of course, everybody did exactly what you're doing. They just cracked up. Fortunately, the governor did, too.

JW: He does have a sense of humor.

BS: He does have a sense of humor.

JW: One Black woman twice.

BS: Twice. The other thing I mentioned is I made a commitment that I might be the first, but I won't be the only.

JW: That's tough.

BS: Whatever I did, I will not be the only. Somebody can follow me based on my record, and that John Carlin hired me twice says something.

JW: Yes. I have a couple more questions, and then I want to give you some time to tell the story that you told me earlier about why you're doing this program for kids that are aging out of foster care. I think that's a good thing to end the interview on.

BS: Okay.

JW: A lot of these questions we've talked about. As you look back, and this is retrospective now about your whole career, what are you most proud of? What one thing do you really want to hold up as you go through the pearly gates and say, "I got this done?"

BS: That's a very tough one.

JW: I know it is.

BS: For Kansas, on the health side, it would be working with Petey Cerf and the whole group of aging advocates to try to work on nurse-staff ratios in nursing homes.

JW: I remember that she was really big on that.

BS: What we were able to get done during my tenure at least was to require that aides who provided care in nursing homes had to have some training before they started taking care of the people. I mean, that makes some logic. So that's one thing I'm very proud of.

I'm proud of the work that we did on the environment, the below-ground burial of hazardous waste, but if I had to pick one thing, it would be in New York City, and that was implementation of the Family Preservation Program in which the objective was—there were 50,000 children in foster care when I went to New York City. But the objective was to keep these children safely, safely, safely in their own homes with their parents or guardians or caregivers, and a piece of that was kinship care, making sure that these relatives who took in sometimes four or five siblings got paid what we would pay foster parents for caring for these children. Can you imagine? And you end up with four children?

The other thing I would say as a public policy matter, my policies were really pretty simple, and I tried to say them in a way that people could understand, and we could develop a plan, and that was we had a border baby crisis. Remember, I was in New York City during the AIDS crisis, the crack crisis, and we had all of these infants, and people wanted to build orphanages, and I said no. No, orphanages are not the answer. Getting these kids, the principle was we're going to treat each of these kids with HIV positive and AIDS as if they're going to live, not as if they're going to die, as if they're going to live.

And when you adopt that as a principle, that guides the policies and the practices that you implement. Everywhere I've gone, I've always worked for people who are smarter than me, and I've always hired people who are smarter than me.

JW: You can't go wrong.

BS: No. As long as the value system is there that guides the work that you're doing, and you can't do it by yourself. As an agency, you can't do it by yourself.

JW: You always seem to have known what was important, what your values were. Take care of the kids. Watch out for this. Where does that come from? Is that life experience? Is it from your religious beliefs or from your parents?

BS: I think it was more from my mom. My mom told this story once. Her mother died early. She was a child. She remembers, I don't know if she really remembered or if it was a story that was passed down to her, but her mother on her deathbed said to her husband, Charlie Johnson, "Charlie, keep these children together." And I heard that story.

JW: And you heard it.

BS: And I heard it, and it meant something. It got embedded in the DNA. "Charlie, keep these children together."

JW: Did the Kellogg Foundation stint, you worked for them for a long time.

BS: Ten years.

JW: Their whole point was kinship care and foster care.

BS: Their whole point was children and health. I was on the health team. There aren't many people—oh, there probably are a lot of people, but I was one who was blessed with meeting all of these extraordinary people: icons in the civil rights movement, icons in the church, Reverend Forbes, Reverend Herb Daughtry.

Being [undercover](#) as a Public Welfare Commissioner^[5] was another kind of turning point event for me, seeing my whole system from the viewpoint of a client. I had some ideas about it, but I hadn't really experienced it. So there were some lynchpin experiences, but I need to go back because you asked a very important question earlier, and I can't remember exactly how you articulated the question.

But at Health and Environment, I was trying to reorganize and bring Health and Environment closer together and address some of these disparity issues and Black infant mortality issues. Someone painted graffiti in one of the bathrooms out at Forbes. And I just had it painted over. So am I to lose my focus by focusing on that, which was upsetting to me, but for the vast majority of the people of Kansas, that wouldn't be their priority.

I recognized I was never elected to anything. Never. Nobody elected me to any of these positions. So that the legislative voice and intent was significant in terms of how I framed things, but it didn't mean that I didn't try to educate the legislators.

JW: And some of them need it. Yes. One of my questions I was going to ask you is whether or not you had ever considered running for public office.

BS: No because I don't want to get beat.

JW: Well, that's a good reason not to do it.

BS: No. I knew that about myself. That was never a consideration although I've supported many in their running. And I've encouraged my children to do it, and they look at me like—I don't even have a nurse. I didn't get a nurse out of either of my girls.

JW: Well, that's odd, yes. I found an article. It's entitled, "[A Conversation with Barbara Sabol and Henrie Treadwell.](#)" There's wonderful pictures of you all, but here's a quote out of that. You're talking about how working with her in this conversation gave you an opportunity to really sound out things. It kind of goes back to that other question I was asking you about. How do you develop those values. And you said, "A place I'd like to start is the responsibility of those in positions of power to make change. Henrie and I coined the phrase, 'power failure,' to describe our concern about the lack of leadership on certain public health issues. Too often, leaders are reluctant to take the risk of working on a certain issue if it's unpopular with their constituency. That is a power failure. Last year, a Maryland child died from an untreated tooth abscess. Those in positions of power failed to push the system to provide oral health care."

Doesn't that kind of sum up some of where you are about what you think people ought to do as they leave these agencies?

BS: Yes. They've got to be brave. They've got to understand that relationships are primary, and all else is derivative. Relationships are primary. All else is derivative. They've got to have a value system that they can test and be tested by.

I'll give you one example. I hope I haven't given you this one before. But I'm in New York City. I tell my staff, "I've just been sworn into office in April, and we've got to hit the ground running." I hired outstanding people, but they know they have to ask the question, "Is it good for the children?"

So I'm telling them to change the name of this program because it's of the old administration. We're the new administration, blahdy, blah. I'm going on and on. So there's this moment of silence among these people. Finally someone speaks up, "Well, Commissioner, that's going to cost money. We're going to have to change all the names on the doors. We have to change the forms."

I can see dollar figures running through my head. Finally somebody says, "Commissioner, how does that help the children?" That was the end of that. The program was Begin. It may still be Begin because we certainly didn't change the Begin program. It would have been superficial.

JW: It was a power failure.

BS: Yes. It would have been a power failure if we had done that because we would have been spending time on that.

JW: Now I want you to remember the story you told me on the phone when we first talked about why you're doing what you're doing with these kids that are aging out.

BS: Of foster care. Foster care is an interesting system that requires close observation because so many things can go wrong. So many things have gone wrong that the children end up there in the first place. But I didn't have any statutory authorities over children who have aged out. In effect, they're adults. I didn't have it in Kansas. I didn't have it in New York, and it was always troubling to me.

And then you see these kids couch surfing, looking for places to live. So we owned some property, my sister and I, and we said, "How can we best use this property to make a difference for children?" My father was reared on that land by his grandmother, kinship.

So we have started [Home Works USA](#), which is an LLC. We're working with the Bassuk Center in Massachusetts with Ellen Bassuk who is a renowned psychiatrist and has done groundbreaking work in family homelessness. We will eventually have fifteen, but we have built ten tiny houses. The heating and plumbing is going in as we speak so that young adults emerging out of foster care, eighteen to twenty-six, can have a launchpad where Home Works, Services Matter, and Nature Helps. We have sought grants. We have used our own personal resources and sought resources from others, financial and volunteer, and continue to do so to this day. Getting there was difficult.

If I could use this opportunity just to call out a very special person. We got turned down by the Planning and Zoning staff because you had to rezone. We got turned down by the Planning and Zoning Advisory Committee. We finally get to the [Leavenworth County] Commission, which was made up of three people, if I remember correctly, then. We had a meeting with the chair of that committee. I was there, a Black woman. My daughter was there, a Black woman. Attorney [Michael] Crow was there, a Native American. Artie Shaw was there, a psychologist, Dr. Artie Shaw, and Jake Hodson was there who was Native American. The chairman of the Board said, "A group like this hasn't appeared before me before." But we were there to explain the project, etc., etc.

We finally appear before the Board several times, and on the last time, [Commissioner] Clyde Graeber, who we had been to see to explain to him the project and what it is we were trying to do, says to the committee, and it's on the tape. I don't know. They somehow publish these things. He said to the committee, "Look, I want to go back to something Barbara said. She said this is for the children." He looked at his colleagues, and he said, "If not now, when?"

They adjourned. They voted 3-0. And we got our authorization to begin building. It had taken almost two years to get through that process. So one of the things that we have to do as a matter of policy is to figure out what's urgent and what's not and how do you make exceptions and when do you make them, and how do you make them because the children keep growing. I mean, the children's needs don't change.

JW: That's right.

BS: So we are still in the building process. We hope to have young people applying to—this is affordable rental housing.

JW: Right.

BS: And we hope to give them a launchpad, a long enough pad that they can seek education. They can seek employment opportunities. We'll have a garden. They can grow their food because nature helps. Nature heals. And we want to give these young people who can't rely on a mother and a father and a grandmother and an uncle to come to their aid.

JW: I think it's a wonderful idea. I not only wish you well, anything I can do to help? It's a much-needed thing.

BS: It's a much-needed thing.

JW: In my experience working with that grant from the Kellogg Foundation through the Villages, which is a similar group here.

BS: Yes.

JW: We didn't have anything to do with those kids when they aged out. I managed to get some in public housing, but that's not a good solution because there's no services with it. So I applaud what you're doing. You have not quit. You have continued on this journey that you've been on nonstop to make Kansas a better place, and I thank you.

BS: Thank you.

JW: Do you mind for just one minute looking at the camera and taking that mask off and letting them see, get a good picture.

BS: Oh, boy. Does my hair look good?

JW: Your hair looks good.

BS: Oh, boy. Good, got it. All right.

JW: Okay, I think we're done.

[End of File]

[1] <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1982/01/21/Furley-residents-seek-15-million-closure-of-hazardous-waste-dump/5199380437200/>

[2] Richard C. "Pete" Loux, legislative minority leader; member Kansas Corporation Commission

[3] SuEllen Fried, bullying prevention specialist, activist, child advocate

[4] Professor of Social Work, Kansas University; activist, legislator

[5] In 1987 prior to becoming Commissioner of Human Resources, Sabol “put on blue jeans and sweatshirt and paid an unannounced visit to a welfare office in midtown Manhattan.”