

INTERVIEW OF CARLOS MAYANS BY ERIC SEXTON, FEBRUARY 11, 2022
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, INC.

Eric Sexton: Today is February 11, 2022. I'm Eric Sexton, government affairs consultant for Foulston Siefkin law firm and formerly of Wichita State University. With me is former Representative David Heinemann who is acting as our videographer for today. We are sitting here in the House Chambers in the State Capitol to conduct an interview that is part of the Kansas Oral History Project, a collection examining the diversity of voices in public policy making in the last quarter century, in the 20th and 21st century. In these interviews, we learn about policy development through the eyes of those who are directly involved. Today I am honored to interview the Honorable Carlos Mayans who was elected to the Kansas House of Representatives and served from 1993—I think I got that right—

Carlos Mayans: Yes.

ES: To 2003. In addition, he then was elected the mayor of the City of Wichita in 2003. While in that position [legislature], he served as chair of the Public Health Committee that was instrumental in brokering a number of important initiatives for our state and a number of initiatives that were part of the economic well-being of south central Kansas. I don't want to steal our interviewee's thunder. So I will leave the rest for that for now. Carlos, can you introduce yourself?

Carlos Mayans: Well, thank you very much, first of all, Eric, for having me here today. We have known each other for a long, long time.

ES: Absolutely.

CM: I appreciate your friendship now and in the past and your entire family.

ES: Thank you.

CM: I tell you, life in America has been a very good life. I have been very blessed. My family has been very blessed. We have been able to come to America when so many of the Cuban people continue to suffer so much. I come here because my parents thought that America, while it was unknown to us at the time, was a better place than Cuba where we were born. So I don't know, we can talk more about that.

ES: We'll maybe get to that a little bit later. Next I'd like to talk a little bit about—The Kansas Oral History Project is a not-for-profit corporation created to collect oral histories of Kansans who are involved in shaping and implementing public policy. Funding for this project is provided by volunteers, individual donors, and the Humanities Kansas, a nonprofit cultural organization connecting communities with history and the ideas to strengthen civic life.

To give us a little road map for today's interview, first we're going to let you talk about your background and education and your early life and what a great story to talk about coming to America and to Conway Springs, Kansas. Then your entry into public policy, public service, and your various roles in public service and then accomplishments and mentors and other kinds of things. And then wrap up with some closing thoughts. With that, let's just get started.

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Carlos, could you tell the people here one thing that everybody should know about you?

CM: That I still have an accent.

ES: You don't have a Kansas accent.

CM: It was kind of funny because the first time that having said to me, that I had an accent, I said, "I do? Why don't you go around to Alabama and Georgia? They have accents. I don't."

ES: Right, that's awesome. Tell us a little bit about what got you to Kansas.

CM: Well, what happened was when I lived in a refugee camp, when I came from Cuba, there were five refugee camps in America. The United States had worked of the issues with the Cuban government because I came in 1963. We had had the Bay of Pigs. So there was a lot of problems between the United States and Cuba. So what happened was the United States offered to help some of the families who had children to come, but they had to come unattended. The Cuban government would not allow the parents to come.

It was a limited number of visas, and you had to know the people. You had to buy the tickets, the airplane tickets with American dollars, but they were not offered in Cuba because you had to pay in pesos. So you had to find somebody in the United States to buy the ticket for you and find their relative in Cuba and pay him in pesos. So we were able to get that done. So we got the visas, and we were put on the list.

My little sister was seven. My brother was eleven, and I was thirteen. So they came first. We did not know what refugee camp they went to. We didn't know that there were refugee camps. We didn't know what was going to happen when we got in America.

So I came a month later on April 29, 1962. I was a little worried. First of all, the way that happened was I was sitting in the front porch of my house, and the guy comes on a bicycle and gives me a telegram. I open it, and it said, "You're leaving tomorrow morning at 6:00 AM. Show up at the airport, the Cuban airport."

So I showed up, and they put me through a, what they used to call the "fish vault." My mother was the only one with me because my dad was at work on the other side of the island. He worked for an American company in the shoe business. So my mother, but she could not be close to me. None of your relatives could speak with you. It was 6:00 in the morning. I did not leave until 3:00 in the afternoon.

We had to take all of our clothes off, and they did some terrible body searches. Then we had to walk to the airplane. When we walked to the airplane, we could not look back and wave or say anything to our relatives, or we would not go.

We got into the airplane, and it was loaded with nothing but children. There were so many children, and I wonder whatever happened to the little babies that were in baby carriages that were put in the aisles. When they said the plane was taking off, I didn't believe it. I thought it

was a trick by the government, and everybody would be arrested. But we took off. So everybody clapped.

We landed in Miami somewhere around 4:00 or 5:00. When we landed there, the first thing I did when I came down was kiss the tarmac. Then they took me into a room where they interviewed me about my parents. Did they like Communism? What did they do? They took our pictures, names, those kind of things, then put me on a van with some other young people, and we went to different camps and dropped off people. We were being dropped off by our age.

So I was brought on a boys-only camp from thirteen to eighteen in the Florida Everglades, Camp Matecumbe. That was the toughest of all the others because the other ones were church affiliated, or my brother and sister went to Florida, the air base in south Florida called Florida City where it was boys on one side and girls on the other, but the boys were up to twelve.

I got to my camp. I can tell you all day about stories out of camp. I tried to find out where my brother and sister were. I found out, and I went to visit them. They had a bus that went from camp to camp. So I went and visited them. I found out where they were and we talked. So at least at some points I was able to go.

Then one day I went to visit them, and they were gone. I said, "Wait a minute." I wasn't informed that they were moving. I said, "You don't understand. My mom told me to keep an eye on them in America." They said, "They were sent to a foster home in Kansas." My office in my camp had asked me where I wanted to go. "Where in America would you like to go?" because everybody wants to stay here in Miami. That list is very long. So I said, "I don't want to go to New York, Chicago, or LA. No real Americans live there. I want to go where the real Americans live." "Where is that?" "I don't know. Kansas, Oklahoma, Wyoming, the Dakotas." And they said, "Kansas? Oh, that's where you're going." He said, "No one wants to go to Kansas."

That was on Monday. On Friday, I was on the airplane. There were four other kids with me that were coming to Kansas, three brothers and one sister, and one little girl by herself. So they put me in charge of them. We all had name tags, "If I get lost, call the Catholic Social Service."

So we went into this Delta flight. We flew to on a DC3. When the plane was coming down in Wichita, I could see cows next to the airport. I said, "Oh, this is going to be so exciting. We're going to have cowboys, and we're going to be riding a horse." I used to watch some of the TV in Cuba with Spanish subtitles. I said, "That is so exciting." Well, it wasn't like that, but it was close.

But the foster parents came and got the three brothers and the girl. There was no one to pick me up. So they took me to a group home called the Mariana Home for Boys, 313 North Seneca, Seneca and Douglas. So I lived there with about thirty-five, forty other boys, but that's not what I wanted. I said, "I want to go visit my brother and sister in their foster home."

So I went to Conway Springs, the Barcam family that had two daughters and two sons. So they already had a house full. So I went over there and I said, "I need to be with my brother and

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sister” because my mother and father told me to keep track of them. And they said, “I’m sorry. We don’t have room for you. So you cannot stay with us.”

I was very sad. I went back. “You have to find me a place where I can be close to them.” I mean, a foster home. There was a family four-and-a-half miles south of Conway Springs on a farm. The oldest boy had just left for the Army. They had twin boys that were eleven years old and one little sister about nine years old. So me being thirteen, that could be very helpful. So they took me in, the Kaneski family.

So a social worker drops me off there. He spoke very little Spanish—si, no, buenos dias, buenos noches.

ES: That was about it.

CM: So he left me there. The people were speaking English. You learn a lot of the sign language. And food I had never seen before. I had never seen peanut butter on bread. I had just never seen that. Or cottage cheese. I had never eaten cottage cheese. I had to ask them, trying to explain where that came from. But it was very, it was a nice home. I learned a lot of things. I helped them milk cows. We raised over 300 hogs and cattle, chickens. So I plowed. I cut wheat. I learned all kinds of stuff. I was at the age of fourteen driving a truck to the elevator carrying wheat and barley. So I learned a lot.

One morning, I said, “I need a big breakfast.” It was 5:30 in the morning, and my foster father said, “I want to tell you something. Before you eat breakfast, they have to eat breakfast.” He goes, “It is because of those animals that you’re able to eat.” I thought that was really powerful. I never forgot that.

So we did that, and I went to school in Conway Springs. I started in the seventh grade because I didn’t know English. Then I moved to the eighth grade a couple of months later, and I learned more. Then I went to high school after that. In one year, I covered a lot of room.

I went to St. Joseph in Conway Springs and then to Conway Springs High School. It was interesting. That’s the first time I knew young people that are not Catholics in the high school. That was kind of an interesting thing, too, that I wasn’t used to. Going to school was interesting because I’d never been to a private Catholic school where you had nuns as your teachers. She put me in the front desk I guess so I could pick up English by osmosis a lot faster. It was very nice. But we lived apart for a couple of years.

Then there was a family in College Hill. Abraham died finally. Abe died playing football at Wichita State. He was an end.

ES: I recognize the name.

CM: Back when they had leather helmets.

ES: Leather helmets, yes.

CM: So him and his wife had eight children, and some of them had left the house, but three were still at home. Actually there were five at home. When we moved in, the three of us, they took the three of us so that we could be together. We lived with them there, and then they sent all the children to Capon [?] or to [inaudible].

So that's how we ended up together until one day I am playing tennis at College Hill Park with a little guy. The net was bigger than him. His name was Henry Helgerson. I liked to hit the ball over his head, and he said, "Don't do that." I said, "Well, it's not my fault. You're little." And then my foster father drove up, and he said, "What's your dad doing here?" I said, "I have no idea. You know what? Maybe it's supper time, but it's too early."

So he comes over and says, "Your mother and father are here." I said, "What? What are you talking about? Here like in Wichita?" "No, they are in Florida at what is called Freedom House. They arrived, and they want to speak to you tonight. They'll call at 8:00. So let's come home, get ready early."

That's what we did. We waited for the call. It was like the whole world was going to change again. That's like when we go on vacation, my wife likes to pack a week ahead, I pack the same day. My suitcase has always been very small.

ES: That's awesome. Thank you for sharing that. Let's fast forward. How did that experience affect and bring you to decide to run for public office?

CM: Well, what happened was, one day, I'm sitting in my office. I had an insurance office. We put together a little Chamber of Commerce for just west side people. So we got together with a lot of people, a guy named Martin Fisher and some other people. We got people together, and we began to get to know people and some of the decision making that was being made, and I met some of the legislators because I also joined Wichita Independent, and I was on the legislative committee and on the Wichita Chamber, also on the legislative committee.

So we came here a couple of times, and we meet some of the people. Then I thought, "Hey, I could do better than that." So I didn't really know anyone, and like I said before, the first person that I talked to was the former Lieutenant Governor, Paul Dugan. I visited with him. I really didn't know too much about what philosophy Democrats or Republicans had or what was a conservative.

The one thing that I always found, America is very good at having labels.

ES: Yes.

CM: They like labels because you can put a label on a person, and you don't need to know anything else about him. As long as they have a label, you already know everything about him. But that's not really the way of life. People don't live like labels. I always felt like I was fairly independent. At one end, people would say I was an extreme right person. But here I was a closet Democrat. So I wasn't. I know who I am. The labels and the titles were meaningless to me.

But I went ahead and ran for office because I said, "This is an opportunity to give back to the people in Wichita and Kansas, what they had done for me." So it was not about power. It was not about the title. As a matter of fact, the first time I got a letter at home, it had Hon. Carlos Mayans. I called them and said, "Hey, you guys made a mistake. I'm not Vietnamese. There's no Hon Carlos." They said, "Oh, no, that's Honorable." How do you know? That's how was.

ES: That's awesome.

CM: The first time I ran, I did not really know anyone. We took some money out of our savings account, \$2,400. There was another guy in the primary and a woman. The woman won. I don't like to say that I lost my race, because that's what happened, but I won because I got my message out, and I learned a lot of things that I did not know before.

ES: Yes.

CM: So I went back to my office, and I put a sign up in my office that said, to me, a question to me, "Carlos, what are you doing today to get elected in two years?" and I had a list of items.

ES: Interesting.

CM: I did one every day. I went into the office, and I took a couple of hours to go out and perform all of those acts.

ES: What was #1 on that list? What was the first thing on that list?

CM: Get to know more people who live in Bel Meade.

ES: Awesome. Let me ask along those same lines, other than Linda being your first contributor when you took money out of your savings, who, or what group was your first campaign check?

CM: Well, obviously from us.

ES: That's what I'm saying. Other than Linda. Can you remember that? I know that a lot of times that's a seminal time with races.

CM: I will tell you something very, very funny. What happened was there was a legislator already in that seat, which I knew him very well because he was in the business community. So he came and he said, "I don't want you to run against me." He offered me some things, and I said no. "I am going to do this." I'm now more determined than anything to do that.

So I started calling people. Then a person from Boeing. I called Boeing, and I said, "Would you give me a campaign contribution?" They said, "You know what? We love you. We love you. But you're running against an incumbent, and they are going to hurt us if we give you money." I said, "Okay. Fair enough. I'll tell you what. I'm going to write your name down. The list is called "How Much Do You Love Me?" So I want you to give me \$500. That's how much you

love me.” So I did a list. I said, “I’m going to call you the next day after the election that I will win, and then I will ask you about your love.” They said, “Okay, fair enough.”

So I won the election. And then I said, “How much do you love me?” Except for one young woman, her I got [inaudible]. So I ran into her at about the third day on the floor. I was down at 176 W [office number] or something like that. I said, “Oh, hello.” I said, “Listen, I want to visit with you and tell you that you promised that you were going to love me a lot if I won, but you need to honor that. So I’ll tell what I’m going to do. I believe so much in your issues that I’m going to forgive you. Just don’t make the mistake again.”

From then on, every time there was a primary or general [election], she would send me a check on each, the first check that I would receive, early.

ES: From that group.

CM: From that group.

ES: That’s special.

CM: But it was not about the money. It was about every day, I would get a hundred palm cards in my hand. I would put them down, and I would take off. I would not stop, regardless of it being in July, 107 degrees until I came back home. I ran into a lot of people that were real interesting.

There was one guy that a dog came and started barking, and he said, “Do you know that you upset my dog?” I said, “Sir, I can tell you the last thing I expected to do today was to come here to upset your dog. It’s 107 degrees. I just want you to know who I am. I will be making decisions for you.” He looked at me. He said, “Stay here.” So he goes to the garage and he says, “Come here,” and his wife comes out. He said, “We’re Democrats, but we’re going to vote for this guy because you know what? This guy don’t take any crap from anybody.” So I said, “Thank you, Sir.” “And bring a sign.” I said, “Fair enough. Thank you.”

ES: That’s awesome. Along those lines, your life experience is so unique. When you walked that district the first time, the second time, the third time, were there interactions that you were surprised at or interactions that you were like, “I thought we were past some of these issues of ethnicity and discrimination,” or did you not see very much of that in your campaign, let alone, and then how did that manifest itself when you came to Topeka?

CM: No, there were mostly amusing things like one guy, I knocked on his door, and he opened it and I said, “I’m Carlos Mayans.” “Oh, yes, yes. You’re the Mayan guy. When I think of you, I think about the pyramids.” I said, “Well, that’s in Mexico, but you know what? That’s okay. I’m okay with that. you think about the pyramids on Voting Day.” So we had some interesting things like that.

No, I think that people were always very nice, even though they might have been—there was one woman one time that said, “I don’t want to talk to you because you have a pro-life stance,” and she went to shut the door. So I put my foot in the door and I said, “You know, that is a problem

because we need to be able to talk to each other literally about that issue and about many important issues.” I said, “Being about pro-life, it’s not just you save the baby in the womb. You’ve got education. You’ve got health care. You’ve got jobs. There’s a lot of things that are pro-life.” So we had a little discussion.

ES: Let’s talk a little bit about now you’re elected. What were some of the key things that you were able to accomplish when you came to this great Chamber that we’re in today?

CM: Well, the first thing I did is since I didn’t even know where all the bathrooms were, I decided the first duty here is I’m going to spend it just getting to know all of the media people on this staff. So I would go into the offices of the different legislators and meet the staff that they have. And every morning, I went around and visited every media outlet and get to know the people that were writing the articles. They had children, and the children played tennis or baseball, those kinds of things. So I did that, and for the first two years, I just watched.

So when I got the call after being a freshman to be the chairman of the Committee of Health, I thought, the Speaker-Elect [Tim] Shallenberger called me at home and I said, “Why don’t you give me three days to think about it?” So I told my wife. I said, “Honey, I haven’t even been the Vice Chairman. There’s more people with more experience.” She said, “Well, he believes in you. He must see something in you.” So I said okay. I called him back and said, “I’ll do it.”

So I came to visit with him and I said, “Listen.” There’s twenty-six members. I said, “I’ll make you a deal. I will take the job with one condition, that you appoint fifteen freshmen to the committee, fifteen Republican freshmen to the committee. So that way they don’t know that I don’t know anything.” He said, “Oh, okay, we’ll do it.”

So everybody was new there. We started bringing out some things. I loved the Committee of Health. There were so many committee to do, so many good things. And we did that. Sometimes we had the divisive issues that came that were sent to my committee that other years they went to a different committee. They decided to funnel it through my committee. I did not know that, that really that was going to happen.

ES: Okay.

CM: But I handled it. After a while, they wanted to route that a different way, Judiciary, Local Government, and I said, “No, listen. I’ll go ahead and take all the arrows. I don’t think the other people can take the arrows.”

ES: What was the most divisive issue? Can you tell a little bit about how you managed to get a bill to the floor, get it by your committee, and even working it through the process?

CM: Well, the first issue was actually with people who lobby in the legislature, who came to me and said, “You know what? We control the votes, and there’s nothing you can do.” So I smile and I said, “That’s a big mistake.” I said, “You have no idea how I work. We’ll see about that.”

So I developed a list of issues that those particular lobbyists wanted to be heard, and since I had all these freshmen, I called that the following pieces of legislation would not be taken up by this committee this year. All those favor say aye, all those nay. It passed. No, put them to the side.

I had no more came back to the office and one of them said, "What are you doing? Are you crazy? You can't do that to us." I said, "Well, not only did I did it to you, but what is going to happen is that the people that pay you to lobby here, they're going to question how come you can't work with me." "Okay, okay." So they sat down and worked with me.

That was the first time, that was the issue that first gained the respect from the people who brought issues to the legislature. After that, the most divisive issues were probably the life issues because all the pro-life legislation was being passed. I tried to, like I told one legislator at one time in the committee, "Look, we don't need to go and bleed to death on the floor of the House every day. Let's push some of these things together, one bill, and put it on the floor and have the discussion." But this, we take up a lot of time. We have a lot of very important issues that are very pro-life, and that's when somebody said, "I don't care about any other issue." "You don't care about health care, about having a job, about your child going to a good school? Those are pro-life issues, too." That's what I say. I said, "I'm going to tell you something. You're not going to be here very long with those ideas." She lost the election the next time.

ES: That's interesting you mentioned that. I want to touch on it. You saw life as a bigger question. If I remember correctly, your involvement with school finance and the issues that you took up relative to that for urban schools, tell us a little bit about that experience and then tying it back to probably your life experience and why that was important.

CM: Well, before I left Cuba, my mother sat me down and said, "Carlos, you're going to the United States, but you need to keep an eye on your brother and sister." "Why?" "When you go to America, work hard, educate yourself, and respect others.

So I always had that in mind, that education was very, very important, and you needed to be willing to work all the part-time jobs you needed to get to do it. So at that time the superintendent of the school in Wichita was Winston Brooks, and he was trying to get some funding, and he was incompetent.

So I met with Winston, his lobbyists and him, and the three of us walked in. He was very upset at some of the legislators that we needed the input from them. So I said, "No." I said, "This is what"—

ES: And Winston can be very colorful.

CM: Yes. I said, "This is what we're going to do. One of the schools that you are just renovating, I want you to invite this list of legislators from Sedgwick County, and I want the parents to bring in cookies and this kind of thing. No liquor. Water. And just visit with them. And I'm going to ask you some questions in front of them."

So that's what happened. Well, guess what? We came back. I put a resolution together, had them all signed, and then it passed. Then the school bond issue passed. He was very appreciative. As a matter of fact, when I left, he wanted me to be assistant superintendent. I said no thank you.

Then the media wanted to know the names of the people that signed it and the ones who did not sign it. I said, "No, that is not going to help. The fact is that we did what we were supposed to do."

So that was very important. We had one vote here. There used to be special ed. There was always every year discussion of special ed. No, because the federal government gives this much. So we are 25 percent. We need to go to 30. It was like an auction, people bringing in different types of amendments. I said, "That's it."

I get up. "Mr. Speaker, 100 percent. We're going to pay 100 percent for education, and we're going to use the lottery money to fund it, and that's what we're going to do. A hundred percent to special ed." Everybody voted no. I mean, some of the teachers unions came to see me. They said, "No, because we won't have a job. We'll lose our jobs if you vote for it." Some of the Democratic leadership told me it was a great idea, but then we'd have nothing to complain about. I was like, "Okay. I didn't realize that"—

ES: I missed that memo.

CM: There were several issues like that where you had to call the people out and wake them up. But it was fun. I always had a smile on my face about it. I remember, I might have been in the legislature maybe two or three weeks, and I came to the microphone for the first time to present something. I was scared to death. There was a legislator that came out and asked me a question that I did not know the answer to, purposely, to show how little I knew.

Well, another legislator back here, over here raised his hand like that, [Tim] Carmody, that wanted to help me because he knew the answer. I looked at him and I said, "Mr. Speaker, can I call on [Rep.] Carmody? They would like to explain that for me because they know better than I do." So he came over and explained it and he sat down. I continued. I finished. I was walking back, and she said, "Did you see how bad you looked, not knowing the answer to that?" I patted her shoulder and then said, "You think you won today. We'll see."

ES: I'm looking at the transition to your next chapter, but I want to go back to, when you were in the legislature, who was it that was a mentor to you when you came to Topeka? And what attracted you to them?

CM: I think I learned a lot from a lot of people. I don't know that there's one single person. I learned a lot of things about different people. It was interesting because we had some members, other members that they are nobodies now. But like I told some people, I said, "Listen, this person from western Kansas may be a farmer, but in their community, they are the leader. So maybe they don't have a—maybe they have an eighth grade education, but they are smart in some ways that you can't see."

So I actually tried to be around those people, but I really learned from a lot of people about a lot of different things because I think that the only way to understand the issue is to understand the person first and why that is happening and why do they believe that and not questioning, but just giving a different point of view.

I always thought that I come in with these ideas, but then I learned these other things so now my ideas are over here. They're kind of a blended. But for some reasons, some people don't want to change their view, but I think it's good to hear. I remember when President Clinton was in office, and I said, "Guys, that guy is a very smart person. You guys, he's got some good ideas, and whether you're a Democrat, Republican, Independent, whatever, you have ideas also. You have to listen to him. You don't have to like him or agree with him, but you might learn something." So I don't know if I have one single person. There's just a lot of people I've learned from.

ES: That makes lots of sense. One last thing here in the State House is that one of the things that you're known for with a lot of help from others, but you were a leader was affordable air fares. The affordable air fares program that helps support enhancing the air service in Wichita and Salina, but it was a bigger coalition that you helped kind of pull together to make that happen.

CM: In health care, there were several things, but with nurses, the advanced nurse practitioners are very smart, very smart women. I had the medical society come over and say, "If they want to be doctors, go to medical school." I said, "Look, if you want to be a doctor and practice in western Kansas, why do we have 105 counties? We've got forty of them who don't have any of them like you. Why? Because it's about money. We can make more money in the bigger city." So you know what? If someone wants to go and work in western Kansas, don't prevent them from doing that.

So that's why I established the fifteen-year scholarships at Fort Hays State.

ES: The nurse practitioner program.

CM: Also out in western Kansas schools so that they can provide care because those people deserve the care, too. What happened was that one of the probations was that you can pay in full and not work at there. Guess what? The practices over here would go and buy those nurses and pay off their—but we tried to expand it.

I also tried to, there was a big fight that had been going on, I guess for eight years between optometrists and ophthalmologists that they're stealing patients. You know what? You can work together in the city office. Then also with them, the issue of people buy from Lens Crafters. They were in the shopping center and being with an optometrist there. Walmart wanted to do that. So that's why they had a side door. I put the side door in there so that they can work.

And then the senior prescription program that was passed but not funded. But when Governor Sebelius came in, she took it. It was her own thing, which was interesting I thought.

ES: But your initiative put it in place so that it was available.

CM: And Kent Glasscock came up to me and he says—oh, one more thing. I was the one that created assisted living because we only had the skilled care. So they come over and they told me this. I said, “I want to see it.” I always wanted to see it, what is this story like. So I went to see her. I like it. But then rural Kansas hospitals that had skilled care said, “We’ll be out of business.” “No, we’re going to make a deal where you can use a wing as assisted living.” So that’s how we worked that compromise. But we were able to create assisted living. It passed finally as a Senate bill in 2007, something like that, and created that.

The prescription program, I went out to Maryland and Maine and all those, and they had all passed those type of prescriptions. So I brought them all, and then I looked at the things that I thought could pass in Kansas that we could support. I put them all together in one. That’s when I became a closet Democrat.

ES: Let’s transition to 2003. You decided not to run again and were coming back to Wichita. And lo and behold, there was this position open in the City of Wichita, the mayor. Tell us a little bit about what drove you to decide that you were going to continue your public service at home.

CM: First of all, I had in my head ten years in Topeka and that’s it. I had my own term limits even though [inaudible] and I [inaudible] always, but I had my own term limits. And I did not make an announcement on my last day that I was leaving.

Some people talked to me about insurance commissioner, and Sandy Praeger and I talked about it. She wanted me to do it, and I said no, I don’t want to do it. I’m going to go ahead and do this mayor of Wichita. There was an opportunity there because the mayor of Wichita in previous years, 2000 and before, was appointed by the commission. But this time, for the first time in 2000, it was voted by the people of Wichita. That was very important to me because when you’re appointed, it’s just half a dozen people making a decision for the City. But when the people of Wichita vote for you, that is a big thing.

So I thought it would be interesting if someone like me that came to this country that was taken in by the people of Wichita could see their support. So I decided to run. Plus it was time to come home. I had a wife and two boys at home, and they needed me, playing baseball, tennis, and I was missing some of that. I didn’t want to miss it. So it was time to come home. The opportunity was there. I decided to do it.

I thought having been in the legislature would be very helpful to the City of Wichita. As a matter of fact, a couple in the City Council told me, “Why don’t you go back to the legislature? That’s where you need to be, not here.” So I can feel a little bit like Whipple [current Mayor of Wichita Brandon Whipple] when he got elected, I said, “Oh, man, you have no idea.” There was one former mayor that said, “You’re going to like this. This is a meat grinder.”

So it was interesting. There was a lot of people, there was a professor at the University of Wichita that came to me and said, “You will never get elected.” I said, “Why?” “Because you have an accent and you’re Cuban. You’re Hispanic. They won’t elect a person like that.” I said, “But I’m an American. I’m an American citizen. I served in the US Army. I was a medic in the

Army. What do you mean, I'm not? I defended this country. I love this country. I'm very patriotic. No, you're wrong."

ES: And, by the way, not so much.

CM: So I think, and I am not unusual. There are a lot of other immigrants that see America as the Land of Opportunity, and there is a lot of opportunities, and they come here, and they see things that sometimes we in America don't see, the opportunity. We have had so little that to come here and see so much. So I thought that I could do it, and we had, I think, thirteen people running in that primary. It was big. I had about eight or ten legislators come down and endorse me in a press conference at one time.

I had one of the big money people in Wichita. We were at a peace meeting where they wanted to get to know me. They were visiting with me. This person says, "I don't know. I've never heard of you." "Well, that's not my problem. It's your problem." Then I said, "I don't even know anything about you." He kept it up, and to me, that's being disrespectful, in front of all these people. So I didn't want to play that card, but I had to. I said, "Well, that's interesting because I know you." "You know me?" I said, "Yes, because I did my undergraduate at Georgia State University in Atlanta. I worked at a bank where you were building some companies there, and your workers came in, and all the checks bounced every time. And you had a lot of lawsuits, and you were kicked out of Atlanta because you were such a crook" in front of all of these people.

ES: But he could not refute it.

CM: No. He sat back. He didn't say another word. I mean, to me, if you are disrespectful and continue to be, you cross the line. I was very nice. I was just telling the truth.

ES: I love the way you put that because you compare that to certain times where people would have said he was disrespectful because of some other excuse for them being disrespectful. I so respect what you said. I don't know if everybody taught this. He was just disrespectful. It wasn't disrespectful because of X or Y. He just was, and you pointed that out. Again, that's the kind of folks, it's interesting that your life experience, whether you knew that or not, prepared you to have that kind of conversation like that.

CM: When I was here, another thing that I learned here is that what you see is not what it is. Speaker Shallenburger had me mentor some of the young ones, and I would say that, "What you see is not what it is." Logic plays no role. You'd have a business person say, "Carlos, but this is such a good idea." I'd say, "Yes, but you don't understand. Logic doesn't play into this issue here."

I had one business person after I left that said, "I paid this guy \$85,000 a year, and I cannot get this done." I said, "Okay, I'll tell you what. I'm going to help you with that. I'm going to set up a meeting in Topeka with the Speaker, the chairman of the committee you're talking about. And leaders in the House, not leaders that have the name of leaders, but social leaders, you don't lobby 125 people. You lobby four or five and know twenty or thirty. That's what you do. "Let me handle it."

I had the meeting at 8:00. By noon, we were done. Before we left, he said, "I'm going to give you \$500." I said, "I don't want any money. I want you to buy me, there's this diner close to the Capitol here. I want you to buy enchiladas and a couple of tacos and drive me to Topeka, and that's it." So I got all that done by noon. He couldn't believe that. "I'm paying \$85,000 for three years, and in three hours, you had all of this done. I want to hire you." "I don't want to work for you" because when you see a wall, I ask him to put it down and walk through it as a path. You bang your head against it, and I cannot do that. You have to be—I used to tell people, "The best way to get to Topeka, from Wichita to Topeka is to come on the turnpike." "Can I go to Hutchinson and go to Topeka?" "Yes." "Can I go to Garden City and go to Topeka?" "Yes, but only do that with this legislature. We don't have to go straight there. Let's go somewhere else."

ES: That's a great learning.

CM: As mayor of Wichita, I was in the community all the time. I was never in the office. When the railroad people came over to explain that we had some deteriorating lines, there were complaints that the long lines would block traffic. I said, "Why is that?" He said, "Because we cannot go more than 40 miles an hour. So we have to pull longer trains." "Okay. I want to go to the track. I want to ride with you. You take me to all the tracks and how the whole thing works."

They showed me the whole thing, and I worked with them on how we're going to fix that. We moved this here and that there. But no one knows that. Also you probably remember years before, around June, July, our water tasted like algae.

ES: Yes.

CM: The first thing when I got in, I said, "We're going to change that." I called the director of the Water Department. I said, "I want you to take me to the Equus bed, to Cheney. I want you to show me how the whole thing works." So he showed me. "Okay, I want to build a plant right here outside of Lake Cheney so the water comes in and gets filtered before it's over there." And we got the contract and got it done. I didn't tell anybody about it.

Oh, by the way, just to go back a little bit, the other thing on health care here, I was working on telemedicine. Telemedicine.

ES: Right. Back then.

CM: Because Glascock put me on the Future of Kansas Committee. We created this committee to come up. I was talking about telemedicine. The medical society said, "No, no, because that would mean doctors in Chicago would be taking care of people in western Kansas, and they don't pay liability insurance in Kansas." "Huh? What? Can we work that separately? It has nothing to do with health care."

It was those kind of things where people put barriers that are not meant to exist. In Wichita, I was in the community every day, looking how the things worked. I met with the Afro-American

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pastors and the Hispanic pastors. Every month, I had dinner with them, and they'd tell me what the problems are, and how can we help.

[End of File 2]

ES: Let's talk a little bit about your mayoral experience and a little bit about one of the—what I would say was a big deal for Wichita from an economic development standpoint was the Affordable Air Fares Program to bring state resources to help subsidize air fares in Wichita and then was added to Salinas to try to spur economic development for the state.

CM: Right.

ES: Tell us a little bit about how that came about.

CM: The previous administration of the City of Wichita came up with the idea of bringing in low fare airlines and to support them for a period of two years. They thought that after two years, they would be able to stand on their own. But that was not the case. So the amount of money on the first year was three times what it was on the second year.

So when I come in in the second year, they said, "This is not sufficient," even in the second year, "So we won't be able to be here, and we needed that." So my experience and the resources that I saw at the state of Kansas with the lottery and some of the monies going for business opportunities, I thought it could be a resource for a longer period of time. So that's when I approached the State Capitol folks with that idea. And then later on, a continuation with the next governor also in Kansas, and she was very supportive of it also.

So it played out real well. A lot of the other airlines began to look into Wichita. As a matter of fact, I went down to American Airlines, and I wanted to put the hub for the maintenance of the American Eagle in Wichita, and they were interested.

ES: Right.

CM: But the City told me that they didn't have the room to put the maintenance for that. But I did bring in a couple of other companies that wanted a fifty-years lease at the airport, and they were big companies. So I brought those companies in. They also expanded in other areas.

Also another big vote was the Arena downtown.

ES: Yes. Tell us a little bit about that.

CM: What happened was, the County had the Arena by Valley Center. They were not doing as well. So I went and visited with them, and then I said, "Look, you are planning to spend 71 million dollars in building and fixing that arena to become ADA compliant."

ES: Right.

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CM: “That doesn’t make any sense. The Arena belongs in downtown Wichita, not over there. So I’m going to tell you what I’m going to do. You go and spend your 71 million dollars over there. I’m going to build a new Arena in downtown Wichita, and you will be out of business. So why don’t we talk about it?”

ES: That is a very good way to get people to come to the table.

CM: “I am going to build this and offer you a dollar for your refurbished Arena. We are all dealing with the same taxpayers, county and city. Or let me tell you what we can do. I can give you the land in downtown Wichita. You build the Arena, and you tear down the other Arena, and we do it on a fixed time sales tax. I want to know how much money it’s going to cost. I want to have five million dollars for maintenance over and above that, and I want to have a fund also for if you don’t get as many people in as you thought the first couple of years. Give me that amount of money.” “Okay.”

“So guess what? We are going to put this to the vote of the people, and what it’s going to do is we’re going to do it for three years. We’re going to put it in the bank, and after we have the money, all the money, that’s when we start building it.” That’s what happened.

ES: Excellent. Let me follow up real quick on that. How was your experience in Topeka because you did have to get some approvals in legislation here in Topeka, how did that experience here help the success of that program, working through the politics at home in Wichita in addition to the things we had to do up here in Topeka?

CM: A lot. A lot because in the city, you’re working with less people.

ES: Right.

CM: Here you’re working with a lot more people. So here you have to convince a lot more people than you have to convince there.

ES: Right.

CM: Actually convincing a lot more people is easier than convincing a few.

ES: You had to get approval to do the sales tax here.

CM: Right.

ES: If I remember correctly.

CM: And that idea had been brought up several times. The fellow from the Sports Commission and another businessman in San Carlos, we have been trying to do this for the last ten years, and we cannot get it done. I don’t think the people in Kansas will vote for a sales tax in Wichita, the county, and I say, “No, I think that if we explain it and we have a good idea, and we show them how to do it.” So they said okay.

So I was going to all of these places. We had a committee where we had the people from the Chamber, the biggest company, the Boeing, Cessna, so that they knew what was going, the school superintendent, no media.

ES: Right.

CM: That was it, just us talking in a very frank discussion about things and listened to what other people had to say about it. So yes with the bigger companies we were also talking about how many people, if we bring all of these jobs to Wichita, how many are you going to hire?

I created those meetings, that partnership between the Chamber, the County, and the City. We also met every month to discuss bringing jobs in. And every business that the City of Wichita gave money to, I went to visit to see how they were spending the money. A couple of businesses said, "I don't want to be with management on the floor. I want to be with the employees. Management can just stay in the office." So I will go in there, and guess what? The employee says, "That's not what they are doing. Let me tell you how they are spending it."

ES: Interesting. You are very hands on and very engaged. That was what was again a hallmark of your public service. I want to again take a step back and ask you a more philosophical question. You've been sitting, and you've served honorably in the State Capitol and in our city for many years. Looking at politics today, when you line them up, tell us a little bit about your perspective of politics when you were here and when you were participating, and now you're sitting outside. What would you tell folks that if you were writing the story about the differences, what would you see looking forward to the future where we ought to be looking at, relative to politics, particularly in the context of you were at the beginning of what one might say is the—we had this conservative movement, but it was different then. And I'm curious of looking today versus what you saw when you served.

CM: It was day and night. It's different now. I think people need to be more respectful of each other. They need to listen to each other and see why they are saying that. I love history. You give me something, one of my sons moved to Pea Ridge, Arkansas and then I went and researched that that was the biggest battle in the South between Missouri and Arkansas, and that one whole battalion in the war was Cherokee.

So I'm very into history. Whenever I find something very small, I go and look into it because I wanted to understand why the people did the things that they did and the sacrifice that they made. So we need to look at what we're doing now, not that we have the ability—I hate to use the word "power," but you have the ability to do good things for our community, and not just for our community now, for our children.

And we need to be patient with each other. I mean, it's not going to happen tomorrow or the next day. You know, how is that going to happen? I remember I used to go to Peter Claber School, a Catholic school to teach math to Black children. I was doing it in the gym. They would come in and say, "Hey, Carlos! Let's go and play hoop first!" "No, we're going to do math first, and then we'll do hoop. We're going to exercise this, and then we exercise this."

When we built the park here in memory of the crash of the KC 135.

ES: Yes, right there at Piatt Street.

CM: And the senator called me and said, “We want to call you here to Wichita State to recognize you. I don’t know where a lot of people—I just played a small role in getting that park. It was just the right thing to do.

When I got home from the state legislature, I threw three boxes out of awards. I don’t need awards. It’s not about awards. It’s not about title. That’s why I took my name off of the parking space. It’s not about that. It’s about doing the right thing and having the opportunity. We are adults. We cannot act like children. Everybody has an idea. We just need to listen to it. We just really have to do it.

ES: That’s awesome. Well, as a final kind of question, we see so many folks trying to look into getting into public service. If you could talk to every one of them getting ready to get into public service, what advice would you give them?

CM: To come out with a smile on your face, like I said to people, breathe in with your eyes closed, breathe out with a smile. And there are going to be challenges, but you can do it and know that you can do it. Like I said, I’ve always looked at the wall not necessarily to crash my head against it, but to make it into a bridge to somewhere else, and how do you do that? Sometimes you’ve got to step back and say, “I’ve got to look at this.”

And there will be people that will say things because they don’t know you, and so your job is to let them know who you are, to allow them to get to know you. Some of them refuse. I recall one time when, the first week as mayor, I went in to each City Council member with a yellow pad, and I said, “I want to know what is important in your district. Tell me about your district, what is important. What issues do you want to pass in your district that I can help you with?” And one person said, “I don’t want you here. I don’t like you anyway.” I had only been in office a week. “I like you,” I said, “but I’ll be back.” And I just went to the next office.

What I mean is that kind of thing, it takes a little while. There were several people of the thirteen people that run in the primary office that decided then to run as an Independent in the final election. One of them, after I became mayor, I formed a community for the arts. We put some money into that, and then I named her the chair of that.

ES: That’s awesome.

CM: I also try in Wichita to create not just the River Festival, but to expand the Aviation Festival into something bigger.

ES: That’s right.

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CM: And then to do as summer, the Doobie Brothers were here in the summer, but by the river where the library's at and then have the River Festival and then have a Christmas Festival, and all that has gone away because it's about getting the people together all year around so they get to know each other better. So to new people, getting in is get to know people better. Don't just do crazy things, do crazy things on TV and on the Internet, I see crazy things from the left and the right, but I don't have to. Those things don't need to affect me. I make my own decisions. I said, "Oh, So and So said that. I'm going to doublecheck that."

Sometimes there has been something in the media, and I go to the media in a Spanish country where I happen to see that that's the way that it happened, or I go to the London newspapers to see if that's really the way it is. I don't do Facebook. I don't tweet. I don't do any of those things. I make some comments on LinkedIn, very few. People are—I think it's the anxiety of the virus and all this stuff going on that they take it out on other people. They miss an opportunity to love each other. To expand hate is awful.

ES: That's a great place for us to stop. Carlos, thank you so much for doing this. I appreciate it.

[End of File 3]