

Mark Tallman: My name is Mark Tallman. I've worked with the Kansas Association of School Boards on education issues as a lobbyist, researcher, and writer since 1990. I'm conducting this interview with Carol Strickland on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and significant leaders in state government, particularly those who served during the 1960s through 2010. The interviews will be accessible to researchers, educators, and the public through the KOHP website, which is ksoralhistory.org and also the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions of these interviews are made possibly by generous donors, and our videographer today is Dave Heinemann.

So, Carol, I guess we should note we are doing this interview in the one-room schoolhouse at Emporia State University that is attached to the National Teachers Hall of Fame. We're excited to talk to you because you bring the perspective as an educator, an honored educator, a Kansas Teacher of the Year, a Master Teacher [Kansas Master Teacher Award], we want to talk about. You spent time here at Emporia State as a professor and then for about ten years were the director of the National Teachers Hall of Fame. It seems to me you're in a great perspective to help us talk about some of the changes that have happened in education over that time, the role of teachers, and how they fit into things, preparing teachers. And then I suspect from your national work, a little bit of that perspective, too. So, thank you very much. We're really glad to be here.

Carol Strickland: Thank you, and thanks for coming to the one-room schoolhouse. We're really proud of this. You know, Emporia State is known as a teachers' college. And Emporia, Kansas is Teacher Town, USA, in case you didn't know that.

MT: Emporia seems to be many things as I drive. There's a lot of things they can point to.

CS: Absolutely.

MT: I went to Fort Hays State University. I learned very young, of course, that my institution just started as the western branch of the State Normal College here at Emporia.

CS: That's right.

MT: I've been understanding well, and I think sometimes people now don't remember that so many of our state institutions started as teachers colleges. That was kind of one of the main higher education credentials that were sought at that time. Of course, they've all expanded their role. And that's part of what I think this series is about is talking about these changes over time.

But before we get into some of those things, a little bit about yourself. So, maybe just tell us a little bit about your background, where you grew up, how you go into this role, some of your other positions. Just fill in the blanks a little bit as what got you pointed in the direction of education as a career and a passion, I assume.

CS: Well, I'm not a native Kansan. I grew up, was born and raised in Fort Worth, Texas, educated there in the public schools. We were totally segregated at the time. I'm dating myself. I

graduated from high school in 1962. I went to Texas Christian University, became a Horned Frog. I was very fortunate to have a scholarship to go there. My parents had always said, "If you invest in education, you'll have your life paid for." They neither one had an opportunity to go to college. They impressed upon my brother and me, my older brother, that we would be educated.

I had various desires of what I wanted to do. So, I came about teaching a little bit later in my life, fourth grade. When I was really young at one of my family reunions, my mother was embarrassed when I was asked by my aunt who was a teacher, did I want to be a teacher or what I was going to be when I grew up. I said I wanted to be a lady wrestler because that's what we were watching on television on Saturday night. And she said, "Well, I will disown you," and I didn't know what "disown" meant. My mother said, "I think you need to look for a different occupation."

So, I thought about it, and I thought—my dad had some health issues, and I thought, "I'll be nurse. Then I can wait on people." When he went into the hospital a couple of years later, I didn't like the smell of the hospital, I got kind of nauseous, and I said, "I don't think I want to be a nurse."

Then for a few years, I just kind of "I don't know what I want to be." You know? Then in fourth grade, my teacher, Jewell Speights, decided that I could help her. I could be her assistant because I would finish my homework early. She was always finding things for me to do.

So, she said to me, "I think you ought to think about being a teacher." She was having me coach some of the students who were struggling a little bit in reading and things like that. I guess that was when I decided that I wanted to be a teacher. I saw what she did and how she impacted me.

My teachers had always really taken care of me. I was the smallest kid in class. That's hard to believe now. And sickly, a little bit, and they were always sending things home for me. They were always caring for me, and I thought, "I think I want to be a teacher."

So, that's what I did. Through high school, I was finding things that I loved. I loved Spanish. I loved theatre. I loved speech. I loved math. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to teach, but I wanted to teach. So, my favorite classes in high school were math and Spanish. I went to TCU as a math and Spanish major, which didn't make any sense at all to anybody.

And then I met some overwhelmingly wonderful professors in communication and English. In my sophomore year, I changed my major. I have been in speech and communication the rest of my life.

MT: I guess I can relate to that a bit. My major was in English, but kind of a journalism and communication focus is more of what I expected to do. And in high school, speech, debate, a little bit of drama, those things were very much my passion at the time.

I am curious. In another one of these interviews, I asked the question, but maybe I'll ask it a little bit to you. What do you think are typically the things that cause people to go into teaching? Has that changed? Particularly now as many districts are struggling to find teachers, fewer people

seem to be going—that's just our perspective. But that's what seems to be. What's your perspective over time of the big reason someone—maybe not when they're a kid what they want to be, but what is it that actually leads them to seriously get in, get the education, enter the profession?

CS: I think if they loved school when they were younger, and if they had special teachers that really took an interest in them, and they had a relationship with the teacher, then I think they could see that as a lifestyle that they would enjoy. In other words, the benefit may not be in the big check at the end of the month if you're a banker, but it's in those intangibles, those relationships that you have, those friendships.

My high school speech teacher and I were close all the way to her end because she kind of helped mold me brought me out of my box and built my confidence, put me in plays that I didn't think I was really qualified to be in and pushed me. And I thought, "I can pay it forward. I might be able to do the same kind of things for students in the future." I think that's the impact, I think.

MT: I guess you have to have the ability to hold on to it to stay in the profession.

CS: Right.

MT: And maybe one of the challenges we have now is—maybe it's not that people don't feel that way, but there are so many options. If you have the education, if you're willing to go to college and get those credentials, there are many things that people can do, maybe more things that women can do.

CS: Right.

MT: And so the motivation may be there, but there are other things which are competitive. I'm guessing that's a little bit of it.

CS: And I think there's so many obstacles to the teaching profession now that were not there when I started. I won't say politicalization, but so much of it now is outside forces that create obstacles for our educators. I look at the list of banned books, for example, and I'm thinking, "I probably couldn't teach English now" because most of those books were on my reading list, my class novel, or suggested reading for my high school students in Denver, in Oklahoma, and even here in Kansas.

The times have changed, and it's much more difficult to be in education today than it was. I was lucky that I was there from 1967 to 2006. The times are very different now.

MT: What were the stops you had before you got to Kansas? Where did you teach in Kansas?

CS: Well, I started in Denver, Colorado. I came from Texas into a teaching position that I probably should have floundered in. I was placed in an inner-city school. I had no experience at that time.

MT: You didn't grow up in an inner-city area in Texas?

CS: No, in fact, I think the first Black student that I came in contact with was at TCU. He was on the basketball team.

So, they hired me to teach in an inner-city school. The principal was not even in on the hiring. It was a last-minute thing. We had moved to Denver. My husband had a job at the University of Denver coaching debate. I was looking for a job. So, I put my application in. It was late. So, they said, "No, we don't have anything." Two weeks before school started, a person came to my door saying, "Would you come and interview?"

So, I got this job in an inner-city school. I had the most wonderful principal in the world. Bob Colwell saved my life as a teacher. Had I had a different experience, I probably would have quit my first year as many teachers do. They did not set me up for failure. They set me up for success, and he followed me through that first year. He just said, "You don't look like or sound like most of the students we have in this school, but you have to do two things. You have to let the students know that you care about them, and you have to treat them all the same."

That is advice I have followed my entire career. I tell it to future teachers. I taught it in the Ed Psych class here at Emporia State. I believe that. He said, "These students have so many phonies in their life. They can spot a phony a mile away. Be yourself. Show that you love them. Treat them all the same."

MT: You brought up a statistic that I think probably our viewers need to be aware of. I know it fluctuates a little bit, and I honestly don't know how it compares to other professions, but a significant number of young teachers—you tell me. If you make it through the third or fifth year, then you're probably going to stay, but a significant number of young people who've spent a lot of time and effort thinking they wanted to be a teacher don't make it through those first three years.

CS: No.

MT: Your observation, you talked about the support you got. Are there things that are particularly helpful or maybe is it just the absence of the kind of leadership that you had from your principal?

CS: We didn't have a mentoring program which is true in today's world in many cases. I think that's valuable. I had veteran teachers I think who saw my naiveté and my greenness and just took me under their wings.

I just talked to one of those women. I knew her back in 1967, and we still visit every week. She was in the business department, and I was in the English department, and I had theatre, and I had speech, and I had debate, and I had forensics. I was overwhelmed, and she sat me down as a business person and said, "Here's what you need to organize." She helped me, and that just—that gave me that structure.

MT: You kind of had informal mentoring, but that was really critical.

CS: Yes. She didn't get paid for it. She just saw me and said, "I think you need some guidance and help. I'm a veteran teacher. If you have anything, come to me." So, JoAnn Rudel and I are just—we're inseparable even in our eighties. It's great.

And the school was very special. If you know East High School in Denver, Colorado, it is still an awesome school. They've had great leadership, and they believed in the students. They believed every student could succeed.

I had that as my first experience to learn from. So, I believed every school was like that. I had done student teaching in Fort Worth, and it was a great school. So, I thought everything was like that. That's not necessarily the case and not necessarily every first-year teacher has that. I think if they did, we wouldn't have the shortage.

MT: That is, I think, one of the challenges in my career working with school boards and educators. Many people who have been successful will talk about, "I thought it was always that way, and then when I started working with more"—there is more variation than we want to admit. I guess the real challenge is "How do you bring more people up to those good levels?"

It sounds like you were lucky in Denver. Where did you go from there?

CS: Very, very lucky. My husband's job changed, and he went back to Oklahoma to his alma mater, Northeastern State to coach debate. And I was very fortunate to get a job just immediately in a middle school. I taught speech and English, and I started a little debate program for them—they'd never had it—to feed to the high school for ninth graders.

Then I was contacted by the community college in Warner, Oklahoma, Connors State College, to see if I would come and take over their forensics program and theatre along with some speech and English. I talked to them, and I liked the opportunity. I said yes, that would be fine.

So, I did that for ten years, and then my husband had the opportunity to come to Emporia State to interview. Dave Matheny called him and said, "We need a debate coach. We need to have you come up and interview." Glen said, "Oh, no, this is my alma mater. We're not leaving. I love Oklahoma."

But we came up, and we realized how wonderful it was here. Glen was familiar with Emporia State because of his debate background. Then I said, "But I need a job. Is there anything around?" Within two weeks, the English, speech, and debate job at the high school came open.

MT: In Emporia, Emporia High School.

CS: In Emporia, and it was like "Somebody's telling us, 'Go to Emporia, Kansas.'" "We very quickly said yes and made the move. We loved it. I told Glen—he was moving around with all of these job opportunities, and I said, "You know, we might want to stay in Emporia for a while." He said, "Yes, but something else might come up."

I have a funny story because University of Miami called him and said, “We’d like to have you come out and talk to us about the debate coaching position.” He went, “Oh, no, not interested.” I thought, “Why wouldn’t you even be interested?” and he said, “I watch *Miami Vice*. I don’t want to live in Miami.” So, we stayed in Emporia, and the rest is history. We both retired from here.

MT: We’re going to see how the people who do the transcript and video explain what *Miami Vice* is for maybe the more modern viewers.

CS: That’s right. See, I date myself. I referred to *Howdy Doody* one time in class, and these kids looked at me like, “I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.” I will date myself.

MT: So, the longest period of your career was here.

CS: Yes, twenty years.

MT: You were in English, Speech, those sorts of issues.

CS: Debate, forensics.

MT: And you again ultimately were honored as a Teacher of the Year, a lot of accolades. That’s part of why we’re talking to you. I guess I would ask you to reflect a little bit on maybe just to start with, what were things that—you talked a little bit about that support at the beginning of your career. What are the things that helped you I guess be the best you could be or be good enough to get those kind of honors?

CS: My colleagues and my administration. The interesting thing is that my superintendent, John Heim, whom you know.

MT: The former executive director of the School Board Association. I know him very well.

CS: When he was superintendent here, he was on the board of the National Teachers Hall of Fame. He came to me and said, “I’m going to nominate you for the Hall of Fame.” “No, no.”

Then they got this application form, and I needed to work on it during the time I was trying to prep my debaters for their regional tournament. I said, “I really don’t have time to do this.” He said, “We’ll get you the help. You just feed us the answers. We’ll put it in the form.” I kind of went, “Yeah, whatever.”

He was the driving force for that award and for Master Teacher. My colleagues were kind of singling me out I guess because my students had a lot of the spotlight with their debate and forensic activities and things of that sort. It was very collegial where I taught at the high school. It was not the jealousy or animosity that sometimes we see with honor and awards.

When I was Teacher of the Year for Kansas in 1999, I traveled, and my message was to the administrators, #1, you need to honor your teachers because that brings awards to your school

and to your district and gives a spotlight. Parents can be proud of that. It's not a one-time thing. That person represents the entire district. And secondarily, when you have a new teacher, don't give them the worst schedule in the world.

I bought that to fruition at the high school because we had a schedule that was basically not a very good schedule. It was a freshman repeaters' class. It was the ESL [English as a Second Language] class, some really tough classes. The idea was the new teacher coming in would have that schedule. I spoke up at a meeting of the department, and I said, "I don't think that's fair to the first-year teacher. One of us needs to take that schedule or break it up." One of my colleagues that I love dearly said, "I've been here too long. I've paid my dues. I don't need to teach that schedule." So, it wound up that I taught the schedule. I said, "If I'm preaching that, I need to do it."

That was a very tough semester for me, but it was very rewarding because I got to see some of those students that had been struggling actually have a veteran teacher with them rather than a new teacher.

MT: So, I guess a sense of mine—I was never a teacher. I did serve on a school board, and I dealt with education issues a long time is that that's one of those—I don't know whether we should go so far as to say a trend, but certainly something talked about is it wasn't unusual for the students with arguably the highest need to get the least experienced teacher.

CS: Right.

MT: Because the "best" teachers feel they've earned the right to teach the best kids.

CS: Yes.

MT: Understandable, but when we look at those achievement gaps and those differences, that becomes maybe an unintended consequence from that system is the kids with the greatest needs sometimes were not getting commensurate resources or attention.

CS: Right.

MT: And that maybe is one reason those gaps persist. Maybe that's a bit of a lead-in I think; I don't want to ignore your time and your experiences as a university professor. So, if this comes in, whatever you want to do, but I'm particularly curious—let's maybe start with this. What changes did you see? Or maybe you didn't see many changes. Let's just start with student needs. So, going back to the sixties and seventies through the 2000s, what changes did you see in the students you had to serve, their backgrounds or their needs, their disability issues, those kinds of things.

CS: Well, we had inclusion, of course, come in, and I found myself in IEP [Individualized Education Program] meetings being uncomfortable with how the students were talked about behind their backs obviously. But the parents were there, sometimes in tears, hearing the bad things.

MT: Let me just clarify for non-educator viewers and maybe me. I'll let you do that. What do you mean? I think most people know there's something called special ed, and probably they know it hasn't been around forever. It's been around for a while. But in some of these interviews with other education leaders, something that's been talked about is that move to inclusion. So, what does that actually mean, and how did it change the life of the teacher and the school and other students?

CS: It brought in the para into--the paraprofessional into the classroom to help the special needs students that were included in the regular curriculum. That had not been done except in some special cases where the student might have excelled with maybe math but struggled in the other classes. So, they were contained in special education for those other classes, and then maybe would go out for PE, for different things like that.

Inclusion, we found many of the special needs kids who were very comfortable with their special needs class with those teachers, but now they were in a larger classroom, more students, students that didn't necessarily look or act like them, and yet they were expected to actually perform to that level.

So, it was a real challenge for us. The paras were wonderful. I kept saying these were my team teachers. These were not somebody that I told what to do. They were right there, and they worked with a lot of the kids in class that were struggling.

I had a young man who had never done a research paper, and he came. He was high anxiety. He would have to leave the classroom and go to the hallway for a while when he'd have a panic attack. He just said, "I can't, I can't, I can't do this." And we said, "Yes, yes, you can." I said, "You need to find something that you really like that you want to do more research on, and we'll help you with it."

I knew he liked wrestling. He would wear his big wrestling belt. I said, "Why don't you do a biography on Dwayne Johnson, The Rock?" And his eyes were just—"You know The Rock?" That kid wrote an absolutely wonderful research paper. The para helped him. I helped him. He was so excited. He would go to the library, and he graduated. But he couldn't have without that. That was meaningful for me to see that you could touch a child who did not want to be reached. And yet he would perform to a level that even he was surprised with.

MT: Some of the interviews that we've done, that's one thing that we've reflected on is people who—some of these changes are gradual enough. If you don't have a fairly long history of understanding that Kansas public schools have significantly increased their staffing. Enrollment is not really much higher. In fact, it's dropped a little bit, but those positions have been largely in special ed or paras. In fact, there's sometimes a criticism, "Well, you haven't hired very many teachers." And the implication being, "Well, if you're not a teacher, you're an administrator." The fact of the matter is the biggest increase in positions in Kansas has been special education paras to I think what you're saying to be the ones working with that special needs student so they can be in the regular classroom, but to assist the regular teacher who now has to teach the regular class and the special education student.

CS: Yes. And we're having more and more students diagnosed obviously in special needs. It takes a special person to work with the kids on a daily basis like that. I really admire—one of my really good friends came back to Emporia after being away for a while, and she came right back to where she was as a para.

Then others have worked from being a para into a special ed teacher with the programs that the Kansas Department of Education has.

MT: Right. Good point. That's another change. Not only fifty years ago, there were probably a lot fewer paras. Now it really is a common route into the profession for some people who want to do that. So, it's a way of introducing that access.

CS: And Kansas is so good about encouraging the paras to go ahead and become licensed if they want to do that. They'll help them financially.

MT: So, that is one way the student needs have changed. The expectation of students with disabilities is different. The number of students with disabilities. My understanding, that another thing that Emporia has experienced, like much of Kansas, maybe even to a larger degree is the increasing Hispanic population, ELL [English Language Learner] population, and just in general, and frankly, students in poverty, lower income issues.

Often when I've gone around and talked to communities, they sort of have this idea of "When I was a child, we were just an All-American rural farm. Everyone was farm kids." What they'll remark on is how there are all kinds of different demographic reasons that has changed. What did you see in those areas in your time here? How does that affect both the profession and I guess the outcomes, the results of our system?

CS: As I said, I had the opportunity to teach what we call ESL, now ELL, and meet some of those students at the level where they were. Many of them had tremendous stories to tell of how they got here and the struggles that they had. I was trying to impart to them what my parents did to me. An education means it will open doors for you. Without that education, who knows what your future is?

I think that has not changed. We did have a huge population working at Tyson Meat Packing here, which now has closed. We've lost some of those families. They've moved on to other places. But this has been a very rich area for Hispanic culture. We celebrate Cinco de Mayo with a big parade every year. The kids feel a part of the community.

We had some problems with some of the young men who came from countries that wanted to be gang members and wanted to rule. They were a little hard to manage until we could bring them in and say, "Don't do that." I remember a young man who had great artistic ability. I kept saying, "We need to get you down with Jerry Troxell and get you some art classes. You have a great future." He was kind of excited about it and said okay. Then later he said, "Miss, I can't. I can't tell you, but no." One of his friends said the other members of his group said, "No, that's sissy. You can't do that." Those were kind of the cultural things that we have.

MT: I want to ask you something else that again is kind of my perception, and again I realize you haven't been in the classroom for a while. But over that period of time, so, again, to date myself, going to high school in the seventies, beginning my profession in the eighties, following education. A lot of surveys and things would say, "What did people worry about?" They worried about drugs. They worried about gangs. They worried about violence. Some issues, there's still concerns over school shootings and those kinds of things.

It doesn't seem we hear as much about fights in school and gang issues and those things. They're still out there, obviously, and I don't know whether we just aren't covering it, but I now hear more concerns about—it is not so much kids maybe hurting other kids as kids maybe hurting themselves. Issues of depression and anxiety and suicide, although the good news is, here in 2025, we've actually seen for five years a decrease in youth suicides, but that followed a decade or more of that rising.

Did you see changes maybe just among students just sort of in maybe their state of mind or their framework or how they dealt with issues or how they dealt with authority and family support and those things? What did you observe over your period in those ways?

CS: I'm not going to point a finger at any one thing, but I think technology changed our lives drastically. The bullying that is now rampant is sometimes on social media where they can hide behind something else and do that. I'm not sure the fist fights of my day—I broke my hand breaking up a fight in Denver—I don't think it's so much that, but I think it's psychological bullying that's going on and the verbal abuse and the name-calling, those sorts of things.

It's tough, and if you're on social media—I think now schools are trying to regulate cell phones. That maybe can come under control. I'm not saying technology is bad. I think it's awesome for quick information. If my debaters had laptops and Google and internet rather than carting tons of evidence to every debate tournament, that would have been awesome. That has changed, probably for the better.

But I think the technology and I think COVID combined desensitized some of our students and maybe some of our faculty and administrators, too. The interpersonal communication that I saw with students back in the sixties, seventies, eighties, even into the nineties where they were comforting each other. They were encouraging each other. We would give awards at the high school for honor roll and things of that sort. We would give out cards for free food, McDonald's, and things. And some of the kids who didn't make it were being encouraged by the kids who did make it.

And it wasn't competitive as much as it was encouraging. I think now there's a real competition among the students. Maybe it's "Me first. I'm entitled." I'm not sure what's happened to society, but the schools are a microcosm. They're copying society. They're copying what they see at home, what they see on TV, what they see on social media. I'm hoping we can kind of come around to an awareness before we totally divide.

MT: So, I want to talk about another issue with you and your perspective as an English teacher, language arts, those sorts of things. Again, as we record this in 2025, we have spent a number of recent years having—I don't know if we'd say a debate—but a real discussion over the science of reading and how to appropriately teach reading. I don't want to oversimplify it, but I think something of a belief that there was a period of time when we weren't focusing on the right things, and that did not help some students as much as it should have or could have, lost maybe some ground in some ways. There's been a tremendous effort in the last few years to change that, both at the school level and, of course, the universities, who train the teachers to do that.

Now, probably in another interview, I made the comment to someone, my mother had an elementary education degree. She didn't actually teach, but I can still remember, we were kind of a weird family, when I was in school, her complaining about they were getting rid of phonics, and she didn't like that. So, it occurs to me that we've kind of been debating about phonics and that sort of thing for a long, long time. Now, we kind of feel we have that answer. I'm curious as to someone who's learning how to teach reading, or hopefully kids knew how to read for the high school level in the sixties to where we are now. What did you observe about what has worked or not worked? Why do we keep having these debates?

I've got to tell you one other thing. I happened to stumble across an article I read somewhere that talked about—it was in a scholarly journal. I didn't understand most of it, but it was conducted by a couple of Kansas professors who were basically lamenting why college students cannot read long form. They would basically say their comprehension level is not at all where it should be for what we want.

So, again, we've been debating why Johnny can't read. That started in the fifties, if I remember, if not sooner.

CS: Oh, yes.

MT: So, we've been debating over a long time. Give me kind of your perspective over maybe the course of your career about why can't we figure that out? Are there other things maybe we figured out and things change? I'm just curious.

CS: I'll give you a soundbite. One size does not fit all, and that's what we argue about. I think school districts as well as teaching colleges want one program that works for everyone, and that does not exist because children learn differently. They learn to read differently. Their backgrounds are different. Some kids are dyslexic, and it's not even diagnosed until they're in third grade. That's unforgivable.

So, parents can recognize certain things early on. When they're told, "Hand your child a book, he'll start reading," that's wrong. Parents, don't listen to that!

MT: And correct me if I'm wrong, but that has been sort of the other end of the spectrum has been sort of the idea that kids can just kind of learn to read on their own, and, hopefully, we make it interesting, and we can—that that's enough. I guess what I'm told in the science now is

some kids might get it that way. Many kids will not. And kids with dyslexia and other conditions like that have to be taught in a different way.

CS: That's absolutely correct. I'll give you the name of a woman you need to interview on this exact subject. She could talk to you for hours—Angie Schreiber. She has fought—

MT: Here from Emporia.

CS: Yes.

MT: A former School Board member a while back.

CS: A former School Board member with my husband, and her husband is in the legislature. She fights the battle every year about "Don't just say we're mandating this reading program for all students. That's not the way to do it." Students need different—and phonological awareness is crucial. Your mom was right.

MT: She was right about a lot of things.

CS: So many of them are looking for a quick way to get kids to read so that they can do better on a test or something like that. It's not the way to do it. They need to be analyzed. They need to be tested. Angie ran Cradle to Career [Cradle to Career Literacy Center] here for a number of years. She took students, several grade levels in a short period of time, simply because she found what worked for them. It might have taken her two or three different tries to find what they could identify with.

But reading is not easy. It's not something innate or natural with us. Just having books in your home does not mean you're going to be a good reader. And you're right. We have students at the high school level that are reading at high elementary, low middle school, and some students that are going to college that are really struggling because of that reading. They have a lot of reading material and they just can't get through it.

MT: So, some critics of education, and I've dealt with a lot of views when I was a lobbyist for many years, would ask the question, "Why do we tolerate that? If a student isn't reading in high school, why didn't someone—why wasn't that identified and remediated sooner?" Can you give me some insights into that?

CS: Do we have the trained people in the schools to do it? Do we have the time to do it? If there's someone leading that school district or that school that says, "These scores are telling us something, we need to intervene" rather than just saying, "Well, we did a little better than last year. Move on."

It happens with leadership, with the trained people that are there. You can go to Osage City and see what they've done with the reading program. Every single child was involved in making a better life for themselves through reading, and it's working beautifully.

MT: Yes, I have done some work looking at districts that seem to be overperforming on measures like test scores and having the opportunity to visit them, and what they will often say is that it's a very deliberate effort.

CS: Absolutely.

MT: But it is not easy. And one of the challenges is when we continue to expect—we're worried about reading, but there's a lot of other things that we're worried about, dealing with those fights and dealing with suicide, and dealing with all those many other things, and the fact that many students are also doing very well, and we want to make sure that continues.

I think that is the challenge, one of the things that has been discussed. To make changes like that, you have to have the support from higher education. So, I guess I'd ask you to reflect a little bit on that. What have you seen over the years as any changes or successes or disappointments in that relationship between the K-12 system and the higher education system?

CS: One of the things I've noticed is some people who have been in higher ed for a number of years want to continue doing the status quo. They have not been in the schools, in the classrooms to see what those teachers are struggling with. What worked in 2000 may not be working in 2025. But they need to be out there seeing it and hearing it and knowing it. I don't know if it's just refusal to change, or they don't want to spend the money, or they don't know where to turn.

I don't know the answer to that, but I know that in higher ed, a lot of the teachers are coming out with some good training and learning to identify reading difficulties and then where to turn for those resources. In other cases, they get one three-hour course in teaching reading, and that's it.

MT: One person I interviewed, not for this series but in other research I've done, trying to look at schools that have been unusually successful, blue-ribbon schools. A teacher, I think she was a Title I teacher, but she was basically there to kind of lead the work in reading. She made a comment early on and said, "We all have a bias to think what we're doing is good because we know we're trying hard. We think it's right. We're comfortable with it. The challenge is to be able to step back and look at, "But maybe what is the data really telling me?"

I think on one hand, teaching is a profession. Teachers want to be treated as professionals. They go through a lot of work to do that, and there is a tendency to say, "I know what I'm doing. I've got the degree and the experience to prove it." It's hard sometimes to say, "But your experience is you were taught by someone in a particular way. You had a certain set of experiences. That doesn't necessarily mean you yet know everything. So how do we continue to improve?"

So, talk a little bit about your role here at the university. I don't know what you necessarily did. Was it primarily working with students just coming in, starting their teaching program? Was it more with professional development for teachers already in or a mixture? What was your experience there?

CS: I taught the educational psychology class as an adjunct instructor, using a lot of my experiences and warning students about what to expect and how to handle things and prepping

them for the tests that they had to take to become a teacher. Then I also taught in the communication department, some speech classes, and I taught the Intro to PR class for them.

With the beginning teachers, I felt like my role there was just to kind of set the stage for them so that they knew what to expect when they walked into the classroom. We did talk about diversity a lot in terms of the different students they're going to meet, the different techniques they would have to use, trying not to give up on a student.

I've heard parents say, "I've given up on him" while the teachers are still working. It's that mindset that not everybody can excel, but everybody can do their best. That's kind of what I was trying to instill in them and try to find the best in those students. And oftentimes, if you establish the relationship, then they will do their best for you, not even realizing that it's for them.

I found it really rewarding getting to work with the future teachers because they were young. They were enthusiastic. I always felt good about the future of education, knowing that these kids were going out to teach the future kids. I would ask them many times, "Why do you want to teach?"

MT: A great question. Probably one that they should also answer before.

CS: And they needed to think of that. They really did. Some would say, "Well, my parents were teachers" or "I just like working." And some of the PE majors said, "I love the outdoors. I love exercise. I want to share that with other people." "Okay, that's the reason. That's why you're doing what you're doing."

Many of them are still in the classroom. Some of them have been Horizon Award winners over the years. I've kept track of some of them. Facebook is wonderful because we can communicate. Oftentimes, they would send me a question or ask me to come and talk to their class or something after they became teachers.

The field of education is so different I think from other professions. It's hard to identify what a person should expect when they walk into the classroom. I've tried to give them a picture of it that it's hard work. You're exhausted. Sometimes you tear your hair out. Sometimes you need three cups of coffee in the morning. But at the end of the day, if you can say, "I meant something to somebody," then I think that makes it all worthwhile. And there are a lot of people that don't have occupations like that.

MT: Yes.

CS: The riches of teaching are not like Bill Gates and his big bank account. I couldn't ever write a check like that. But the riches are in the notes that you get, the invitations to weddings or graduations.

MT: Certainly when I talk to them, that's often what you hear, those connections that they make.

CS: The baby showers. They're sending me pictures.

MT: People are grateful to you for changing their lives or giving them a direction. And I imagine for many people other than their parents, the biggest mentor or the greatest influence on them, hopefully in a positive way most of the time would be an experience with a teacher at some level.

Let's kind of talk about one more area before we finish up, and that is your work with the National Teachers Hall of Fame. I'm curious what led you to that role. Why were you interested? And what does it do? What is it? Tell us a little bit more about that, what you've learned from it.

CS: Another hour show. I was inducted in the Hall of Fame in 2003, thanks to John Heim's nomination. Since that time, I've volunteered to help them when they did inductions. They choose five teachers nationally each year to be inducted into the Hall of Fame.

So, in 2003, I was inducted, and then the people who had been leading it as director were coming and going, and there wasn't much continuity. They finally let the Dean of the Teachers College kind of oversee it. It wasn't really a full-time directorship. So, when Phil Bennett was retiring, he said, "You need to hire a director and start that up again."

In 2013, I was hired after a national search. I didn't think I stood a chance. I loved it. It was directing the Hall of Fame, raising money. We've put in the new memorial to fallen educators. We did that ten years ago.

MT: So, if people are in Emporia, a great place to visit. It doesn't take too long.

CS: It's open 24/7. It's open here by the one-room schoolhouse. We've gotten a really good firm foundation for the Hall of Fame, and it continues to grow in terms of applicants. There was national coverage this year on CBS Morning to announce the five new inductees for this year. They'll be here on campus next week.

MT: What is its purpose? I assume honoring teachers, but more fundamentally, what is the concept behind it?

CS: Fundamentally, when Dave Eldridge and Bob Glennon from ESU and people from this city decided there needed to be a National Teachers Hall of Fame because everybody else has a Hall of Fame. Teachers don't. So, they said, "Why not Emporia?" because Emporia State was Kansas Normal. It sets the standard, the norms for teaching. Emporia is the place for it.

So, Emporia State gave them the place. The idea was career teachers need to be honored. You have to have twenty years in the classroom, full-time teaching to be even nominated. Then it's a grueling process, and you have to write and do things. The idea is to highlight great teaching, and then these teachers become ambassadors for education and do presentations and workshops and things all over the country. So it's primarily to recruit and retain in our profession.

MT: On the surface, it's an honor to the inductees. But what it really does is hopefully allow them, encourage them to share what makes them worthy of that honor in a way that other teachers can better appreciate, and I assume that the public can have a better understanding.

CS: Absolutely. I think when you see and hear the inductees talk about their teaching careers, we like to have the future teachers and the new teachers here in the district come each year to the banquet. They get to hear these veteran teachers who have been there twenty years or more. One gentleman had taught seventy years, and he finally retired because his hearing was gone, and he had to have somebody help him. He said, "It's not fair to the kids."

MT: What dedication.

CS: Oh, my goodness. He died at the age of ninety-nine. You meet these people that you would never have an opportunity to meet. Then they come back for Induction Week each year. And then the memorial was established to honor those educators who lost their lives in the line of duty. The impetus was Sandy Hook obviously, and our inductees were just clamoring, "What can we do? What can we do?"

So, we came up with an idea, "We'll have a little book out here." Well, now we have 183 names. It's full. We're raising money for another granite slab. But it primarily says to people, the teaching profession, the education profession is so important to democracy. We've heard that before. And we touch the lives of children at the present but into the future, and the number of students that we teach, how much of what we do is passed forward?

That becomes our legacy. But then it also creates a foundation of critical thinking and logic and diversity and acceptance and tolerance. I often say that if we didn't have the teaching profession, we wouldn't have any other professions.

MT: Good point.

CS: Even last night on the Tony Awards, there were recognized, renowned actors and actresses thanking their teachers. And a teacher from New York was highlighted as a theatre teacher who was making a difference for his students. I think that's what we need. That magic needs to be understood. And, yes, it's difficult. It's not easy to be a teacher. It's not easy to be in education. But we need leaders. We need teachers. We need paras. We need the lunch ladies. We need bus drivers.

MT: Yes.

CS: There are districts now that can't get bus drivers.

MT: Struggling for all of those things, exactly.

CS: So, how can we share this magic that can happen in schools and recruit those people that we need? That's a hard job, but if we can get everybody on board, and we can get people from all the Departments of Education to work in a positive way, rather than dividing and conquering and

criticizing and cutting funding and things like that. All that does it damage. So, anything we're trying to build may be torn down with some of the things that are done.

I wish education were in the hands of educators. This is probably something you will x out, but legislators who are not trained in education should not be telling educators what to do.

MT: It is that interesting tension. You can tell me if I'm wrong, but somewhat unique in America and in Kansas, we have developed this system where we put the control of education in the hands of noneducators, and I guess in a sense that is the idea that it connects you back to the people paying to support it and sending their kids, but it does, like anything as a profession, becomes more complicated. The ability for the governors, if you will, to understand and have that relationship is certainly a challenge. I don't think there's any doubt that some of those controversies you talked about from the very beginning over books and everything else has gone back to—it seems no question there have been some gaps and differences created through all of that. Maybe when the next round of these interviews are done, we'll see how some of that has worked out.

CS: Yes.

MT: I don't know whether I could ask for a better summary than what you did. Is there anything that you wanted to say that I haven't asked you about?

CS: I would just ask the general public to think about what they experienced in school and if it was joyous, how do we get back to that? If it wasn't, how do we make it joyous? And it does take a village. We need parents. We need school boards. We need the legislature. We need the federal government, but we all need to be on the same page, and we need to work together.

Since I'm a communication major, let's communicate face to face. Let's talk about things. I can be on the opposite side of the aisle, but we could still meet for coffee and talk about something. I'm going to quote Bob Dole, "Where's the outrage in some of the things going on today in public education?" So, a rallying cry, maybe. I don't know.

MT: Well, thank you for that. Thank you for sharing. Thank you for your passion and certainly for your long career and service to Kansas and other places in education. And, as always, I want to end by thanking the viewers for making this possible. I don't know if you do a recording and no one watches it, was it an interview? I don't know. Transcripts are available. We appreciate you as always.

[End of File]