

INTERVIEW WITH GOVERNOR KATHLEEN SEBELIUS MARCH 8, 2004

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Dr. Bob Beatty, Producer, Kansas Governors Recorded History and Documentary Project
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Q. I want to start with your background. Could you please tell me where you grew up, where you were born and what life was like growing up?

A. Sure. I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. My father got involved in politics when I was five. He had been a teacher and heard Adlai Stevenson speak and was inspired and decided to run for political office, to run for city council. So I really grew up in a political family where I thought going door to door is what people did in the fall. He ran for city council, he served in Congress and he ultimately was Governor of Ohio.

I'm one of four children in an Irish Catholic family. I have a brother a year older than I am, a brother a year younger, and sister who is five years younger than I am. My mother was a teacher but when the kids were born she ended up as a stay-at-home mom so she kind of kept the family together while my dad was out and about.

Q. I read a story in which you said there were pluses and minuses to your father being involved in politics. Would you say the pluses outweigh the minuses, because eventually you got involved in politics yourself?

A. Well I think it was a wonderful way to see what kind of contribution you can make by being involved in public life. That certainly was a positive. He had a lot of positive impact on people's lives, on changes in Cincinnati and ultimately on the state of Ohio. The downside as a child is that he was out a lot. He was always a public person when we were out. There were always people who wanted to talk to him and wanted to be with him, so that was a little difficult. If you were out to dinner he was a likely to be up shaking hands as opposed to being with the family. But I think my mother was great about making sure we knew what he was doing and how important it was. She was his best cheerleader. So I think there was a feeling not that we were being neglected but that we were sharing him with other people and they needed him as much as we did.

Q. It's a unique situation to have a father who was a governor. Do you think that you were able to see this life and say in a sense, this is doable, anybody can do this, including myself?

A. Not at all. I never really saw myself as a candidate. I always liked politics. I was always a volunteer in his campaigns. When I came to Kansas I got involved right away in other people's races. But I never grew up thinking this is what I want to do, I want to run for office some day. It really came as almost an accident when a State Legislative seat opened up and the timing seemed to be right. It was something I was interested in. And for the first time I kind of translated from being a volunteer and supporter into a candidate.

Q. And let's go back a little bit. How did you get from Ohio to Kansas? Would you tell us how that happened?

A. Sure. I went to college in Washington, D.C. and stayed there and worked for a couple of years after college. My husband Gary is a Kansan, grew up in Norton in northwest Kansas, went to K-State and then came to D.C. to go to Georgetown Law School. His dad also was a politician. He had been in the State Senate and was in Congress at the time Gary came to law school. We met in Washington. And when Gary finished law school he wanted to come back to Kansas at least for a couple of years and practice law. So we got married in December of 1974 and have been here ever since.

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Q. Did you have any misgivings about leaving the East for the Midwest and coming to Kansas or did you like the state when you came here?

A. I had only been in the state once before I moved here so I really didn't have a big impression one way or the other. It did feel like I was moving away from family and friends because I was. I didn't know anybody but Gary in Kansas. I had no job. I had no circle of acquaintances here. So the first couple of months were difficult for me; new friendships, figuring out sort of where I was, getting established, finding a job. But I've never really regretted the move and I've never regretted being here and have since become a great Kansas fan.

Q. What prompted you to run for the State Legislature and also Insurance Commissioner?

A. Well the State Legislature was really a timing issue. I had a neighbor and a friend who was the Democratic representative who lived a block away from me. I had been involved in her campaign. She decided in 1986 to run for state-wide office and came to me and said, "Why don't you be the candidate, why don't you run?" And it seemed like a good idea at the time. So I had been involved in her campaign. So I ran and won and served four terms.

In those terms I had served on the Insurance Committee and I also served on the Health Committees, and health care was becoming more and more of a major issue in terms of accessibility and affordability. People were really worried about insurance coverage. And there had been a long-time incumbent in the Insurance Commissioner's Office. In fact, in the 50 years before I ran, there were only three Insurance Commissioners, each of whom had been Assistant Commissioner for 20 years before becoming Commissioner. Never had there been a democrat. Never had there been a woman. And a number of people said to me, "You really should make this race, you should make a state-wide race, it makes a lot of sense." There was an opportunity really to change the office from sort of an insider club where the industry provided all the money for the candidate to a consumer look. It was kind of a leap of faith to make that run. But I decided that the timing was right and it was probably time for me to do something other than being a State Representative so I decided to run for the office.

Q. Do you recall some sort of moment or specific time when you said, "I'm going to run for Governor"?

A. I didn't have an epiphany. I didn't wake up one morning...Probably about two years before the end of my second term as Insurance Commissioner it became clear that I needed to decide what was next. Was I going to run again for Commissioner or was I going to go get a real job in the outside world? Was I going to run for another office? And what was clear is it was going to be an open seat. Governor Graves was leaving office and couldn't run again for another term. I really went through a process of looking at the possibilities and again decided that the timing was right. It felt like the right thing to do. I've always been interested in policy at the state level. It's why I wanted to be a State Rep, why I wanted to be Insurance Commissioner, and not going to Washington. I've always felt that there was an opportunity really to make a big difference at the state level and there certainly is no office better to do that than the office of Governor.

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Q. It's an interesting situation for any Democrat running for Governor in Kansas. What was your main message and why do you think that you won the election?

A. The issues that were probably central and the message that was central is, "I'll work hard on your behalf - I'm not tied to special interests or a particular ideology." And I could back up those promises by a record. I had been, for eight years, their Insurance Commissioner and had really turned around that office and delivered not only a lot of services and consumer protection but cut the budget by 20 percent and had more going on than had been there before.

The same thing running for State Representative. It was for both races a series of issues that I was interested in - education for all kids, healthcare reform, cutting back on waste and inefficiencies at state government. But I was able to back that up by saying, "I've been there and done that, look at the record. You know, this is not just an idle campaign promise, look what I've done." I think that tends to be pretty effective.

Q. And it didn't bother you when people said, "Hey, this is a Republican state, this will be a real mountain to climb?"

A. Well, that had come to my attention before. I ran in a legislative district that was more Republican than Democratic. Certainly in the two statewide races I had before that I had confronted it. And it always is an uphill climb. But what I knew about Kansans is if you could get a message out and if they really believed you were on their side, if they believed you would work hard for them, they were willing to cross party lines and vote for the person and not necessarily the party. So that was my job to make sure that I could get up above the dialogue about who is a Republican and who is a Democrat and talk to them about the issues.

Q. What have you found the job to entail? And is it any different than you thought it might be?

A. Well, I knew a lot about it because I'm the first Governor in 12 years to have served in the Legislature. That really helps. I had also run a major agency so I had put together a budget and been involved in that part of the process. I would say the surprises are that it is significantly more intense than I ever expected. There is something going on every moment. There are ten things that I can't do because there's just not enough time in every day.

The other piece of the puzzle that is a surprise to me is how visible this office is. And in some ways that is very good. People are so excited about, not me, but about meeting the Governor, about introducing their children and grandchildren to the Governor. About having me sign an autograph or have a picture taken. And since I had been in statewide office I thought, you know, it's a level up from where I had been, but I didn't expect a big change. But it's a big, big change in that regard. And in some ways I think again that's positive. People are excited about the democratic process and they see this office as very significant. But you're never invisible.

Q. What do you find the most rewarding part of the job?

A. Well, I've been able to work with some pretty amazing people at the cabinet level and at the staff level. That is incredibly invigorating and rewarding, to choose good people and watch them kind of take over a job or an operation and make it work much better than it has worked before. It is that kind of energy of good people working together which generates some really good policies. That's been very exciting. And I think just getting some things done. It's nice to look back after my first year and say, "We're really in better shape than we were a year ago when I walked in the door." That feels pretty good.

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Q. Some Kansans may not know a lot about the Governorship. If you have an idea can you sit at your desk and say, "I want to do this," and then follow through and with signing the bill?

A. It can, and I think that makes it very uniquely rewarding. I'm not sure a President ever gets to do that given the time it takes to work something through Congress. Often it's six, seven years of dialogue and operations. But we really can put a package on the table at the beginning of the session - budget initiatives, changing money, new laws - and by March and April I'm signing a number of those initiatives into law. So you really do see the process through and are able to affect in a very real way changes. States can be much more nimble than the federal government. We can really identify issues and problems and put together coalitions and solve them quickly and then move on.

Q. Is there one you would like to mention to be specific?

A. I would say last year the big challenge was how to balance the budget, which hadn't been balanced really in three years. In a very tough economic time, how do we stretch resources so that we didn't make cuts in education and we could provide the safety net services? That felt very good at the end of the session to have done that and not have a situation where drastic cuts had to be made or people really weren't going to be able to provide the services they need. I'm in the midst of battle No. 2 which is really about the future of the funding of public education. I hope I can come back in a couple months and tell you that's been a great success too. But we're sort of midstream right now.

Q. What do you find the most frustrating part of the job?

A. Well, the partisan dialogue gets frustrating; to have issues that are so critical to Kansans like their kids' school or what happens with health care, break down into, "I'm a Republican, you're a Democrat, you had this idea so I don't like it." That gets a little frustrating. You have to kind of bring people back to the table and find a way to find a common ground and then try to move from there. So again, you get away from the dialogue about what party you belong to and more into identification of common interests.

Q. What sort of thoughts do you have regarding what skills you think a Kansas Governor needs?

A. First of all they should get up every morning and realize how incredibly lucky they are. This is a wonderful job in a wonderful state. And it's an incredibly special time; that I know because when I talked to my father now who left the Governor's office in 1975 he still says it's the best job he ever had. I mean, the most wonderful opportunity he's ever had.

So, savoring each moment and relishing the opportunity I think is key. I would say the next big thing is just figure out how to get along with people, how to bring people to the table. It's always important to work across party lines to put coalitions of people together and that I know, having been in the Legislature, so much of that is personal relationships. Can you talk to somebody, can you lift up the phone and have them visit with you, bring them into the office, learn about their kids and their families and their concerns and their constituents?

And you have to spend a lot of time out in the state. I think it's a real mistake to get housed in the office and not reach out very much. Because what happens in Topeka is interesting and lively, but there's a lot of Kansans who don't feel that the sun rises and sets inside the Capitol. So being able to talk to Kansans where they live, see the farm conditions and what's happening in the oil fields, and the aircraft workers who are losing their jobs, visiting those communities, talking to people one on one is really a critical part, I think, in understanding what is best for Kansas.

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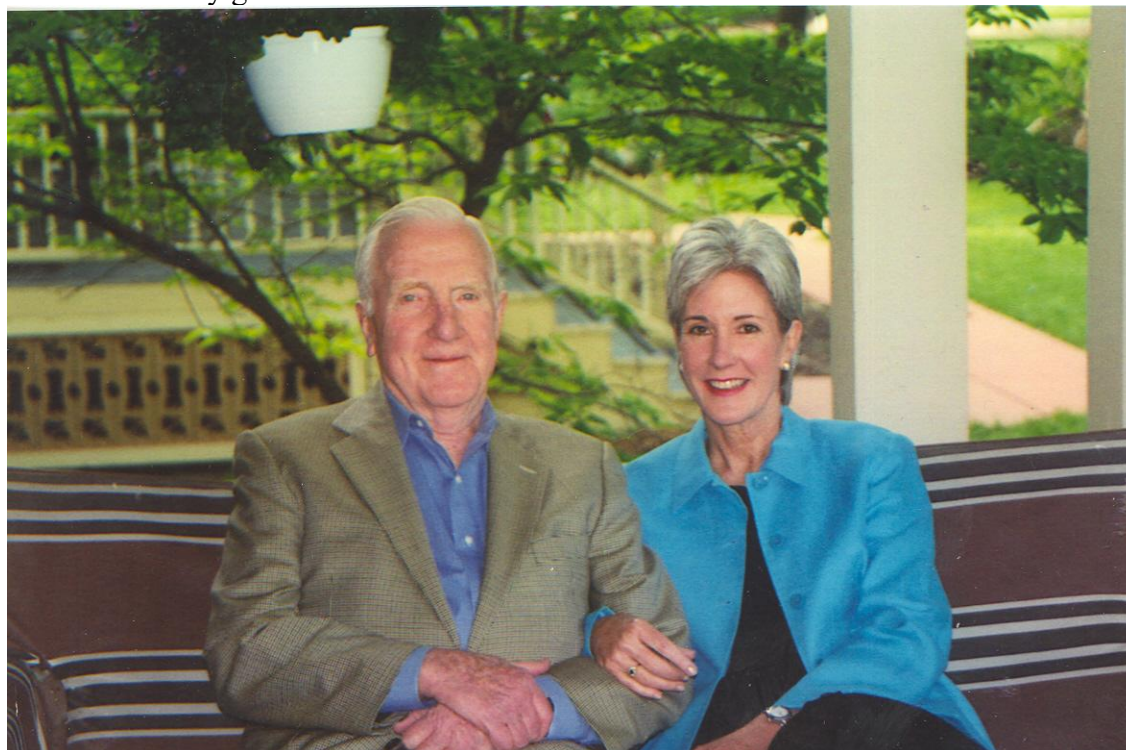
Q. You're part of a small but growing group of women governors. Do you feel any special pressure or at least acknowledgment that you're in this group and that what you do may influence the possibility in other states of electing female governors?

A. That again has always been something I've done. I started out in corrections. And I was the first woman to be in the central office at the Kansas Department of Corrections who wasn't a secretary. In the Legislature there was still a very small group of women who were elected, and I was the first woman to serve as Insurance Commissioner. So in some ways, the challenges of making sure you're jumping higher, running faster, have always been there.

I think I feel a sense of responsibility of, you know, not screwing it up for people who come behind me. I have to do well to make sure that the next four, five, ten women can do well, that people look back at my tenure and say, "She did a great job and we're thrilled to have another woman." That's important to me. And I think we're unique in Kansas because there's a long and very rich history of women being elected to public office. In a number of states it's a very rare instance, but we've had women who have served in every elected public office available in the United States - Senator, Governor, Attorney General, Insurance Commissioner, Secretary of State, and the U.S. House. So I think Kansans are quick to give women opportunities that may not be available in other states.

Q. What would you like Kansans in the future when they think about Kathleen Sebelius' Governorship, to think about what you did and how you approached it?

A. I hope they think that I was on their side, working for them, and that I left Kansas a better place than I found it, that their kids have more opportunities, that the economy is prosperous, that we're in a better, more stable economic condition than we were when I walked in the door. That would feel really good.





Governors: Avery, Sebelius, Anderson, Hayden
May 18, 2005, Washburn University