

INTERVIEW OF BILL GRAVES BY MIKE MATSON DECEMBER 5, 2022
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INC.

Mike Matson: The Kansas Oral History Project is dedicated to preserving and providing access to voices of all Kansans from all walks of life, including those who have been involved in the creation and implementation of public policy. My name is Mike Matson. I'm a volunteer interviewer for the Kansas Oral History Project, and I'm joined today by Kansas Governor Bill Graves.

I had the opportunity as a journalist to cover Bill Graves when he was Secretary of State, later had the great good fortune to serve as the Governor's Press Secretary and Communications Director in his administration. We're going to talk to Governor Graves today about his life, what it was like growing up in Salina. We'll talk about politics. We'll talk about policy. We'll talk about the influences that helped shape his way of life and the thoughts that led to the decisions that he made.

So to kick us off, Governor, welcome.

Bill Graves: Thanks, Mike. As my former Communications Director, you should have the answer to all your questions.

MM: There were colleagues who could say I could read your mind. So that's a possibility that that could happen. Thank you very much. We should say at the outset that we are here in the second floor of the State House in the office of Kansas Governor Laura Kelly, and we're grateful to her for allowing us this time and allowing us to bring our electronic infrastructure in here for this interview. As a former Governor staffer, I'd like to also shout out to the Governor's staff as well because it's a disruption for them, too. So we're grateful for the opportunity.

Let's start where it began: Salina, Kansas. What was it like growing up in Salina?

BG: Well, Salina was not unlike probably every other Kansas community—rural you might say by nature. Salina had at one point a large Air Force base, Schilling, and there was a big military presence when I was very, very young. It eventually closed and has transformed itself into sort of a business center now in that community.

But Salina was small enough that you kind of got to know everybody, but large enough that there was a lot going on. Certainly for the Graves family who kind of were in the transportation business, being in the community where the Interstate 70 and 35 crossed was a wonderful place in the heart of the state to be in the transportation business.

MM: We'll talk about your family's involvement with the transportation business here in a little bit. But tell us a little bit about your upbringing with your family. You're one of two children of Bill and Helen.

BG: Right. My mom Helen and William H. I have a sister, Martha, currently living out in Colorado Springs. Attended public schools, Whittier Elementary School, right across the street from where I grew up, a couple of other elementary schools, North Junior High, then Salina High School, which by the time I was a senior became Salina Central High School. The community had grown large enough; they needed to build a second school. Salina South was built.

So I was in the first graduating class in 1971 of Salina Central High School, a proud Mustang, and then I decided to stay in Salina. So many of my friends were off to KU and K-State and Wichita State, but I enjoyed sports. I wasn't very good particularly, and I had an opportunity to stay in Salina and attend Kansas Wesleyan University and play football and played a little baseball, not much. I loved the small college environment that they offered. Again, it gave me the chance to do a little bit of everything. So I was there through graduation in 1976 before leaving Salina and heading off to graduate school at the University of Kansas.

MM: Can you talk a little bit about your career aspirations and tie that in with the family business? Your father and your uncles established a company that proved to be very successful. Tell us about the origins of the company.

BG: The Graves were farmers, a large, good, Methodist farm family—four boys, six girls. In the 1930s, like so many, suffered through the Depression and lost the family farm, but held on to one old truck. It was sort of the one possession they managed to salvage out of that, and I think neighbors, probably feeling generous you might say, would ask my grandfather and my dad and the brothers to move product for them, things from farm to market.

They discovered that they could make some money moving things. The business was just in its infancy in the late thirties and early forties. Several of the boys, my dad included, went off to war, World War II. Dad served in a transportation unit, moving supplies to Northern Africa and France and learned a lot more about logistics and how to be successful at that business.

He came home, invested in the business, and grew it into a really large multi-state carrier. At one point, he had 2,500 employees, thousands of pieces of equipment. They were a great company. So the family all worked in that business—my uncles, my aunts, my cousins, everybody. It was a family business, and my goal, my aspiration was to follow in my father's footsteps and be the CEO or at least have a significant role in Graves Truck Line.

That came to a screeching halt in 1980, when they had an offer to sell that business that they simply couldn't refuse. He called me one day. I remember it clearly. I was in Lawrence in graduate school, and he said, "Hey, I tell you, I've sold the business, and you're going to need to find something else to do with your life."

MM: So most of your cognitive adult life and teenage years, you had this notion of you knew what you were going to do professionally.

BG: Absolutely.

MM: You had a sense that this was the family business, and my father's going to hand it off to me. I'm working there—you're learning the ropes. So what did that mean to you? What happened to you when that call came from your father in 1980?

BG: Well, I think I did unfortunately what too many young people probably do, make immediate bad decisions. I felt like that was sort of the end of the world. In fact, I sort of checked out of my

graduate studies because I thought the whole graduate degree was about being prepared for this business challenge.

So I kind of wandered aimlessly for a bit, and then got a phone call about some political stuff going on in 1980. I very candidly have to say I didn't feel like I had anything better to do. So I thought this is kind of interesting. I'll put my toe in the political water.

MM: You had the opportunity then to be surrounded by—"mentor" is maybe too strong of a word—but they were older adult individuals who had an influence in your life and saw that you were struggling after your father sold the company. Talk a little bit about that and some of those individuals and who they were and what they meant to you.

BG: Well, [Gary Sherrer](#) who I first met when he was recruiting freshmen to participate in his speech and debate program at Salina High. I signed up, and I enjoyed speech and debate, which was in a way sort of ironic because my father couldn't—he couldn't give a speech if his life depended on it, but I enjoyed that.

I had an algebra teacher, his name was Kaye Pearce, and he taught me about following rules. He was also the head football coach at Salina High. He eventually became the Executive Director of the Kansas High School Activities Association, enforcing the rules. So I learned from a master in that regard. And then my college coach, Gene Bissell, who was a hard-working, wonderful man that taught me a lot about extra effort and kind of get going when the going gets tough.

I had three individuals, and in fact, it was Gary Sherrer who had actually left education, and ironically enough, ended up working for Graves Truck Line. My father gave him a job after he left education, and Gary had come then to Topeka when the company was sold. He had a good sense of what was going on in Topeka. He was actually the one that called me and said, "There's a gentleman by the name of Herbert Walker Bush running for president in 1980." Just everybody else in Kansas was locked in with our favorite son, Bob Dole, but Gary said, "You know, Bush needs some people. Dole's not going to notice or care. You could really open a few doors and enjoy yourself."

So I was actually a very—a minimum-wage paid staffer on the 1980 George Bush presidential campaign.

MM: And that led to work in the Secretary of State's office or the connections that were made and the folks that you were introduced to at that time.

BG: Right. In fact, we were a stone's throw over here on Kansas Avenue. So I would walk here to the Capitol and go to the Secretary of State's office, get voter registration information and just information about the upcoming primary election or the primaries. There was a presidential preference primary at that time. That's how I met Jack Brier who, of course, Bush became the vice presidential running mate of President Reagan and successfully elected.

So my campaign experience ended early summer, but by September, Jack Brier called me and said, “Hey, I have a position open at the Secretary of State’s office. Maybe you’d like to come talk to me about it.”

So I came back to this Capitol building and interviewed with Jack and was hired in September of 1980 to go to work.

MM: Did you have an inkling then that public service might be a path for you?

BG: No, I really didn’t. I was twenty-seven years old. I needed a job. I was still trying to figure out—I was still on the rebound from the whole family business thing. So, no, to me, it was just a minor administrative position, just down the hall here on the second floor.

MM: Your mentors will say about you at that time in your life that the message that they tried to impact to you as a young individual who was looking for a direction was “To those who much is given, much is expected,” and the fact that you had a life dream shattered and were looking for something, talk to us a little bit about those conversations with your mentors and how much that meant to you in terms of helping to shape how you came to view the world and how you came to look at this notion of doing something else.

BG: I certainly believe that is a philosophy that my father and my mother instilled in me. I think much of that time involved those mentors trying to convince me that there was worth, that there was value. It was a contribution that I could make that I needed to leave that old chapter behind and open a new chapter, and I was probably again a little immature, just didn’t quite yet grasp what those possibilities might be. I was unsure of myself.

So I settled in here with Jack for a couple of years and actually Senator Dole popped back up, became Majority Leader for the first time in the Senate, and it was expanding his staff, and I actually made an attempt to resign from the Secretary of State’s office, and Jack talked me out of it. He just really felt like there was some opportunity here that Washington would just be kind of a blur, and I’d get lost in all of that.

So I stayed and worked out that Jack had his own aspirations, and maybe he was thinking of that at the time. He decided to run for Governor in 1986, and called me in one day and said, “I’m going to run for Governor. You ought to consider running for Secretary of State.”

MM: Had you thought about it before?

BG: No. I think if you think about public service, you generally think about “I’m going to run for the local School Board,” or “I’m going to run for the City Council” or maybe a state legislative seat. But to all of a sudden say, “Sure, my first race, I’m just going to run statewide” was a little overwhelming, but again it seemed like the stars kind of aligned, and it was what was meant to be. So that’s what we did.

MM: Any recollections or vivid memories from that first campaign in 1986?

BG: Well, I can certainly assure you we quickly figured out that the unique Graves Truck Line logo, which people had seen millions of times up and down the state's highways, it was a positive image. There as something about it that people were comfortable with. So we latched on to that in a hurry. I suppose it's that you look back and realize how many people gave up their time and their energy, not to mention their money, I mean, supporting you financially—people that would host the coffees, to say to some neighbors, "Hi, we want you to come over and meet Bill Graves. He's running for Secretary of State."

Well, we know now—of course, there's a higher profile in Secretaries of State today than there was then.

MM: Correct.

BG: But nonetheless, it's not the most high profile office. You know, it's just wonderful that I made so many friends and was successful.

MM: There was clearly some personal growth in you during those years, too. There were friends and colleagues who were with you in that campaign who tell the story of having to peel you off the wall and push you towards the crowd so that you could start conversing with people. You clearly developed some skills, human relations sort of skills doing that sort of work.

BG: Right. Well, you've got to get comfortable basically walking up to strangers and extending your hand and saying, "Hi, I'm Bill Graves. I'm running for Secretary of State. I'd appreciate your support," whatever the pitch might be. But again I think it goes back to, all the way back to high school speech and debate. At Kansas Wesleyan, I actually did some theatre, and I loved performing on stage. I actually did some community theatre following that. I certainly had a comfort level which went a long way in helping me with the public appearances and self-promotion.

MM: Fair enough. Re-elected in 1990 as Secretary of State. At one point did you start thinking, "Maybe governor."

BG: Well, and I'll get a few of these details wrong. The night that I was re-elected in 1990, I think [Bob Stephan](#) was re-elected but was politically wounded a bit from some of the issues that he had going on.

MM: Correct.

BG: The Attorney General. Let's see, Governor Finney defeated [Mike Hayden](#) that night in Hayden's attempt at re-election.

MM: Correct.

BG: I believe the Insurance Commissioner was defeated that night, Ron Todd.

MM: I think that's also correct.

BG: I think that's true, and I believe the Treasurer, it might have been Sally Thompson.

MM: I think that's correct. Sally Thompson followed Governor Finney as Treasurer.

BG: But when the dust settled on that night, in terms of statewide office holders—

MM: New faces.

BG: I was, I looked okay. So that certainly, there was a thought. There was obviously federal office holders. There were a lot of other people, but I also, Mike, I loved public service, but public service was not sort of an all-consuming "This is all I can do with my life." So as we moved closer to 1994, I was okay with the idea of running and not winning. You want to win elections, but if you don't win, you do what most people do. You go on with your life. You go get a job. You find something else, some way to contribute. I never viewed public service as kind of a lifelong career-like endeavor, and I know you know that I'm the one that wishes a lot of our public officials would move out of the way sooner.

MM: Sure.

BG: I think there's no shortage of bright, capable people with good ideas and energy and perspective that, if we could just move some of the folks out of the way.

MM: Sure.

BG: So I decided I'd give it a whirl.

MM: Before we get out of 1990, we need to talk about your marriage. That also happened that year. Tell us about Linda.

BG: Linda is smarter than me. She's better looking than I am. She's the whole package. I think having her as a partner also made it easier to make that decision, knowing there was going to be someone to help me along the way. She was a fierce campaigner all over the state on my behalf. That just made a big difference.

We were married in April of 1990, just before that re-elect. I think throughout my remaining time in public office, she was a big factor.

MM: I think it's safe to say you married up.

BG: I married up.

MM: Absolutely.

BG: Her father, who was alive at the time, was very politically interested, involved, had been a big supporter of Senator Dole. So the marriage worked in that regard as well.

MM: Sure. Fair enough. So 1994, it's a crowded Republican primary for Governor. Did that scare you off at all when you knew there were going to be some other heavy hitters in that campaign?

BG: Well, I didn't know much about Gene Bicknell, only that he had been a very, very successful businessman from Southeast Kansas. He sort of came out of that mold—I'm trying to remember, Nestor Weigand, who had run previously. There were always some businessmen who fancied that if they could get control of the state government.

MM: Larry Jones.

BG: Yes, absolutely. But, Gene, I didn't know much about [Fred Kerr](#), I did, and he was just one of the finest men. He had done a wonderful job as a State Senator from Pratt. I suppose I'd say, and I hope he wouldn't be offended in hindsight, he had all the skill sets. He probably didn't have the best political personality, but Fred was who I worried about the most, which goes to why I worked so hard to convince [Sheila Frahm](#), the State Senator from Colby, to be my running mate. The one thing I lacked was any sort of legislative experience and sort of policy experience. So having the Chair of the Senate Education Committee, someone with the same rural Kansas roots, she was just sort of the perfect checkmate to Senator Kerr's sort of bonafides. There were probably three or four others in that race, but that was kind of the bulk of it.

MM: When you think about state government, everything is so close here. The executive branch is just a floor down from the legislative branch, just across the street from the judicial branch. Unlike Washington where things are a bit more disparate, here it's you get to know each other pretty quickly. You have a sense of how the legislative works. The legislative has a sense of how the executive works. You were always very, very clear about making sure that people understood you were the leader of the executive branch of government. That was a purposeful decision on your part?

BG: Well, that's why we have three branches of government. You respect that, and that's what makes it work. I think in '94, again there were—no Secretary of State had ever been elected to higher office, ever, in the history of the state. So I didn't exactly have the wind in my sails in that regard. And I think there were many in the legislature who were probably—it's a kind of a fraternity. Even if it's Republican and Democrat, collectively it's kind of “We're legislators, and that's the executive branch.”

In order to be successful, you need legislators all over the state to be for you or at least not be against you. And again a person like a Fred Kerr whose brother, [Dave Kerr](#), was also tremendously influential in Hutchinson, they had reason—you had reason to expect them to get a lot of legislators supporting them. And I think again the Sheila Frahm decision helped us in that regard.

MM: So 1995, you take office on your birthday. On your 42nd birthday, you become Governor of Kansas. It was a good time to be a Republican in office. The state coffers were full. So the

decisions, talk to us about what went through your mind when you first became governor and realized, “My gosh, I’ve got to make some decisions here pretty quick.”

BG: Can I say something about [Jim Slattery](#)?

MM: Please.

BG: Okay. The opponent who to this day I consider a friend—when I announced that I was going to run, I thought the Republican, whether it was me or whoever else, would win the primary. I thought the Republican would be facing off against the incumbent Governor, Governor Finney. She certainly surprised me. I don’t know. There may be some who weren’t surprised, but she decided not to run, and just like that, six-term Democratic Congressman Jim Slattery is in the race.

He is smart, articulate—

MM: Very well known.

BG: Yes.

MM: Good name ID.

BG: That changed the calculus, I guess, if you will, but it was just ’94 nationally was a Republican year. Timing isn’t always everything, but it’s often a lot, and Jim just jumped in at a time when it was going to be hard in Kansas for a Democrat to win.

So we came out on top, and again January of ’95, we came into office with the state in pretty good shape. So we didn’t have a tremendous amount of heavy lifting to do right off the bat, but it was also a year, and I’m sure we’re going to get more into it, the political sands were shifting a lot within the Republican Party. A more conservative element was emerging.

MM: Let’s talk about that. That was the first time in 1994, that that Republican branch, or the conservative branch of the Republican Party in Kansas began to exercise, throw some sharp elbows. They started to show that, yes, we have some influence, and we have some clout. You were perceived as a moderate Republican. So it was very easy, right or wrong, for two camps to be created within the Republican Party. What did that mean to you when you first started to see that surface?

BG: Well, initially, it was obviously disappointing because you sort of have this picture of how things are going to go. We’ve just won, and we’re all going to kind of unite and work together and do good things for the state. Instead immediately a sort of a family feud breaks out, and we had a lot of—this was the first time that there was really an effort to get precinct committee men and women elected who would then have their way in the elections in the precincts and Congressional districts around the state.

It was the first time at least that I'm aware of where the Party more or less said to the sitting Governor of the same party, "You're not the leader of the party. We collectively are, and we'll decide who's going to be Chairman of the Party." So we started off on kind of a bad note, but again you've got to deal with the way things are.

MM: When that occurred, I can recall you saying—you were very prescient with respect to how you would position those conversations publicly, and you would always say, "I'm willing to sit down and talk with anyone who is willing to sit down and talk with me." And that took the pressure, the political pressure off of you in terms of "This doesn't have to be confrontational," right? That was purposeful on your part. Talk a little bit about that.

BG: Well, it's because I felt that way. I thought, "Okay, we have some differences of opinion. Let's sit down, and let's try to work through the magnitude"—we had surplus of revenues. We were going to do some tax cuts. Let's have a conversation about a compromise, where we meet in the middle to make meaningful tax cuts, but not ruin sort of the immediate future of the State. Social issues, abortion was high on everybody's radar at the time. Guns were already emerging as an issue. There was plenty to disagree about.

What was disappointing to me, Mike, was that however far you were willing to go to compromise, the goal post kept moving. If you said, "I'll cut taxes this much," then the response was, "Well, we need this much plus." "Well, okay. We'll do this much plus this much." They'd say, "Well, no, we need"—there was always sort of a bar too high.

My job was to take care of everybody in this state, to do the best I could to provide public policy for all Kansans, not just Kansans who voted for me, not just Kansans who were members of the Republican Party, all Kansans. So I didn't really hesitate or feel any reason not to reach out to members of the Democrats in the Kansas legislature and say, "Can we put a coalition together, if you will, of like-minded Republicans and Democrats and take care of the people's business?" And that's what we did.

Now, that further alienated me from the conservative Republicans, but in hindsight, I'm like, "What would you expect?"

MM: Sure.

BG: I sat in this very office one day with a key Republican Senator when we discussed compromising on an issue, and the Senator said, "Compromise, Governor, is a dirty word."

At that point, you pretty well understand that you're going to have to figure out how to get solutions in some other form or fashion.

MM: Is that the genesis of some of the challenges that we're facing today in the public sphere?

BG: Well, it certainly was sort of the birth or at least the public emergence of the differences we're seeing today here in Kansas. And I think again that the notion that public servants somehow have a group of individuals, they're responsible to satisfy or accommodate, and if you

didn't vote for me or if you're not of this particular stripe, then you don't matter. That is just something I can't wrap my head around.

Wyandotte County is a good example. One of our biggest challenges back in those days, in the 1990s and preceding that though was just that Wyandotte County was a great part of Kansas City, but it was just not, it just had a hard time developing.

MM: Right.

BG: You know, challenges in the education system, challenges in their social services. Economic development was slim and none in the county. But because it was a predominantly Democrat county, Republicans just weren't going to help. And we sat here one day and talked, Duane Goossen, the Budget Director, we talked about how much money we were spending supporting Wyandotte County without really making a difference in Wyandotte County.

And that's when we got into this whole thing with the people showed up from NASCAR and said, "We have an interest in a racetrack." Well, nobody thought a racetrack was the solution to Wyandotte County's problems, but it was an opportunity to sort of rise and shine, to bring a national spotlight on a location that had heretofore not gotten much of that kind of attention.

So I sent Gary Sherrer and his team down to a meeting in, I think, South Carolina or maybe North Carolina. They came back and said, "Hey, this is something we need to pursue further." I got Dean Carlson, the Secretary of Transportation, in my office. I basically said, "Dean, whatever they need in the way of infrastructure improvements in and around that interchange in Wyandotte County, the answer is yes," which Dean did.

So you end up landing a [motor sport facility](#), which all of a sudden, spawns retail and hotels, and then businesses started locating in that vicinity. It just sort of transformed Wyandotte County, and I am very proud of that because it was a conscientious decision that we take care of everybody in our state.

MM: You touched on this with respect to mentioning some of your Cabinet members, right? One of the first things you did when you took office was surround yourself with very talented people. That was clearly by design. Talk about you as a manager of human resources and how you approached building a Cabinet.

BG: I have to tell the story about the announcement. We thought it would be again because back to my Secretary of State had never been elected to higher office and all the questions about my capabilities, we decided to really land a big punch and sort of announce everybody at one time. We're going to show everybody we're decisive, and we've got this team.

So we went to the old Supreme Court Chamber and we had the list—Steve Williams, who went on to be the head of the US Fish and Wildlife Service was in the group. We had [John LaFaver](#) who had been Department of Revenue who went on to the Internal Revenue Service. [Rochelle Chronister](#) who was a really respected state legislator, had been Chairman of Ways and Means, I believe.

MM: Wayne Franklin.

BG: Wayne Franklin as Human Resources, Dean Carlson came aboard. He was the former head of the Federal Highway Administration. It was an outstanding group of individuals. We introduced everybody to the media upstairs in the Chamber. I believe it was your friend, Martin Hawver probably who said, “Governor, how many of these people are Democrats?”

I turned around and looked at the group and I said, “Are any of you Democrats?” because I didn’t know. It wasn’t the way I thought about how you govern. It’s not about your political stripes. It’s your capabilities.

Now, thank goodness, Wayne Franklin raised his hand. There was somebody else. I’m trying to remember. We at least passed the smell test.

MM: I remember Wayne Franklin, a quick story. It was right after the inaugural speech. You gathered everyone in the Lieutenant Governor’s office with Sheila Frahm, and it was a “Rah, rah! Let’s go to work!” and Wayne said, “Where’s my office?” So we had to point him down to the Department of Human Resources at that point.

BG: Your question though.

MM: Yes, please.

BG: I think, I view today, and we’re talking in 2022, I view today that too many chief elected officials, whether it’s Presidents or Governors, they micromanage to too great a degree what these individuals in the various agencies are allowed to do, or they have people within their Governor’s office or within the White House who sit on people to the point they can’t fully use their talents.

I loved it when [Rochelle Chronister](#) walked in here and said, “I have an idea about”—we called it “privatization.” It was really subcontracting some of the services for social service programs for Kansans. It was something we’d never done before. People had criticized the way the state was running some of those programs, and I said, “Let’s do it.”

Dean Carlson was front and center on coming up with a 13 billion dollar multi-modal transportation program. Steve Williams had a number of innovative little programs. I remember, he walked in and said, “You know, we have a lot of people that like to hunt in this state, but there’s not enough public hunting ground. So I have this idea. Let’s offer farmers a little stipend, and we’re going to create something called the Walk-In Hunting Program, and if you participate and you let your land be available for guys to come and hunt on, we’ll pay you”—I don’t know. Was it a dollar an acre? It was some amount of money, but it was just sort of those little creative things that I would have never thought of those things.

So again I love the fact that I had a team of people that 99-9/10ths percent of the time did not let me down.

MM: Fair enough. '95 was also a big year for you and Linda with respect to your family. You've often referred to it as the Katie factor. Talk to us about what adopting your daughter meant to you.

BG: Linda and I had both—Linda is an attorney and practicing law in Kansas City. I was obviously involved in my public service in politics. We got married, and it was like we kind of looked at each other and said, "Well, do we have time? Is there going to be a family?" And it turned out that that was not meant to be. So we turned our attention towards adoption.

We were very fortunate to find a referral through Wichita of a baby that was going to be born in Texas, and we went through all the hoops of making sure the birth mother was healthy, taken care of, all those issues prior to birth, and then I always think it was one of the most funny, interesting days when Jennie Rose, the administrator at Cedar Crest, planted those "It's A Girl" signs, and Mrs. Graves had never looked pregnant.

So we announced Katie's birth in October of 1995, but, Mike, for me, all of a sudden there was a clarity about adoption, adoption-related issues, about the health issues surrounding newborns. There was childhood immunization programs that Linda worked on. There were sort of child safety initiatives, things about car seats and the like.

So I thought it helped round out in me kind of a missing piece that many people are fully aware of because they have families and they've raised children, but we had not. So that was the Katie factor in my life.

MM: You're a father, and you're making all the decisions that fathers make, but you also happen to be Governor. So that added another layer of just sort of importance to work.

BG: Well, it also brought to this office a sort of a commitment or an appreciation of the things that we needed to do as a state to support those who were raising young children.

MM: Let me ask you this. When you think about your years in office, what is the most difficult decision that you had to make?

BG: There are three things that come to mind immediately. The first was probably when Senator Dole whispered in my ear—I was at a meeting in Washington, and he leaned over and said, "I'm going to make a very important announcement in the next day," and that was his decision to resign from the United States Senate.

I honestly don't wish on any Governor having to appoint a replacement to the United States Senate. It's one of those situations where a lot of people want it. How much better does it get to just have a seat handed to you? What happens is, when you finally make the decision, the person you decide on, which in this case was my Lieutenant Governor, Sheila Frahm. They probably feel a certain expectation. That's kind of how that works. We did this thing together. But in the meantime, everybody you said no to, they think you've made a mistake, a terrible mistake. So

you don't win. Plus you live under horrible media scrutiny. Even in Kansas, our small state, those probably fourteen days were just probably the worst.

And then I think I felt bad because I don't think I thought through where that was headed with Sheila's short time in the Senate and what it was going to take to keep her in that Senate seat, and I think I just said, "Okay, it's your seat. Good luck."

MM: "Knock yourself out," right?

BG: "We'll see you," and I went back to my business here at the Capitol. I think had I been more helpful, had I thought more about that, I might have helped change the political future of the state to some degree. That will always remain with me.

Two, a gentleman that I came to really respect and like in the Kansas legislature, Gary Hayzlett, was an avid pro-gun member of the state legislature and was one of the leading advocates for our concealed carry here in the state and had been a huge supporter and helpful Chairman I believe of the Transportation Committee when we got our transportation plan passed.

I'm not one that believes more weapons is a good solution to anything, and I'm sure at this point I'm really outdated in my thinking, but as you probably remember, I vetoed a bill that allowed concealed carry of weapons in this state. I made the right decision. I just hated the fact that it was a decision that so disappointed somebody that I liked and had been helpful to me.

MM: Sure.

BG: And then, third, of course, is the plethora of all the abortion-related issues. Again, it was back to our conversation about never compromising. I think we agreed to, and we moved the bar as close to what was legally permissible in terms of restrictions that the Court would allow, and I believed that everything that was being promoted upstairs beyond that was just theatre. It was just scoring political points, trying to stir the base. So we vetoed several bills, if I recall. Again, I think I made the right decision, but it just further angered the conservatives.

MM: So today, let's talk about politics today in 2022 compared to what it was in the nineties. Today in Kansas, you, Bill Graves, are held up as sort of the model of moderate Republicanism, the last of a breed. A, do you agree with that, and, B, if you do, tell us why. If you don't tell us why you don't.

BG: Well, I don't know if I think that I'm the last of the breed. I think that there are a lot of centrist, moderate—you can pick the phrase to describe them—Republicans in the state. I think they are a minority relative to the totality of registered, those who identify themselves as Republicans. But I still think it's where the Republican Party ought to be. I think they spend way too much time on again theatrical sort of issues where in my mind the Republicans ought to be focused on collecting whatever amount of taxes you need to make government run and serve people and not a dime more, and you'd better spend and account for the money you use appropriately.

I think education—public education is so, so very important. I mean, we just have to have smart—we have to be raising smart thinkers. And where would a lot of our small Kansas communities be without their schools? Probably they wouldn't be there for very long. And the same goes for health care.

It's sort of these basic meat and potatoes kinds of issues that I think Republicans have always kind of campaigned on and felt passionately about, and I think because we've loaded ourselves down with all of this other peripheral stuff, we don't devote as much time and commit ourselves as much to those traditional Republican values.

The other thing I'd say, Mike, is, and you know this, making state government work is hard. It's really hard work. These are big operations with a lot of people. They spend a lot of money. They touch a lot of people every day, and I think there are some Republicans who have decided that failing to be able to actually manage these programs, we'll just do away with the programs. That's how we'll solve our waste and inefficiencies problem. We just will not even have the program, and then there won't be a chance for waste and inefficiency.

I don't view that as the right answer. The right answer is figure out where the waste and inefficiency is and fix it. Go find better people to do whatever it is you committed to do. So, yeah, I'm an Old School Republican. I'm still a Republican. I think that the pendulum will eventually swing back, but I don't know if I'll see it in my lifetime.

MM: I was going to ask you about that. In Kansas especially, the governance model you described succeeded for decades, for generations. You didn't invent it when you ran for Governor in 1994. You stood on the shoulders of a lot of individuals, Republicans and Democrats, who had had the same basic approach. So what you just described led to your decision in 2018, 2022 to endorse a Democrat for Governor in Kansas. That could not have been easy for you.

BG: It was not. Easier in '18 than it was in '22. In '18, I simply concluded that the Republican nominee was not going to be good for the future of the state. I have a view from my personal experience of what this office is for and about and how a person should be ready to conduct themselves as a Governor of this state. And I firmly believed, and I was right, that Governor Kelly was the best choice for the state at that moment, and she proved me right over, I think, four years of wonderful work, all the time having to deal with a pretty conservative state legislature that wasn't always that helpful.

Now flash forward to this year and it was more difficult because the Republican candidate, Derek Schmidt, had worked for me in this office. I knew his history, having worked for Senator Kassebaum, was always somebody that I had admired and quite frankly had hoped he would aspire to higher office. But, along the way, there was this transition—or at least to me it was a transition, sort of away from a more traditional Republican view to what the Party seems to be promoting today in sort of Derek's beliefs, and I don't agree with that. You know, I'm one of those people that I don't mind disagreement. I just don't like disagreeable people. I still like Derek, and I wish him well, but I think the state will be in better hands with Governor Kelly for

the next four years, especially given we have a very conservative legislature, and I don't expect some of the theatrical kinds of pieces of legislation to—they're going to continue.

MM: Let's begin to wrap this up. When I hear you talking about your governing style and your thoughts, it takes me back to the 1990s, too. One of my most fond memories of you as Governor and those of us, myself and my colleagues on the staff, one of the things you would often say was, "People of Kansas don't get up in the morning thinking about their Governor," right? I still think about that a lot. Tell us what's underneath that. What drives a thought like that?

BG: Well, it's a little bit like flipping on the lights or turning on the water. I mean, you flip the switch, and you have an expectation. You turn the tap, and you have an expectation. People expect without thinking about it that you're here, and you're taking care of a business, and I don't really—I never did really care whether—I wasn't looking for adulation or—again, I kind of wanted to get in and do my thing and get out. I've often said in jest that I started with the same wife, ended with the same wife. I got a job when I got out, and I never was indicted. I mean, I had a successful eight-year run.

I think there are just too many people who have found seeking public office as a permanent career. I mean, it's just something I'm going to keep doing. I'm going to be a state legislator. I'm going to be a Governor. I'm going to be a Congressman. I'm going to be a US Senator, then I'm going to be the President, and my whole life is going to be spent on the public dime, if you will.

I actually like citizen legislators, citizen public officials. You ought to come in, do your job. You ought to spend all your energy. You should be completely worn out and done and then get out of the way. Let the next person come in and see how they can do. That's actually worked great, Mike. I mean, I miss this a lot. It's the best job you could ever have, but I also respect the system, and the system says you get four or eight years, and then you go find something else to do.

MM: Fair enough. Governor, thank you. Anything that we haven't brought up that you'd like to touch on before we land the plane?

BG: Mike, you and I have talked in this building—we could go on for probably days, unfortunately, but I appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this Oral History Project. I think it's a wonderful thing that's being done, and I hope that this short time together is in some way contributes to its success.

MM: Governor, thanks for your time.

BG: Thanks, Mike.

MM: On behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, we appreciate your time. Thanks very much.

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