Mark Tallman: My name is Mark Tallman, and I've worked for the Kansas Association of School Boards on various education issues since 1990, largely as a lobbyist, also as a writer and researcher. I'm conducting this interview with Dr. Ed Berger on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and other significant leaders in government in the state, particularly those who served through the 1960s through 2010, but also beyond. 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 State Library. Transcripts are made possibly by generous donors. Dave Heinemann is our videographer today.

So, today, we're going to be probably focusing largely on some issues we haven't talked about in earlier interviews, and that is our community college system. I think our guest today was very much involved in that for a long period of time, but then he's also had roles at the state level as well. So, that's what we want to explore. Glad to be talking to you, and as we always begin, tell us a little bit about yourself. How did you grow up and what made you move into an interest in serving in education as an educator and a leader?

Dr. Ed Berger: Well, I was born on a farm near Halstead, Kansas, and I went to a one-room country school, all the grades in one room. I think that was a great experience for me. I think one of the advantages of being in a one-room school is your group, your grade would be called in to recite periodically throughout the day, but you had the benefit of listening to the other classes as well. Sometimes those were more interesting than my class. So, that was basically a great learning experience.

I went to Halstead High School. I graduated from Halstead High School and then went to Hutchinson Community College for three semesters before transferring to Wichita State. I got my bachelor's degree in history from Wichita State, was lucky enough to get an assistantship to work on my master's at Wichita State, completed my master's program in 1969.

So, that's kind of the higher ed background that I had. After 1969 when graduated, I was lucky enough to be hired by Seward County Community College. They were starting a brand-new college in Liberal, Kansas, 1969, and I was hired as a charter faculty member at that institution, which was an incredible experience. Here you have a young kid going out there and being able to start a program, start a department all by yourself and pick your textbooks out and kind of plow new land. It was a great experience.

MT: That's a good way of thinking about education. One of the things we wanted to talk a little bit is how things have changed. 1969, not terribly far ago, is that one of the newer of the Kansas community colleges?

EB: It was the last community college to come online. Barton County and Johnson County also came online in 1969. So, there were about three community colleges that were chartered in 1969. I think Colby was about 1965, if I recall. So, there were several new community colleges started in the late 1960's. A county needed to hold a local referendum to see if the public wanted to

have a community college in their county. The citizens of Seward County said yes, they did, and the rest is history.

MT: I'm kind of again sort of remembering history. I have to have a disclaimer. I don't specifically remember the 1960s being born in 1960, but one of the things I've heard is that was a period of just tremendous change. One of that really was the kind of movement from the junior college model, which really grew out of—and you can still see it in some places where the junior college was just under the local school board basically. You started classes at the high school to being renamed community colleges and taking on a broader mission. So, I assume, while you may have been working at the last, some of that kind of transformation was still part of what you would have been involved with.

EB: It absolutely was. I think one of the things that starting a new community college, or at least a revelation for me, was how important it was for a community college to remove barriers of participation. We started that college in Liberal in 1969. Many of our students were nontraditional students who had been in southwestern Kansas and hadn't had a chance to attend any higher education institution. All of a sudden, that institution was there, and they could attend, and they could go ahead and broaden their horizons.

Then again, that barrier, removing that barrier of distance was so important. We had a lot of spouses of educators who came to the college, got their degree. And then Saint Mary's of the Plains College in Dodge City at that time--it's no longer there-- but Saint Mary's College provided a distance learning opportunity for them so they could complete their baccalaureate degree at Saint Mary's.

So, again, I think the importance of removing barriers, that is what a community college really should be doing. I don't care if it's a physical barrier, an economic barrier, or a personal barrier. They should be involved in doing that.

MT: And again my sense was or has been so some of that emphasis was on beyond that traditional college age.

EB: Exactly so.

MT: Again, the junior college was still more the model of "Well, these high school kids who want to go to college, this is a chance." Many people of course in that era did not. Part of the role of the community college was to talk about access both geographic but also a wider kind of age range than we typically saw at four-year schools. Is that fair?

EB: It was great. As an instructor, when I had those nontraditional students in class, they would just blow the top off of everything because they were focused. There was no question where they were going and what they wanted to do. It was going to happen. It was kind of uneasy for some of our eighteen-year-olds because they said, "These old students had more time to study than I did." I said, "You know, they probably had a family at home. They had lots of things to do."

MT: It's all about priorities.

EB: "Quit whining," essentially. But again I think that geographic barrier removal is so important. We took that to the next step as well, community colleges do, by taking classes off campus. We had a seven-county service area at Seward County, and we had college classes at every one of those little communities out there. And again, talk about access, talk about removing the barrier of geographics. We were able to deliver that education to them. It really solves that problem. So, the geographic barrier was something that was a real thing, and we got it taken care of.

MT: That, again, in my observation over several decades of looking at education, primarily K-12, but higher education to a point, I was always struck by when we sort of evaluate Kansas compared to other states, I guess it is still a debate whether it is an advantage or a disadvantage having lots of institutions, but part of what apparently the people of Kansas wanted to do was have lots of institutions relatively close, working in community in a way that maybe other state don't have that same model

EB: Right. And community colleges are just a huge asset, an economic asset for the community whether it be job training, or whether it just be generating activity within the institution itself.

MT: So, you started as a professor?

EB: Well, I started as an instructor. I taught history and sociology. Again, I was always interested in community. So, I was very much involved in the Liberal community, of everything from delivering commodities or unloading commodities for SRS [Kansas Department of Social Rehabilitation Services], being involved in NAACP, all those kinds of things in the community. Then after being there a number of years, I applied for and became Dean of Continuing Education at Seward County Community College. That was again my goal, something that I really wanted to do, work with that nontraditional student and providing those opportunities. The Dean of Continuing Education is sometimes called the Dean of Dark because that's where—off-campus, evening, wherever.

MT: I guess was there anything—you sort of talked about several things, but anything else you want to say about that interest in moving from I guess being an instructor, being in the classroom to more of an administrative role?

EB: I think the main thing for me was having the opportunity—again, it was always my goal being the Dean of Continuing Education there. I saw how much good could happen in the community, the surrounding communities as well. So, when I got into the role, we expanded it, and we delivered the course work off campus, and we had some telecourses. That was a very positive thing.

MT: I assume that looked a little different than—I don't know when people will necessarily be viewing this, but you didn't have the Internet back then.

EB: No.

MT: You had to look at—

EB: The technology wasn't there. Right now, the geographic barriers are broken down by technology. You don't really have to have a physical class in Johnson, Kansas. You can deliver it with the Internet. You can have online classes. So you're eliminating the geographic barrier by doing it with technology instead of humans.

MT: Right, but at the time, you either had to have a presence, or you had to have a chance for people to come in amid shifting schedules.

EB: Absolutely.

MT: That in some ways is really the challenge because the original higher-ed model like the K-12 model, well, you come in during the day. We teach you during business hours, and then you go home, or you go to whatever it might be. Part of what everyone's had to learn, but I think was sort of a special role of the community college was to say, "We have to find ways to deliver education that is not in the traditional school hours because some people can't come then."

EB: And you have to make it so it's not so formidable. A lot of the non-traditional students are very much intimidated by that environment. You have a fifty-year-old individual sitting in a classroom with a bunch of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, sometimes they can be a bit intimidating. Most of our people really provide a good resource for our younger students as well.

MT: So, was your next move then from Seward County back to Hutchinson?

EB: Yes. I'm kind of a goal-oriented type of person. My goal was to eventually be president of Hutchinson Community College. So, when the position of Dean of Continuing Education at Hutch became available, I made an application for it, was lucky to be named Dean of Continuing Ed at Hutch. That's where we just continued our outreach, continued delivering coursework to the area, establishing off-campus sites, that type of thing.

And one of the things I guess I was most proud of was the program we had at the—it's called KSIR. It was Hutchinson correctional facility. We had a program out there that laddered a student in from basic education through the GED and then ultimately, he could get the Associate of Arts degree. I think when we first started, we had as many as ten individuals graduating with an Associate of Arts degree. That was taking individuals who for whatever reason hadn't had the opportunity to get an education, and all of a sudden that was provided to them right there in-house. All of a sudden, they could learn many times to read, to write, and to get the GED out of the way and then work on a community college degree as well. That again was taking the education to the population, removing that barrier.

MT: What then was your path from that position to your lifelong goal of being president?

EB: Well, I knew I had to get a doctorate. When I was at Seward County, it was really very difficult to look at getting a doctorate at Seward County. One of the programs that they recommended was Texas Tech, and that was at Lubbock, then, of course, K State and KU. But

when I went back to Hutch in 1981 I started a doctoral program at K-State in 1985 and finished that up in 1990. The current president decided to retire, and I was lucky enough to be selected in 1991 as president of Hutchinson Community College.

MT: In 1991, so putting that in my context, that's about a year after I went to work for the School Board Association. That's an era I have a little more familiarity with. Kind of looking back on that, what do you see as some of the major developments, both locally and to the extent that they were maybe part of broader trends? What are the striking things that maybe changed from that 1991 through your time in that position?

EB: I think one of the things that we did was shift from being under KSDE [Kansas State Department of Education and the State Board of Education] to being coordinated by the Board of Regents in the early nineties, not to be governed, but to be coordinated. There's a bright line between being governed and being coordinated by the Board of Regents. We didn't feel like we any longer fit with KSDE. They Are focused on K-12, and that's where it should be. That's where the money is. That's where the students are. So, we felt we were more of a higher ed tie than KSDE.

So, it shifted to being a part of the Board of Regents. I think that worked extremely well. It enhanced communication between the universities and the community colleges. Those students who were transferring on, I think the process was much more fluid because of that change.

MT: As we've discussed in some other interviews, talking a little about history, the reason the community colleges were under the State Department historically went back to the fact that they had—

EB: That was the genesis.

MT: Yes. They had local boards coming out of high schools. They were primarily locally funded.

EB: Yes.

MT: But as there became, I think, a general movement—I don't know whether we'd call it rigor, whatever it might have been, to create expectations that post-secondary should be governed with other post-secondary.

EB: Right.

MT: But that wasn't without controversy in Kansas, if I remember correctly

EB: I'm sure it was. We wanted to make sure that we weren't just Grades 13 and 14, and that we were perceived as really higher ed. I think that was a good move for us to split off from KSDE and be part of the Board of Regents. And again it was a coordinating role for the Board of Regents. our governing board, our local board of trustees, they're the governing board. We wanted to make sure that stayed in place.

MT: And I guess one of the things that, as I recall, there was at least some concern by some was whether—you know, a lot of logical reasons to move to the Board of Regents, but would you be seen as reasonably on the same level with the state institutions, the four-year colleges? Were those concerns answered, you feel in your opinion?

EB: I think so. I guess I never did really feel that. Maybe because of where I was, that was the case. Certainly I don't think that they saw any encroachment there. They saw the separation between the two, and they saw really the scope of influence being broadened considerably, too, by having community colleges at virtually every corner of the state.

MT: Absolutely. That issue of governance, of course, was a major thing that happened over the nineties and moving into this century, I guess.

EB: Sure.

MT: Another big thing that as I recall was sort of happening maybe around the same time or shortly after was a change in how community colleges were funded. Can you kind of talk a little bit about how—what has changed in how we pay for the community college system?

EB: Basically it's a reimbursement per credit hour. So, if you don't produce, you're not funded, and I think that's appropriate. I'm not sure that's changed that dramatically. Perhaps it's increased. Still, community colleges are primarily funded by your local counties and students' tuition, and thirdly would be state funding, state support. The state has some skin in the game that way.

I think another big change that took place in about '92 was community colleges merging with area vocational schools. We had a Central Kansas Area Vocational school in our area serving McPherson, Newton and Hutchinson, and we had to get legislation passed to allow us to merge with that institution.

And Senator Dave Kerr was very supportive of that and made that happen, and we got the legislation in place. The merger took place, and that expanded our scope of providing more vocational education than we had in the past.

At the same time we moved to merge our institution with Central Kansas Area Vocational School. Johnson County merged with their vocational school, and Dodge City did as well. From this point forward, I think that's been a trend that's been very beneficial, providing a lot of opportunities for technical education for students in the region in the state of Kansas.

MT: And that also further created in those cases perhaps a greater degree of coordination between the community college and those institutions because both technical colleges and community colleges offer vocational programs, now more commonly thought of as CTE programs.

EB: Sure.

MT: And, of course, so do K-12, so do high school. So, how all of that is coordinated and promoted I think has been another big issue. I think there's been—my sense, and you can give me your perspective, the state has really tried in various ways to put more emphasis on those programs so that students who may not want to go to a four-year college or even necessarily a two-year degree, there's still a way to get some options to them, have the skills to fit into the work force.

EB: We have a dual enrollment program. One of the highlights is working with Unified School District 308. They can dually enroll in technical education at the college as well as the high school. By the time they graduate from high school, they can have that Associate of Arts of Applied Science. That again has been a great coordination between community colleges and the unified school districts. The bottom-line winner is the student because the student has that credential. He or she can go out to the workplace and launch a career.

MT: When I've visited people, I always say, "I'm a perfect example of a student who"—of course, I went to a private high school, Thomas More Prep in Hays, didn't have an option to any CTE-type programs at the time. There was not much discussion of them. So, my experience and ultimately my children's experience, we really did not know much about it.

So, I'm often not sure how well many people understand those programs or the growth in those programs because if you didn't have maybe direct experience yourself or for your kids or ultimately maybe grandkids, you may not be aware of some of the unique aspects of those programs. I think having a strong connection with local employers, having a sense of "This is a credential that can lead to something else," often the ability to maybe earn that or a lot of it while you are still in high school or relatively quickly, I'm not really sure everyone knows that.

EB: I think one of the things for economic development that has been when the Chamber of Commerce brings a company in, they can point to that program that is at the college, at the high school and say, "This is a program that can develop your workforce , and you can have a membership on the advisory committee. You can target the curriculum to what your needs are and get a student coming out that will be work ready. I think that's a tremendous resource for a community and also the student as well.

MT: One of the things that I have done some research on that I wouldn't say it shocked me but maybe I hadn't seen it laid out in black and white is that—so we're recording this in 2025—2024 was the highest year ever for basically any type of credential offered by institutions under the Board of Regents. So, the highest year ever for certificates, the highest year ever for associate degrees, bachelor's, master's—I'm not always sure that people maybe really know how even as our enrollment has fluctuated some, how we've faced a lot of challenges in enrollment under COVID, a very different student body, our system has continued to produce increasingly higher levels of educational attainment. And I think that has to go back to some of that commitment that you've talked about to try to do that.

EB: Absolutely. I think what's important to know—I'm part of a liberal arts education myself, but you might have a student who decides to go the liberal arts route, and then when they

complete that program, there's not necessarily a job opportunity. So, we see an individual perhaps getting a liberal arts degree from the University of Kansas and coming back to us and perhaps enrolling in a nursing program or another technical program so that they can get employed. Again, that student has a broad background, has a strong background, and adding to that the vocational experience and being job ready. It's just been tremendous.

MT: I'm always mindful of that because we continue to have discussions around, I mean in blunt terms, "How are our schools doing? How are our colleges doing? Is the money we're spending worth it?" I think there's often an implied discussion that things used to be so much better, but when you look at the actual number of kids enrolled or served or credentials, just the level of education in Kansas and nationally has just continued to go up, but I gather we have to ascribe a lot of that to the institutions who've made it their mission to do that. That didn't just happen. A lot of things had to occur if we're going to get students being more successful than in the past.

EB: You have to look at a couple of different things. Again, going back to barriers, removing the barrier of physical location, we've done that. That opened some doors for these students. But also the barrier of economics and Pell Grants have been very important for that individual who perhaps couldn't afford a college education. A Pell Grant might make that happen or perhaps even a scholarship, a nontraditional scholarship being available to those students. So, an economic barrier has to be removed as well.

I think another thing for community colleges, you might have some parents who really didn't think they could go back to college because they had childcare responsibilities. So, many community colleges have established a day care center so that individual can come back to campus, take the class, and have day care provided for him or her. That's been very successful as well.

MT: In your role in Hutchinson in particular and then obviously as you became president, I'm sure you talked a lot with other presidents and observed things around the state, we've talked about a couple of those trends, but what are some things that stood out over the last twenty, thirty years, I guess, differences that you've seen or heard of in maybe the types of programs that are promoted or valued or different trends within a student body that the institutions have had to respond to?

EB: I think one of the things is the community college can get close to the community, listen to the community. The community can tell them what their needs are and then respond to it appropriately. If the community college isn't meeting the needs of the population or the industry, it's not serving its function.

MT: So, there is sort of a democratic feedback, I guess.

EB: Yes, there is.

MT: Because that local institution's board I assume runs for election every four years or on a two-year cycle like local school boards. If there's a problem, maybe there's a strong sense of what to do. If there's a perceived need, you can kind of know where to go to get that done.

EB: Absolutely. That board is close to the community. Again, you have advisory committees with the area vocational program, and they can make sure that your curriculum is fitting with what the needs of that industry are. That's important.

MT: I assume that's something that you, just by nature of working in an institution like that, a leading institution like that, but also kind of looking at your resume and background, you've done a lot of work looking at workforce needs and community needs, community development.

EB: We really have. Again, when I was back in continuing education, we took things out to business and industry. We had Cessna Fluid Power Corporation in town at that time. We had classes at the site, at the factory for that workforce. That was so that they could ladder into an Associate of Arts degree. Getting that access is very important.

MT: Are there any things that strike you from the viewpoint of—we're trying to talk about, broadly speaking, Kansas history. Anything kind of stand out to you as some of the particular economic or demographic challenges that we faced or that maybe looking ahead a little bit, that we're going to have to get ready for, and that the next generation of leaders are going to have to be looking for?

EB: I think workforce readiness is certainly essential. That's something that we have really worked hard on. Also, making sure that everybody understands when you complete that degree in technical education, that's only step #1. Technology is changing so quickly that the education will be obsolete unless they lean into it and get upgrades. Again, technology and knowledge is something that's not static. It's going to be changing all the time.

MT: Right. I guess that's something that again having been able to view this for a while, as you have just over the course of a career, you can kind of think back on some things are very simple. Some things are dramatically different because technology has changed what is either possible or what is required, and every state is going to have to continue to be responsive to that.

EB: That's probably a big change as far as higher ed is concerned. I think at one time you saw universities and maybe to a certain extent community colleges being apart from the community instead of being in the community. I think that has been a change. In the 1990s, our enrollment was probably 60-40 [percent], 60 being transfer and 40 percent being technical, and now it's basically flipped. We're about 60 percent technical and about 40 percent transfer.

Transfer is still an important element. We still provide students readiness skills so they can go to KU, K State, wherever, and get that degree, but also the readiness of being job ready, too.

MT: Yes, and of course, you've already mentioned a big part—I believe of community college enrollment are those dual or concurrent enrollment hours that now are a big part of community college enrollment.

EB: A student could conceivably get enough credit hours to complete their Associate of Arts degree by the time they're a senior. They could graduate from high school and community college at the same time. It's very rare, but it's there.

MT: As I've talked to people, as I've done kind of stories about local districts and particularly those that really seem to be getting into this idea of focusing on how kids are prepared for their post-secondary career, I mean, work force on one hand, but with the idea that so many jobs now and in the future are expected to require some type of credential. Those that really seem to have accepted that idea, as you say, it may be rare to have that, but I will always hear that, "Well, we have an example of this young woman, this young man, they graduated from high school, but the same weekend, they have their two-year degree out of the way."

EB: Absolutely.

MT: Whether that's it and they're ready to go to work or that's just two years toward a four-year degree.

EB: It's not unusual at all for that strong student to graduate from high school having thirty credit hours. That puts them at a sophomore level. You talk about cost saving. All of a sudden, you're reducing your time at the university by an entire year. A real cost savings, and they can go to that university fully prepared, being able to step in and become a sophomore at KU, K State, Wichita State, wherever.

MT: I'm also struck by you talking about the community college being a part of the community and not separate from it. I think I've observed the same thing at many of our high schools and school districts. There seems to be a greater emphasis on saying, "Your kids don't come to us and kind of sit here"—I don't know if we call high schools "ivory towers."—They're going to learn and then they're going to leave and go out in the world." There's so much more, it seems now, connection between educational institutions. How much of that is what the community wants? How much of that is sort of, "Well, frankly, it just makes good political sense to kind of have that sense" because you are accountable to those voters and to that community.

EB: Exactly so. I think if that local board of trustees isn't listening to community, they're funded by local tax dollars. Those local tax dollars have some skin in the game. If that board member isn't conscious of that or doesn't take that into consideration, chances are there's going to be some issues. I think most of our boards of trustees do an excellent job listening to the community and making sure that that school reflects the needs and the profile of the community itself.

MT: So, we did not prepare the answers to this, so you may not want to reflect on that. I often find it interesting, again particularly at the K-12 level, I don't know whether you have data yourself, but so often we do these opinion polls for people to be asked, "Grade your school. Grade your state school. Grade the country schools."

Most people give their schools an A or a B, and the farther away, "Oh, but nationally we're failing." State schools, "Well, they're not doing as well." And I've never been sure how much of

that is just because you know what's going on there. You know what's happening in your own community, and it seems to work pretty well, but you hear things you're concerned about.

So, one of the things that's been, we've talked in some of these interviews, again I just welcome you to reflect if you want, while most people seem to be happy with their local institutions, certainly there's been opinion polling saying that the same people that are happy with their local institution, maybe they're electing legislators who are more skeptical about the whole issue or members of Congress who are now questioning a lot about national education policy. So, there seems to be some tension between how people feel about their institution and how they feel about other institutions, but then when policies are made for all institutions, they're going to affect your local institution.

EB: I think what happens many times is perception by maybe outside organizations and groups, that school is not reflecting community needs. I think it behooves a board and administration to make sure they communicate effectively as to what they're doing. I think too many times we in education hide our light under a bushel. It's important for us to talk about the good things that are happening, the students that are outstanding and going off to med school, whatever, and making sure we brag about it a little bit, make sure people know that this is really a great system and serving a large number of students extremely well, serving the community extremely well, and the state of Kansas.

MT: I don't know if you'd agree with this, but I sense—I've never lived in any other state. I don't know if this is true of Kansas or not, but educators I think sometimes are reluctant maybe to feel too much like they're bragging, but I also think in some ways it becomes a sense of "We're pretty busy doing what we're doing." It takes a lot of time and effort to be a good teacher, to be a good administrator, to be a good professor, whatever it might be. So I'm just going to do a good job and hope the rest takes care of itself. And add that, there's often a particular professional jargon sometimes so that maybe even the ability to explain what you're doing to members of the community can sometimes be a challenge. So, while people in general seem rather satisfied, perhaps those are some of the difficulties we have in maybe more broadly communicating.

EB: I think you're right. I think sometimes we as educators think we're doing, and we are, doing God's work. So, since we're doing that, everybody should understand how great it is and just take it for granted. I don't think we can do that. I think we have to make sure that people know that we're making a difference. We're making a difference in the community and making sure that people are aware of that. That happens all of the time, making sure that we hang that out there for folks.

MT: I think sometimes I will hear—

EB: And sometimes there's a kind of elitism, too, because you've got maybe a teacher or a professor who thinks, "I'm in my ivory tower, my special classroom, and I really don't want anybody else infringing on that." That kind of elitism has caused some of that tension, I think, between community and institution.

MT: In other words, we expect a degree of professionalism—

EB: "Don't you know how great I am?"

MT: Exactly. And "I studied hard to do this and I work hard to do this."

EB: "I've got this credential. What do you have?"

MT: "Why are you challenging me?" I think there's an element of that, too. But, again, I think there has been still efforts by many educators in our state to try to figure out, "How do we address that?" but it's coming in challenging times.

So, you served as then president at Hutchinson Community College until what year?

EB: Until 2014.

MT: So, you would have been there through I guess what I sometimes call—you would have been there in the early 2000s when we went through one sort of budget problem, one recession that we faced, and then even more profoundly, after the 2008-2009 recession when we were facing much more severe budget difficulties in some of those things, how did your institution and maybe observations of other institutions, how do you think we managed through that?

EB: I think we managed through it because we had good local support. We were very—you have to be when you're at a college or a K-12, you have to be aware of that local mill levy. We were able to keep that mill levy relatively flat. The disclaimer on that of course is we had valuation increases. So, our tax dollars did increase for that institution, but we were able to keep the mill levy flat and making sure we kept our institutions lean.

I think most communities don't want to see a lot of largesse at local K-12 or community colleges. They want to make sure that they're operating frugally and operating with the best interest of the taxpayers. You demonstrate that by doing things in the community, being visible in the community, being part of the community. That's just absolutely essential.

MT: So, you certainly in your last several years would have faced some challenges there.

EB: Yes.

MT: You left the presidency, and then a few years later, you entered a different realm. You ran for Kansas Senate. I wondered if you wanted to reflect a little bit on why, what that experience was like, lessons you learned from that.

EB: There were a lot of lessons learned from that. Basically, it was my impression and some people in the community that our senator for the 34th District perhaps wasn't as visible as meeting local needs as much as he could have been. I put together a group of about ten people in the community in July of 2015 and asked if that was their perception, and if they felt it was

appropriate to develop a candidacy to run for that seat. They were unanimous and supportive in raising money and all of that kind of a thing. They were very much supportive.

I decided to file by petition because I thought, "If I'm going to run for this office, I want to make sure that I've got enough people signing petitions to say they'll support me and get my name on the ballot."

So in November of 2015, one year before the election, I filed for office with a petition and had that in place. Again, I was fortunate enough to have a great campaign group and was successful in the election. But, again, I think it was an issue there that the senator wasn't perhaps as accessible to the local public, and there was some issues statewide as far as taxes and revenue. I think that people were very sensitive to that as well.

MT: So, again, for viewers, kind of the context there is after the state experienced, like every state, the issues around the Great Recession as it was, further the tax policy put in place was a desire to reduce income taxes rather dramatically, and there's a whole lot of history about how that happened and how it was supposed to happen, but the reality was it put the state budget in a much lower position, and of course, because about half of the state budget goes to K-12 education, and if you include post-secondary education, about two-thirds of the general fund budget, it's very hard to manage a reduction budget without reducing education

So, you came into a situation where I assume there was some expectations on "How do we kind of fix this, but how do we fix it in a politically acceptable way?" And that is often—if it was easy, it would have already been done.

EB: Certainly. We passed the tax increase, and again it was a necessity. Really, a lot of state agencies was starving, and money was being moved around to areas that it wasn't intended for just to cover expenses. It was my sense that we could not continue going down that road.

I think the tax cut was well-intentioned, and the tax cut was put in place because the sense was that it would generate more activity, more economic development activity, generate more revenue. And whether it was the timing of it or whatever, that just didn't happen. So, we were really starving a lot of our agencies, and we went about getting the tax increase in place. It happened; it was vetoed, and we were able to override by one vote, the veto of the governor in the Senate, and then it went to the House, and the House overrode that veto as well. So, that put us on I think a sound footing financial-wise. It was really I think a key to perhaps some of the success we've had on the state level.

MT: You served on the Ways and Means Committee?

EB: I did.

MT: You had even a closer look at what was happening, budgets and that sort of thing.

EB: Exactly so. We had presentations from agencies as always, presenting their budget to the Ways and Means Committee. Certainly their budgets I think were realistic, but the bottom line

was we didn't have the funds to support any of those budgets until the tax increase was implemented.

MT: And you served in the majority party and in the Senate, the Republican party in both the House and the Senate of Kansas, usually very dominant although it's gone up and down. Was there anything that surprised you about perhaps some of the views or attitudes of your legislative colleagues?

You'd come out of an education background. So, you had a lot of knowledge of those things. In a citizen legislature like ours, you have people from many different walks of life coming into those rules. So, I'm wondering whether there was anything that surprised you pleasantly or unpleasantly.

EB: I think when I went into the legislature, the full knowledge was that I'd be working with forty other senators from forty other areas of the state of Kansas, forty different backgrounds.

And I wanted to make sure that I understood where they were coming from and their opinion, however different from mine, their opinion was valid. Their views were important, and you had to understand that, and you had to listen closely. If you're telling me, I might completely disagree with, but then I'll listen to see what kind of nugget I could pick up from that position. I'm sure in their opinion, that position is well-founded, and you had to know that.

So, I think that's part of it. There wasn't anybody that's so extreme that I couldn't listen to them and say, "You know, I can understand your position. I can understand where you're coming from. I don't agree with it, but I can certainly understand it."

MT: I guess that is sort of the challenge with where we are now in some ways. Again, I don't have the experience going back all that far, but I think there's a concern now, whether you call it polarization or whatever, that it's just in some ways getting harder for people to listen to each other or talk to each other because, whether it's fair or not, I welcome your opinion, but in some ways, the divisions are so deep, it is maybe more difficult to get people to listen.

EB: You know, just looking from the outside, it does seem like there's more polarization than there has been in the past. I really didn't sense that when I was in the legislature. Maybe I was just being Pollyanna, but there was a desire on the part of every legislator to do what was best for Kansas and the citizens of Kansas. If their route to getting that done is different from mine, so be it. That's your prerogative. I don't have to agree with it, but I certainly have to respect it.

MT: I guess in some ways that is the challenge of "Can you look at someone you disagree with and say, 'I disagree with you, but I can see where you're coming from,' and the majority are going to win" versus I think some people—and this may be less true maybe with some legislators or maybe just the public who "If you disagree with me in this way, you're not only wrong, you're bad." There's less ability to maybe give the benefit of the doubt to the opponent.

EB: I really didn't sense much of that at all. I sat around some very conservative legislators, and when we come up with the vote, I knew that the person sitting next to me was going to vote one

way, and I knew I was going to vote the other way, and we both knew that. We both recognized it. I could count him as a no, and I could count me as a yes or him as a yes and me as a no. He was a good friend. That's the way it is. "I understand your position. You know who elected you, and you have to represent them."

MT: It may be just historically speaking, maybe we always think the past was better, and everyone got along or whatever it might be. Maybe we've always had these divisions. Maybe it isn't that much worse. Maybe that's just sort of the sense now.

EB: Again, I don't know. But there was never a time that I couldn't visit with anybody on the floor of the Senate and have a good conversation, put our differences aside and go from there. Good friends.

MT: Before we begin to wrap up, what are you doing with yourself now? What have you been doing since that experience?

EB: After I completed the legislature, I was Interim General Manager at the State Fair. That was kind of a critical time for the Kansas State Fair. THEY DID not haVE a fair the year I came in. It's a revenue-driven organization. So, no fair, no revenue.

When I became Interim General Manager, one of the things we had to do was try to find some support so we could have a fair the following year. I was able to work with the legislature. They were very generous as far as providing support to the fair. We were solid enough to have a fair in '21. That was a difference. That's what I really enjoy doing. It wouldn't have happened without the generous support of a lot of legislators who saw the importance of the fair to Kansas and knew that it had to have some outside revenue to prop it up, to kind of get things rolling again.

MT: Again, just for our viewers who are interested in history, I imagine most Kansans know, maybe not, the [state]fair is in Hutchinson.

EB: Yes.

MT: Do you know why? What's the history of that?

EB: The history of it was we had an individual named Senator EMERSON Carey who back in 1913 got legislation passed. There was a contest between Topeka and Hutchinson for having the State Fair, and he was able to convince enough senators to get the State Fair located in Hutchinson, and it's been there ever since and has grown and thrived. It's certainly in the center of the state. It's a State Fair. It's not an Eastern Kansas Fair or a Western Kansas Fair. It's a State Fair. Having it right there in Hutchinson is so important.

MT: It's always interesting to reflect on "Why is the Capitol here? Why is this university here?" And a lot of that was, "Well, it was politics at the time."

EB: It was politics at the time. Senator Carey was very influential and made that happen. Certainly his mark is all over that community. Carey Salt, that's part of HIS LEGACY.

MT: Oh, yes, that makes great sense. I think that kind of covers it chronologically. I want to give you a chance, if you want to kind of—anything maybe I've missed that you think is an important thing to share or just any final thoughts on things you're particularly proud of or maybe where there's some disappointments.

EB: I think one of the things that I'm most proud of is providing a way to break barriers down to participation by students. I go back to that first year I was at Seward County Community College. I was right out of a master's program, and I certainly thought I knew just about everything. I was kind of an elitist. I came out of that environment, and I was kind of guided by a lot of professors who had the same attitude. So, I did, too.

But we had a lady who—I was in the entryway of the college, and-- she came in and said she wanted to go to Seward County Community College. She said, "I have no money." I said, "How are you going to sustain it?" "I don't have a high school diploma." So, I said, "Golly. "I'm not sure we can work with you."

I had an administrator at that time who said, "We do not turn anybody away. You find a way for them to be part of it." We got her into the program. She got her GED. She got her Associate of Arts degree and ended up getting her master's in logopedics at Wichita State. That to me is the kind of success story that every community college has, taking that individual, making a tax eater into a taxpayer. That's important, changing their lives. I could do that one person at a time in many different ways. So, financial barriers, physical barriers, and also personal barriers.

MT: As I said, that really lines up with again what the research shows. We as a state, I always note the Kansas constitution, Article 6, the very first thing, "The legislature shall have a system of public schools and other institutions for educational improvement." So, the mission statement is really "How do we continue to get better?" And the data really shows that in terms of more and more people finishing high school, getting some type of credential, going on to additional credentials. We've continued decade after decade to do that, and of course, we have a work force which more and more seems to expect that.

EB: I think so. Just taking a little detour from education, we certainly were able to answer the Gannon decision[1] by fully funding K-12 and getting that put to bed in 2019. I know that had been something of a block for legislators for a number of years. So we got that taken care of.

You say "one of the disappointments." I think one of the disappointments [was when] I served on Public Health and Welfare. At that time, Vicki Schmidt was chair of that committee, and we had extensive hearings on expansion of Medicaid. From all corners of the state, people came in and provided testimony as to how important it was to expand Medicaid, and we got it passed through committee. We passed it through the legislature. The governor vetoed it, and we did not

[1] Gannon v. State, a case involving school funding was heard by the Kansas Supreme Court seven different times over about a four or five year period. A final decision was reached in 2019. More information about the Gannon cases may be found in the oral history of Justice Lawton Ness.

have enough votes to override it. That was probably as close as we've ever come to expanding Medicaid, and again I give a lot of credit to Vicki Schmidt for putting that all together. We met in the old courtroom, and we had testimony after testimony, all corners of the state even a Catholic Bishop provided testimony in support of it. We passed it, but we just couldn't get over the veto.

MT: Well, here in 2025, the issues are still out there, both in the state and at the federal level.

EB: At the federal level, too. So, maybe it wouldn't have made any difference if we passed it.

MT: It's hard to know. I guess that is something. You talk about the role of the Pell grant and everything. While education at all levels is primarily a state and local—there has been a federal role, we'll kind of have to see now what going forward—there could well be some changes, and how our state and community responds to that will be interesting to watch going forward.

EB: There's certainly different things coming down from the states or from the feds. But, you know, Kansans are creative and resilient, and I think no matter what happens at that federal level, Kansans will find a way to adjust to it and to still serve its public well and be part of whatever the conclusion is. That's the nature of Kansans. That's who we are. We've maybe grown up in a difficult time or kind of struggling with agriculture many times and is still surviving and growing and being a part of that strength of a Kansan is what's so important.

MT: Absolutely. And that may be a great place to wrap up. Thank you, Dr. Berger, Senator Berger is how I would usually call you..

EB: Ed is what I go by.

MT: Absolutely. And thank you very much to our viewers or readers, and we appreciate your wanting to learn more about Kansans. Thank you very much.

[End of File]