Dale Goter: Hello, I'm Dale Goter, retired Kansas journalist, and now assisting with the Kansas Oral History Project. Today is April 28, 2026, and I'm privileged to be visiting with former Kansas Attorney General Carla Stovall Steckline in her Garden Plain, Kansas home. General Stovall is the first and only woman elected to the office of Kansas Attorney General. During the course of this interview, we'll hear much more of her notable presence in Kansas political history.

The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation whose purpose is collecting the oral histories of various individuals who help shape public policy in Kansas over the last several decades. Our videographer today is former State Representative Dave Heinemann, and Susie Murphy is the project coordinator. The Kansas Oral History Project is supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants.

So, let's begin our conversation with Carla Stovall Steckline, the first and only woman elected to the office of Kansas Attorney General. You served two terms from 1995 to 2003. You were first appointed to the Kansas Parole Board before that and served three years from 1988 to 1991. You're a native of Marion, Kansas, and you earned your undergraduate degree from Pittsburg State University, your public administration degree from the University of Kansas, and your juris doctorate from the KU law school as well.

All right. That's enough of me talking. We're going to get to your story. Thanks for taking the time to share your story with us. Let's start from the beginning. What got you first interested in public office?

Carla Stovall Steckline: When I think back on it, I think I always was interested in government. My great-grandfather was an elected probate judge in Marion County, and while that was before my time, I think, "Maybe I had some of his DNA," and that sparked my interest. But I remember as a senior in high school going with my government teacher to Newton, Kansas to Common Cause meetings back when that was a thing.

So, after high school, when I was in college, Senator Kassebaum, Nancy Kassebaum, was running for the first time for the Senate, and I got to be her campus chairman at Pittsburg State University. Then when she was elected, I applied for and was selected to be an intern in her office for the summer. And, honestly, being an intern for Senator Kassebaum was like the greatest honor I could ever have imagined. She was so tremendous and was a role model for me forever. I just think I always was interested in government and politics.

DG: Did you have a political persuasion at the time? Did you think you were going to be a reformer? Were you going to be a conservative? What did you see yourself as?

CSS: No, I didn't have a vision like that. I always would say I became a Republican because my dad was a Democrat. In the beginning, it was that simple, just a little obstinate. But back in the day, I certainly fit well in the Republican Party. I wouldn't necessarily today, but I did back in the day.

DG: And you got your law degree, and that led you to become—you were a defense attorney? No, you were a prosecutor. You were born a prosecutor.

CSS: Well, I started—

DG: Lead us into that Crawford County experience.

CSS: I wanted to go back to Pittsburg after law school. There was a notice on the board, the employment board at the law school for a litigator down in Pittsburg, Kansas. I in college had been a bailiff with the district court, a volunteer position. I knew lawyers. I knew the judge. I knew this lawyer that had an opening in his office. I called and drove down there on a Saturday morning to have an interview, and we had a good conversation. At the end of that, he said to me, "Carla, it's been really nice talking to you, but my practice is litigation, and I just don't think Crawford County juries are ready for women in the courtroom yet." That was 1982, not 1932. So, that's how that went.

But I ended up, graduated, went back down to Pittsburg, and I started my own practice then, hung up my shingle, and did divorces, child custody, a lot of bill collection, frankly. But as a new attorney, I also had to be on the indigent criminal defense list. So, I did represent criminal defendants that didn't have their own lawyers. I saw up close the county attorney who was then in office. While the plea bargains that he gave for my clients were very good for my clients, I didn't think they were very good for justice. So, I summoned all my courage and filed and ran against him, and so defeated him, and was the first Republican elected in eighteen years down in Crawford County.

And I loved that job. I loved it. It paid part time, but I did it full time because I'm not very good at compartmentalizing. So, I was all in to be the county attorney and just loved prosecuting, wearing the white hat, being the good guy, representing the victims. It was the greatest job.

DG: The Crawford County attorney is a part-time job?

CSS: Yes.

DG: That's a good way to slide into it, I guess, without being too immersed in it.

CSS: They just expected you to because of the pay. At that time, it was $27,500, I remember. They expected you to have a private practice on the side. But I couldn't split my interest. I just did it full-time and loved it. I saw so much child sexual abuse there that I would never have imagined existed, and that was back in the day of *Miami Vice*. So, drug prosecutions were really big. We did a lot of that as well.

DG: At some point, you become visible to the political community. Somebody noticed there's a potential for you to do something more. What was the first indication that you were going to be—I assume you were recruited at some point to seek a higher office, maybe get more immersed? How did that evolve?

CSS: At some point after I was county attorney, the legislature increased the parole board from three members to five members. So, Governor Hayden's office called and asked if I would take one of those new appointments. And so I'd been visible in Republican politics as county attorney, I guess, and going to Kansas Day, that sort of thing. So, I came to the attention somehow of Governor Hayden. So, I took that appointment. While I loved being county attorney, I would never tell you I loved being on the parole board. That's tough stuff.

DG: I just happened to have a conversation with Governor Hayden this past week on something else, and I mentioned I was going to be interviewing you, and he said, "Well, make sure you remind her that I'm the one that appointed her to the parole board and got her started." But he was very complimentary of what your skill set was. He was really an influential person in your career.

CSS: That was a tremendous opportunity to be able to have a statewide position, and I saw a lot. I learned a lot. It was just tough stuff. The case that I remember the most that I'll never forget was we went to the prisons every month and interviewed inmates that were eligible for release. This one time, the inmate was an older man, and he was in for aggravate, indecent liberties with children. The children that he victimized, Dale, were his own children, but they were also his own grandchildren. He had serially raped his daughters to the point that they were impregnated, had children, and he then molested those—those victims were his children and his grandchildren. How that family could have not had intervention from the state of Kansas some way, somehow, at some time to prevent that serial abuse was just so tragic. I never forgot that.

DG: It stayed with you. That kind of thinking motivated you as attorney general as well, I assume. That's always been a point of emphasis for you. Do you think you moved the needle on that? Did you help bring more awareness? Do you think things got better for the things you were doing?

CSS: Well, eventually they did because of the work we did in the attorney general's office, the Sexually Violent Predator law. But that came down the road, came down the line a little bit.

DG: So, then it's time to think about being attorney general. How did you get into that? Who talked to you about being—did you make up your own mind? "I want to be attorney general," or were people picking you out?

CSS: When I was county attorney, I knew Bob Stephan. I had a lot of interaction with his office. And I loved being county attorney, and I saw the attorney general as the big county attorney, the county attorney for the state, if you will. And so, in the very, very back of my mind, I would have dreamed that that could be the best job ever, but I never thought it was feasible at all until I was on the parole board at the end of my term, and Bob Stephan announced he wasn't going to run again, and he was looking for somebody to support, to carry on his own legacy. I was so, so grateful to have Bob Stephan's support. And I say to this day that I don't know if I ever would have been elected attorney general without Bob's support. He was tremendous and so well respected across Kansas.

DG: He was. The office of attorney general has always had a certain notoriety for lack of a better word going back to Curt Schneider, Vern Miller from Wichita. Bob Stephan was a unique individual. As a journalist, I know we really admired him for his interest in open records and open meetings. So, you're stepping into an office, and now, of course, we have Kris Kobach who makes headlines on his own. Did you see it as that kind of position where you have to live up to some expectations of making a name for yourself in some way, given the office's more visibility?

CSS: Not really. I think the office, as Bob always used to say, was a tremendous bully pulpit that you could use for whatever causes you really cared about. But it wasn't so much an intention to do that. It was the issues that crossed the desk and the way that things come about. But I was so fortunate to be elected because that wasn't a given at all. That primary, as you may remember, was very contested. When I got in with Bob's support, I was the only person in the race at that time. But it wasn't very long before Wint Winter Jr. of Lawrence got into the race. And Wint was a state senator. His father had been a state senator with the same name, Winter Sr. and Jr. So, Wint sort of had double name ID. He had a great network at KU, and his family was in banking. So, they had a lot of money. He had all the things that I did not have—no statewide name ID, no big network, and certainly not family money. If he had gotten in first, I'm not positive that I would have filed to run. But because I was in first, I had too much pride not to continue the race, and I just had so much fire in the belly, frankly, to win that race. I wanted to be attorney general more than anything.

Then Mike Harris got in the race. Mike was also a state senator, and Mike was from what we used to back in the day call "the Religious Right," and it was the three of us that ran. I didn't have the advantages to start with. I did have the advantages of working hard and having that fire in the belly. So, I was at every county fair, every parade, every bean feed. Nancy Lindberg, my campaign manager, put me everywhere, and we won. We prevailed with only 3,000 votes at the end of the night on that primary. That was close back in the day, and I used to be kind of embarrassed about that until President Bush won by only 600 votes, and I thought, "Well, you know what? Three thousand votes is a pretty good margin."

DG: Campaigning back then was a lot different than now—no social media, no media access, more of a face-to-face, door-to-door kind of a thing although mass media was a little more accessible then, more influential, I guess, if you had TV advertising and a statewide office. You had to go down that route, and you had to raise quite a bit of money, didn't you?

CSS: Right, and billboards. Nancy was very good about using billboards. That was not necessarily a new thing, but we really used that a lot because it was less expensive obviously than television.

DG: Right. Nancy Lindberg was with KNEA?

CSS: That was a long time before that, but she'd been with Bob Stephan as his legislative director, and she came with me, too, then.

DG: Remind me who you ran against. Who was the Democrat at that point?

CSS: Richard Schodorf from Wichita. He was in the Consumer Protection division in the DA's office here.

DG: I play golf with him occasionally in Wichita. He's quite a personality himself.

CSS: Yes.

DG: You had a relatively easy time for re-election, obviously. I think I read you had 75 percent of the vote. You went from a very narrow margin to—you did something right along the way. What were you doing? You took the office. What did you set your sights on? What was handed to you to be responsible for that made an impact on our lives?

CSS: Well, what was happening during my campaign was the tragic case of Stephanie Schmidt. She was a young college student at Pittsburg State University, my alma mater. Stephanie worked in a restaurant, and one night accepted a ride home from a coworker. That coworker was a convicted rapist, having raped a community college student, done his time, got paroled, was working at this restaurant. None of the young college waitresses at that restaurant knew what his background was. Stephanie would never have taken a ride home from him had she known that.

So, it took thirty days for her to be found. He had raped and murdered her. Her parents then were so active in saying, "This can't happen. This can't happen again to somebody else's family." So, they formed a task force, Speak Out for Stephanie, had several proposals which were adopted. One was the Sexually Violent Predator Law. That became the biggest issue really in my term in office was the privilege of working in defending that law. And it came about from the state of Washington. There was a twenty-nine-year-old, young ad executive in Seattle on her way home from the office. She went to the parking garage. There she was abducted by a rapist, a convicted rapist who was in work release in downtown Seattle. He walked away simply from that work release, abducted Diane Ballasiotes. It took a week for her to be found after he raped and murdered her.

Not very long after that, in Tacoma, Washington, a little boy, six or seven years old, was riding his bicycle in the neighborhood park. He was attacked, sexually assaulted. His penis was actually severed by this molester. The molester was a convicted child molester who lived nearby. Again, nobody knew that in the community. So, the state of Washington, the people were incensed that this could be allowed to happen. That governor put together a task force. One of the major suggestions they had was this Sexually Violent Predator Law. It would say that when someone is convicted of rape, child molestation, and they're getting near the completion of their prison sentence, instead of releasing them on parole, which there was no option at that time. When the sentence is over, they have to go. Instead of that, you could have them evaluated to see if they have a mental abnormality or a personality disorder that makes them likely to reoffend. And if so, if the judge and jury go along with that finding, instead of releasing them to the street, you can civilly commit them. You take them from the criminal side, and you put them on the mental health side. They're there for treatment.

So, that law passed in Kansas as well, of course, as in Washington state and some other states. Shortly after that law passed, there was a man named Leroy Hendricks who was getting ready to be released from prison. He was a child molester, a forty-year history of molesting children. His victim pool was so large. He was convicted of molesting little children and older kids, boys and girls, family members and strangers, which was very unusual for a pedophile. Usually they target a specific demographic, but not him.

So, the Sedgwick County DA filed to have him civilly committed. She did a masterful job. The judge and jury went along, found him to be a sexually violent predator. He appealed that, of course. The Kansas Supreme Court struck down the law and said it was unconstitutional. It violated double jeopardy and ex post facto. So, our office then stepped in and asked the United States Supreme Court for cert [writs of certiorari] to take a look at that because Kansas struck it down. The state of Washington upheld it. So, there's a conflict of laws, and that's when the US Supreme Court likes to step in and clear up that discrepancy.

DG: That must have given you some satisfaction that you did something—that obviously not turning him loose protected some people that otherwise would not have been protected. Serial offenders are—

CSS: At this point in time, twenty states have the law, and the District of Columbia, and the federal government and approximately 6,000 people have been civilly committed under those laws. So, think of all the people that are protected that aren't victims, because of the protection of that law.

DG: We talked about this before. Did that also generate the sexual offender registration, that you have to give notice to your neighborhood?

CSS: Right, Megan's Law. Megan's Law came from New Jersey. That was a part of that, that there needs to be registration and notice. So, one of the things that we did in office was to have the KBI publish that sex offender registration list on their website so that it was easily accessible. It used to be only available in sheriffs' departments, but the KBI published it.

DG: It must have been hard to sleep at night sometimes, dealing with people like that, especially when you're responsible. That's one of the things you get a lot of credit for doing is setting that in motion and bringing that protection to Kansans. That's a notable thing.

CSS: And to have the opportunity to argue before the United States Supreme Court was—for a lawyer, it's the Super Bowl. And to win is like winning the Super Bowl. It was an incredible opportunity. At that time, only nine Kansas attorneys general had been able to argue before the Supreme Court. That was a privilege. The term that I argued, there were 208 lawyers who argued, and only 14 percent of them were women. So, that was an additional privilege to be able to do that, too. It clearly was the highlight of my professional career.

And then I went back, I have to say, a couple years later on the same law, back before the US Supreme Court. The Hendricks case, they only upheld 5-4. The second case we did, they upheld 9-0.

DG: Wow. Let's turn to something maybe that wasn't quite as difficult. You had played a role in the tobacco settlement. At that time, it was a big deal. Big Tobacco was in the sights and changed a lot of things. Talk about that one.

CSS: When I first was elected attorney general, I met all the other attorneys general, of course, and Mike Moore, the Mississippi attorney general was pursuing that litigation against the tobacco companies. I remember meeting Mike and him telling me what he was doing, and I kind of turned aside and rolled my eyes, like "Talk about tilting at windmills. You're going to try to sue Big Tobacco."

But it wasn't very long before I understood why and why we should do that. Tobacco marketed to children, and we were learning that. In Kansas, thirty children every day started smoking. That was higher than the national average. Once a child starts smoking, the odds of them continuing are great.

So, there was that issue from a Kansas perspective, and also that the state of Kansas paid 800 million dollars every year in Medicaid-related health care costs for smokers. While adults certainly had the agency to make their own decision and start smoking, the state of Kansas didn't get a say-so about that and yet had to incur those significant costs. It made sense, the more I learned and studied, for Kansas to get into that litigation.

DG: And the things that flowed from that, there was the Children's Cabinet. There were structured programs that used that money to really accomplish quite a bit in the state.

CSS: Right. With the settlement, Kansas, the settlement itself was the largest commercial settlement in the history of the world at that time. It maybe still is. I don't know. The total settlement was 368 billion dollars. And what's remarkable is, up until that lawsuit, tobacco had never paid a dime. They'd been being sued since the 1950s, but never, ever lost. So, the settlement was for 368 billion. Kansas's share of that was 1.6 billion dollars, and the legislature rightly, in my opinion, dedicated that money to children's programs and set up the Children's Cabinet to help administer that.

In years since that was set up, the legislature took some of that money to plug short falls in the state general fund. That hasn't happened now since 2019, but about 280 million of it was diverted to just general business of the state.

DG: But you did send a message that nothing's off limits. A big business that offends on a grand scale has to be held accountable. That kind of opened the door for some other things later on?

CSS: Not just big companies offended, it's they broke the law. They said they were going to have this objective research council, and they were going to publish all the information that came about from that, but they didn't. They held closely any of the damaging information that their scientists proved, that nicotine is addictive. Yes, it causes cancer and those kinds of things. So, one of the results of the litigation is the companies agreed to get rid of Joe Camel, get rid of the Marlboro Man, no billboards, no vending machines, certainly no marketing to children, and we

set up the Tobacco Document Library with millions of documents that they had previously guarded with all their authority at the University of California in San Francisco. So, now anybody can go and look at those documents and see what it was that tobacco was hiding from us intentionally all those years.

DG: When you think of things that change public life, that really is a big deal. When you think what smoking was back then, and you look at today. What a quantum leap that was, and it all starts with that kind of effort to put them in the spotlight.

CSS: It started—I give total credit for the impetus to Mike Moore, the Mississippi attorney general. That took unbelievable brilliance, insight, vision, and courage to try to tackle Big Tobacco. They had never lost a lawsuit prior to that, and they'd been sued since the fifties. So, that was tremendous.

The role Kansas played in that; I have to brag about our counsel—tobacco had always gotten away with protecting their documents because they had a Committee of Counsel. All of the tobacco companies' General Counsels were together, and they shared documents back and forth. We know if you have an attorney, and you communicate with your attorney, anything said or written is privileged. Well, they took that and made it larger to say, "Any of us that share between each other, among each other, those documents are also protected," and they got away with that for years in litigation.

But our Kansas counsel, Jeff Chanay, Stew Entz, challenged that and said, "In Kansas, we don't have a joint defense privilege, and you can't stand behind that because it doesn't exist," and Judge Jackson agreed with that. When his decision came down, that decision made the news, and the *LA Times*, the *Washington Post*, and every major publication in between, that helped break the log jam of them protecting documents. Once the documents were going to be public, the tide really turned then because everything would be out in the open.

DG: Well, you mentioned a log jam, that gets us to water, which is another major issue of the day that you participated in. There were lawsuits against our neighboring states. Tell us about that. You got into that before you were attorney general, right, involvement in the—

CSS: No, I just continued Bob Stephan's lawsuit against Colorado. He started it, and then we continued it when we were in office. We prevailed in the US Supreme Court. We're still fighting with Colorado over enforcing the compact even yet today, but generally they're in compliance. I sued Nebraska over the Republican River compact in 1998, and that's coincidentally how I had the first significant contact with my now husband was because—

DG: I was going to ask you if you wanted to share that story. It's a charming little story.

CSS: I love that story because of how that ended up, of course.

DG: So, set that up. Where was he and where were you at that point?

CSS: Larry Steckline, Larry was the voice of Kansas agriculture on TV, radio, doing ag business, and I was attorney general, of course. Well, when I sued Nebraska, the governor of Nebraska called Larry directly and just said, "What is going on with your attorney general? Why is she suing? Why won't she sit down at the table to negotiate?" And Larry was unaware of the issues. So, he said, "Well, I don't know, but I'll find out."

Well, he went on the air and reiterated Governor Nelson's criticisms of me for suing. So, then my people called Larry's people to say, "Will you give the attorney general equal time?" He said yes. I was in Topeka at the KSN station, up there, Channel 3, and then Larry was in Wichita. So, we didn't meet in person, but we saw each other on the monitors. For that entire three-minute interview, we argued. We had completely opposite positions, and I left that interview saying, "That is the most independent, bullheaded, stubborn man I have ever met in my life. He's not listening to me." I knew I was right, and the US Supreme Court eventually said that the lawsuit was right on Kansas's part. Nebraska had stolen. But I like to remind him of that, Dale. But I'd also say now that we're married that we had our first argument before we had our first date. That was good to get that out of the way.

DG: Amazing. What else in your tenure—am I leaving something out that you'd want to highlight in those years?

CSS: We did a lot for domestic violence as well. In 1991, one of my best friends was murdered by her husband. I always try to honor Regina with work I did on domestic violence. We established the Victim Rights Conference, the Attorney General's Victim Rights Conference. We established the hotline so that victims of domestic violence and sexual assault had a 1-800 number to call for help, not just to report the crime certainly, but for help in resources. It was a statewide number, but it could access help across the state, and that's still in existence today. That was important to me as well.

DG: That's one that seems to defy resolution. It's the #1 risk for a police officer, the violence that comes.

CSS: Right.

DG: And it seems like we're spinning our wheels a lot. Did you get the sense then that it's just hard to deal with it?

CSS: It's very difficult. It's hard to break that cycle. And kids that are raised in a home with domestic violence often find their own homes with domestic violence, either as victims or as perpetrators. It's a horrible cycle, and the danger obviously to women in that situation is grave bodily harm and death. Domestic violence is the single most dangerous situation for women. It takes more lives of women than all other causes, but it's also dangerous for children who live in those homes, too. It's tragic.

DG: Do you see anything that should be done differently, with all that experience you've had, watching that play out? It just seems like it never gets any better. People like Amanda Meyers who runs the Wichita Family Crisis Center does wonderful work, but it's like they're always on

the front line in the battles there, and you just wonder, "Is there anything being done on the other end?"

CSS: Not that I know. It's a society problem. I mean, the consequences are so tragic. I don't know how we get in there earlier to try to put a stop to it. I don't know.

DG: Okay, I don't want to leave anything out.

CSS: We did a lot in consumer protection. We were very active there. We had fines and penalties that we assessed for over seven-and-a-half million dollars. We saved Kansas consumers thirteen million during that time. But we really took the lead nationally on Internet pharmacies, which is kind of ironic because today, that's not such a bad concept, but back in the 1990s, that was the Wild West, and they were not regulated. They were not licensed. They were not legitimate. They were just a sort of 1-800 number you could call and have a pretend prescription, I'll say, and get Viagra, Propecia for hair loss, and a weight loss drug. Those were the three popular ones, but we really were very active in trying to shut that down, and we did a lot with scams on the elderly. That always morally was just so reprehensible that people would prey on elderly folks who were living on Social Security and trustworthy—they trusted people because they themselves were trustworthy, and it backfired on them so many times. That was so tragic.

DG: So, you completed your first term. You had to run for re-election. You win with 75 percent of the vote. Something happened in those first four years. Obviously, you—did you sense that you had a similar mind to the public, that you did something really good to have that reward? It must have been rewarding to get an overwhelming response like that your second term.

CSS: It's humbling, gratifying. It was fabulous.

DG: Remind me who you ran against the second time. I shouldn't ask those questions if I don't know the answer. I'm sorry.

CSS: It was a Democrat lawyer from Topeka who simply got in the race because he was a firm believer in the two-party system and just didn't want me to be unopposed. His first name was Dan. I can't say his second name. I don't remember it. When we would do debates, public appearances together, he would say to whoever was there, "You'll win no matter who you elect, whether you elect me or whether you elect Carla."

DG: Was that Dan Lykins?

CSS: I think maybe that is.

DG: I think he might in the primary, didn't he run against Fred Phelps's son?

CSS: Maybe.

DG: I did a program on Channel 8. They drove down from Topeka together to be on this program together. Fred Phelps Jr. was a nice guy. The family was a little crazy.

CSS: Right.

DG: They didn't have much of a chance against you. You get re-elected. There's sometimes a mandate that people think they have with that kind of a margin. Did you think you needed to do something more spectacular the second term?

CSS: No, not on purpose. I intentionally was just doing business as business came across the desk. I think it was really the result of the sex predator case that propelled me to such a great victory. People were so supportive of it. Unless you were—maybe the ACLU didn't like the law so much, and I know Nina Totenberg on NPR didn't like the law, but for Joe Citizen, people loved it because it protected women and children from repeat molesters and rapists. It had tremendous support, and that's I'm sure why my margin was so great.

DG: Now we're going to talk a little politics. You're in that world.

CSS: I was.

DG: You're kind of seen as the heir apparent to the governor's office. That's just kind of the way it works in Republican politics. With that great success, you were being groomed for that. You entered the race. How did you decide to get in and then ultimately to get out?

CSS: Well, in 2000, before the governor's race, in 2000, I announced I wasn't even going to run for attorney general again. I wasn't going to run for anything. I really wanted a change of pace. I loved being attorney general. It was the greatest privilege of my life, but I thought maybe I wanted to try something else. I didn't know what really, but I wanted to experience something else. So, I said I wasn't going to run.

Then 9/11 happened, and it changed everything in so many ways. I thought instead of pursuing my own goals, maybe what I needed to do was more public service because I did have strong support. I was very blessed to have great support. So, I thought maybe that's what I should do.

So, I got in the race, but from Day One, I never had that fire in the belly that I knew it took to win, and that I had for attorney general. I regretted it from Day One. So, before very long, I got out of the race because it just wasn't right. I never wanted to be governor. That was never my goal. I loved being attorney general. I never wanted to be governor, and I should have never gotten into the race. So, I got out so people who really wanted it and would have been good at it had a chance to do it.

DG: Again, in my conversation with Mike Hayden, he said the reason you got out was Larry Steckline—it was kind of like a Hallmark movie in a way. You're a talented politician, and you run into a circumstance, the man you're going to live with for the next thirty-something years, it had to be a tough decision. But did you get support from people understanding why you did it? Was there some resentment? As Mike said, this was a marquee race. Kathleen Sebelius was running as a Democrat, and you as a Republican, two very strong women. It was going to get a lot of national attention. Then they were a little disappointed. Did you get some pushback?

CSS: Yes. Certainly people were unhappy. A lot of people thought I handed the race to Kathleen because I got out.

DG: That's what Mike said.

CSS: But that wasn't my intention. I just knew personally it wasn't right for me to run. It just was not a good fit. The Larry piece of it was sort of a coincidence. I didn't get out because of Larry.

DG: Now you're ruining the Hallmark movie.

CSS: It just wasn't right. It was a coincidence the way things came about.

DG: But some must have recognized that's an honorable thing to do. If you're not going to have your heart in it, if you're not going to be a good governor, and to hand it off maybe to somebody else.

CSS: My running mate, Kent Glasscock, ran, and others did, too. It made room in the race for others. But Kathleen was a very strong candidate, a very good statewide officeholder, and has gone on to do good things to be in President Obama's Cabinet. It was not the end of the world that a Democrat was elected governor when Kathleen was elected.

DG: Looking back, compared to today, you two were very similar probably in political philosophies in more ways than you were different.

CSS: That's true.

DG: Not so much today. That was kind of the beginning of the Religious Right movement, the conservatives that came to the Statehouse, took that over, and leads us to where we are today. Do you think maybe you'd have changed that dynamic if you had stayed as the moderate Republican?

CSS: No. I don't think it would have made a difference. I think we would have been steamrolled just like we are now.

DG: Wow. Well, it's still a great story, nonetheless. So, you leave public office. You look at people who have long careers in politics—it was a very short tenure for you, essentially the parole board—

CSS: The county attorney, the parole board, and attorney general.

DG: When you were in the public eye at that level. You got a lot done in a short time. So, you step away. What's on your mind for the rest of your life? What's your agenda going to be other than having a great life with your husband? What else are you thinking?

CSS: When Larry and I got married, he had three children. They had spouses. We had eight grandchildren. The ninth one was born within twenty-four hours after I left the attorney general's office. To me, that was God's way of saying, "Things have changed now. You're not doing politics and government anymore. This is your life path." That little guy, Max, was the light of my life. I used to say that all of the grandchildren were mine because they lost their grandmother—Larry lost his wife in 2000—but Max was really mine because he never had another grandmother on this side. But we lost Max on September 9th, 2022, when he was nineteen years old in a tragic accident, and my father died the night of Max's rosary of a massive heart attack. Eight-and-a-half years before that, I lost my beloved mother.

So, I've certainly experienced tragedy in the years since leaving office but also great joy. We have a wonderful family. We now have five great-grandsons, one great-granddaughter, and we have two more that are due this summer, one in July, one in August, and I think we'll have many more after that, frankly. So, we have great joy, and we're very blessed.

When I first married Larry and we moved here, I used to say, "I want to put a sign out by the front door that said IBTCC, which would stand for 'Infinitely Better Than Cedar Crest' both my house and my life" - because I just have never had a regret about leaving that governor's race. But since then, I've gotten involved with a charity. I founded a charity. I'm a big knitter. This, by the way, Dale, is the most challenging piece I've ever knitted by a fabulous designer, Lucy Hague. But since I've been out of office, I have really developed that passion for knitting. It gives a peace—all the noise in your head, the stresses of life can go away when you knit. About a year and a half ago, it just occurred to me in one of those aha moments that if it does that for me, it could do the same for victims, for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. So, I founded a 501(c) 3 called PurlsofPeace.org. They can look it up on the website. We provide free knitting instruction, needles, yarn, patterns, notions to survivors. We work with the programs in Wichita. We've been with Family Crisis Center, WASAC, Stepstones, Fresh Hope Wichita, Hope Ranch for Women in providing that instruction.

The women that participate, the survivors, benefit from that. When you can focus on what's in your lap, the yarn and the needles and the pattern, all that other noise and chaos can go away. I sort of knew that intuitively, but actually there's scientific research that talks about how you can heal from trauma when your right brain and left brain interact, and certainly knitting, crocheting, lots of other hobbies can do that, too, but it actually scientifically can help with healing.

So, I'm really proud of what it is we're doing. We have two great instructors who volunteer their time, Donna and Christince, and we go to these shelters and have six-week class programs. We've done it only in Wichita for this year, but my vision is that we will take it statewide and be able to really provide that help. It doesn't get rid of domestic violence. It doesn't stop it in its tracks, but it helps the healing process.

DG: That's a wonderful cause. Well, that pretty much covers most of it. Am I missing something? Did we leave anything out on this relatively short but notable career? Just to close it, do you look back and see any missed opportunities, something you might have done differently, or are you just pretty much satisfied the way things went and take the accolades and move on?

CSS: I'm sure I could have done better, done more, accomplished more. I would never say I did it all and did it perfectly. I'm grateful for the chance I had. When I would give speeches across Kansas when I was in office, I would always end it by saying, "It's been the greatest honor and privilege of my life to serve as the 40th Kansas attorney general," and I mean that today. It was certainly the high point of my career. It was a great honor. I couldn't have done it, I don't think without Bob Stephan's support. I'm grateful for him and miss him. We're sad that he's passed. But I'm so grateful I had that opportunity. I feel like my cup runneth over that I had that great opportunity to have a career. I must have done something worthwhile to get you folks today to want me to talk about it for posterity. I'm glad that my great-grandchildren will someday be able to watch this and say, "Oh, Gigi did more than just knit and bake cookies for us." So, it's a great opportunity for me, and with all the family, with the kids and the grandkids and the great-grandkids, my niece and her children, my cup truly runneth over. I'm a very blessed woman.

DG: That's a wonderful cap to the whole thing. All that's left unsaid is "Who would have played you in the Hallmark movie?" Thank you for taking the time.

CSS: Thank you, Dale, for your interest.

DG: For the Kansas Oral History Project, I'm Dale Goter.

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