

Interview of REPRESENTATIVE DON HINEMAN by Alan Conroy, August 20, 2020
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Alan Conroy: Good afternoon. The date is August 20, 2020 at 1:30 p.m., and we're in the House Chambers of the Kansas State House here in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Alan Conroy, a forty-year-plus state employee with the majority of that state service working in the Kansas Legislative Research Department, which is the central nonpartisan research and budget staff for the legislature. I'm interviewing today Representative Don Hineman who served twelve years in the legislature. He was the majority leader in 2017 and 2018, and he has decided not to run for re-election at the end of this current term.

So I'm going to be conducting this interview on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, Incorporated, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing legislators, and the interviews will be made accessible to researchers and legislators. These interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Humanities Kansas, and the audio and video equipment is being operated for former Representative David Heinemann.

Representative Hineman is from Dighton, Kansas. He's a farmer and a rancher. He has his undergraduate degree in business from the University of Kansas, and he got that in 1969. Then he has two advanced degrees from the University of Michigan, one in business in 1970, and the other one in natural resources in 1973.

Representative Hineman was elected to the Kansas House in 2008 and has continuously served here in this chamber for the last twelve years. He currently represents District 118, which includes all or part of the following counties, and you might keep me honest here—Lane, Scott, Wichita, Logan, Thomas, Gove, Trego, Graham, Sheridan, and is it a few townships in Rooks County? Is that right?

Don Hineman: I believe it is only one square section in Rooks County, and no one lives there.

AC: No voters.

DH: A little glitch in the mapping, thanks to the Court.

AC: Thanks to the Court. There we go, and we can talk about that. Over his legislative career, he served on a number of legislative committees. 2009, when he first came, Education, Vision 2020, Veterans, Military, and Homeland Security, Ag, and Natural Resources. In the 2010 session, it was Appropriations, General Government Budget, Ag and Natural Resources. 2011, Energy and Utilities, General Government Budget, Local Government, and Vision 2020. In the 2012 session, those same committees, Energy and Utilities, General Government Budget, Local Government, and Vision 2020. Then in '13 and '14 sessions, he served on the Vision 2020 Committee and the General Government Budget Committee, and Taxation. That was both in 2013 and 2014. Then in '15 and '16, he served on Federal and State Affairs, General Government Budget, and Taxation. Then in the 2017 and '18 session, he was House majority leader, and with that title comes lots of interesting committees—Calendar and Printing, Interstate Cooperation, Legislative Budget, which is the House budget committee, and then the

Legislative Coordinating Council. Then this last session, he served on the Rural Revitalization Committee, Commerce and Labor and Economic Development, and Taxation.

Quite an illustrious history there of service, lots of committees, and lots of committees that touch a lot of major areas. We might start off to talk a little bit about the background, your background, and the life before you entered the legislature. I believe you are a native Kansan. Is that right?

DH: That's correct.

AC: And your parents had the farm and ranch?

DH: That's right. My parents had the farm and ranch. Actually I live in the house that my grandparents built, the first part of it in 1918, and then expanded it later. So we've been in that house for over a hundred years now.

AC: That's a good long run. I've got to ask. I mentioned two master's degrees from the University of Michigan. How did you get from the University of Kansas and end up at the University of Michigan?

DH: I knew I wanted to get an MBA if I could with an emphasis on Operations Research, which is analytical mathematical methods. I had a low draft number. I didn't think I was going to be able to do that. So I elected to apply for Officer Training School, went through the written exam, went through the physical exam, and the last station on the physical exam was the eye exam. When they found out I couldn't read the big E on the top of the chart without my glasses, they said, "Son, the military doesn't want you."

So I went home and applied to several business schools around the country and selected Michigan as the one that seemed like the best fit.

AC: A great reputation, the University of Michigan. So your friends, I guess back home, going to the University of Kansas was okay, they understood that?

DH: It was okay. Actually it's interesting. My high school graduating class was fifty-five students. That's the largest it's been. Since then, all of the classes have been smaller. I think they're down into the teens now, unfortunately. But out of those fifty-five students, there were five of us. I think that was a little bit of an anomaly. It was a bit of a sore spot for my father. He had four offspring. He was a K State graduate, had a degree in veterinary medicine. He had four offspring, and we all went to KU. He saw that as a failure in parenting, I think.

AC: That's good. Maybe just in terms of just your general interest in politics in general, maybe not just legislature, but politics in general, is that something maybe even from those college days forward, or is that something that developed later in life?

DH: No, I think I've always had an interest in politics. I remember the 1960 election, being involved as a young middle school or high school student. It's always been something I've followed, and then my father [Kalo Hineman] served in the legislature in the seventies with Dave Heinemann, by the way. Dave was in diapers I think still. That got me following Kansas politics more closely.

Yet I didn't have any ambition to serve in the legislature myself. I did involve myself in public service back home in City Council, County Commission, and then a number of boards within the livestock industry, but it was a good and well-respected friend who urged me to run in 2008 and convinced me that the time was right for me to do that. So I did.

AC: Would you consider that person sort of your mentor, I guess, in a broad sense of the term in terms of politics or taking that leap then into the legislature?

DH: Yes, I think so.

AC: You mentioned your County Commission service and your City Council service. Of course, all public service, you see a lot of differences between serving in the legislature and maybe being on that local County Commission, in terms of maybe interactions with your constituents or expectations of your constituents.

DH: It's not an easy job, being a county commissioner. You don't make a lot of friends. Everyone wants their road bladed yesterday. But it's a good opportunity to get a greater understanding of what public service is like, and what you can do for the people you serve. Over the years, we've discovered—I'm kind of a centrist Republican. I'm kind of in the middle of that political spectrum, that bell-shaped curve. I'm a centrist Republican, and we have found that those of us that kind of categorize ourselves that way quite often come from a career of public service back home. I think that colors your perspective on politics and the legitimacy of government. I think it has served us well to have had that experience before getting here.

AC: Maybe just in terms of this mentor, but were there others in terms of individuals either at the local level, state, or maybe in the national level that you admired because of their public service?

DH: Certainly. It goes with kind of my position on that political spectrum. I've looked up to and admired President Eisenhower, Senator Dole, Senator Kassebaum have been individuals who had very illustrious careers and worked for the common good with a focus more on policy than on politics. That was my approach during my service.

AC: I guess sort of bedrock is that public service, what's doing best for the overall, whether it's the state or the county, without necessarily coloring everything in terms of the politics of the issue or an issue.

DH: Exactly. I think that's so important. It really is true that the best legislative initiatives are bipartisan in nature. If there's a major legislative initiative that is passed with just one party's support, that's usually not the best policy. We've seen that at both the federal and the state level. When the two parties work together to find that common ground in the middle, that's when you have policy that really lasts and stands the test of time.

AC: Just in terms of running for—was it City Council first and then the County Commission?

DH: Correct.

AC: Those campaigns compared to your legislative campaigns?

DH: It was pretty simple back then.

AC: No TV commercials.

DH: No commercials. Not even any yard signs or palm cards. You bought an ad in the county paper, and that was it. That was your campaign.

AC: I think the first time you ran for the legislature, it was against an incumbent [Virginia Beamer]?

DH: It was, yes.

AC: A tight race, but clearly you were successful.

DH: It was a tight race, and a very interesting race that lasted past the primary. I campaigned very hard. I knew that running against an incumbent, I was going to have to outwork the individual that I intended to replace. I think my district back then was smaller, instead of all of seven and most of two more counties, I had all of five or six and most of two more. But still it was a very large district geographically, and I remember I campaigned in my pickup truck because I thought that presented the image I wanted to present. That was in 2008, when gasoline was four dollars. I put almost ten thousand miles on my pickup, traveling the district and knocking on doors.

I won by—the final tally was thirteen votes. On the primary election night, I was behind, and it wasn't until the provisional ballots were counted that it flipped, and I had a thirteen-vote lead. The incumbent still had a sizable amount in her campaign fund and so decided, "Let's have a write-in campaign." We did. Those don't have a very high odds of success, and that didn't work out for her. I was elected.

AC: In that decision to run, was there a particular policy issue, or you just thought there was a time for a change? You were ready to come to Topeka?

DH: It was the right time in my life. Our kids were off to college. It just seemed like if I was ever going to do something like this, that was the time for it. Like I say, I had a well-respected friend say, "Look, we need better representation here. We need someone that sees the world the way you do, and you need to run." I spent about a week thinking about it and finally decided, "Yeah, I think I'll do that."

AC: Did your wife weigh in on the decision?

DH: She did. She supported me. She helped campaign.

AC: That's neat. So you won that election, and then your next, 2012, 2014, 2016, you were unopposed. Is that right?

DH: Yes. In 2010, I had a primary challenger, an individual who signed the affidavit to not spend more than \$500 and really never put the work into it. An incumbent always considers that the best kind of a challenger. It's good for fundraising to say, "I've got a race here, folks," but yet the outcome was pretty much assured. Since then, I've never had another challenge. I ran unopposed. I think that's probably due to the fact that my district is actually bigger geographically than the state of Connecticut. It's kind of a built-in deterrent, trying to take that on.

AC: Or does it mean from your constituents' standpoint, you're doing the right thing, that you haven't riled them up in some manner?

DH: I'd like to think that that's part of it, too, yes. I mean, it is representational form of government. You always have to keep that in mind, that you're representing those folks back home, and your vote is not just your vote. It's their vote.

AC: Does that sort of philosophy cause some internal challenges as you're dealing with some sort of major issue? Maybe your constituents want you to vote this way on whatever it is, but you think from your experiences, maybe it should be the other way?

DH: There have been some occasions. I would say they've been rare. I think that means that I've been fairly well in tune with the voters in my districts. It's always a balancing act. It is the people's vote, but yet you're the one that has the perspective and the access to information through the folks at legislative research to be truly up to speed and understand the issues better than the folks back home. It has to be balanced.

AC: Here we're in the House Chambers, and there's the podium or the well. Do you remember the first time you approached the speaker and were standing right there in that spot, besides maybe the—I guess they always haze the new members a little bit—the first bill maybe that you carried, the subject matter?

DH: You know, I really don't. That's kind of odd. I was not on the best of terms with the speaker that served in the first two sessions. It was a while before I had that opportunity. Frankly, I don't remember the details. I do remember when my little sister, [Representative] Linda Gallagher carried her first bill because I was the one that got to haze her.

AC: That's good. As I mentioned here earlier, through your legislative career, you served on some very key committees—I think that they're substantive committees, not that they aren't all substantive. I think about Education and Ag and Natural Resources, Fed and State Affairs, Taxation, Appropriations. Clearly those are perhaps sort of the workhorse committees of the legislature. I guess that must give you a lot of satisfaction through those twelve years to be able to have served on those. Some legislators, of course, maybe it's Ag and Natural Resources. Over their career, they may only be on Ag and Natural Resources. But to have that opportunity to get a broader experience must have been rewarding, was it? Challenging?

DH: It was. I'm glad I had the opportunity to serve on that variety of committees. I think every legislator ought to have at least one opportunity to serve on Federal and State Affairs. I certainly didn't look forward to it when I was first assigned to it because it covers a lot of controversial subject matter. I thought, "Oh, man. What is this going to be like?" but it was really interesting I'm glad I had that experience.

I served on General Government Budget subcommittee for several sessions, and, again, I didn't know that I would enjoy it, but I did. You really get to understand the workings of a good part of the state legislature by serving on a budget committee like that.

AC: Right. I think your first bill, at least your name was on in 2009, had coverage for colorectal cancer screening, mandatory coverage. I don't think that bill passed. I think eventually, as in the legislative process, subsequently the issue was addressed. I didn't look close enough to see how many sponsors were on that bill, but you were one of the sponsors of that. Was there any sort of back story to that?

DH: Not really. I think it's indicative of how the legislative process works. Many ideas when they first surface in bill form run into some resistance. It takes several attempts before a concept is actually passed into statute that we don't rush into a decision about a new subject matter.

AC: I was looking at some of the other bills you introduced—Kansas Children Internet Protection Act; a bill on distinctive license plates; back in 2013, the Transparency Act for the legislature about committees and broadcasting and all of that; sharing parenting time for temporary placement orders, I believe it is; limiting utilization review conducted by health plans for people with mental illness; sales tax exemption on farm products at farmers markets. You touched on a lot of different areas there. Clearly I'm guessing these all had piqued your interest in one way or another through the years.

DH: A bill that I was probably most personally involved in was a bill to designate two state fossils. There were a couple of paleontologists who were pushing that issue for years. "We need

a state fossil. We have a state bird. We have a state tree, all of the rest of it. We have state grass. We need a state fossil.” A 4-H student from Scott City, which is in my district, had written me with that same request, “I really like geology and studying the ancient history of the world. We need a state fossil.”

So we went to work on that. Between that 4-H student and the two paleontologists, brothers, and Governor Colyer's daughter who was also interested in the subject matter—

AC: That's always a good thing, probably.

DH: We got that accomplished and actually established two state fossils. Pteranodon is the state flying fossil, and Tylosaurus is the state marine fossil. Some people make fun of that. They say, “Why do you waste time with that kind of stuff?” but that comes from a position of not understanding the legislative process and the time that we have available to take on some things that aren't earthshaking, but yet they are important to some people and especially to the young students of the state, to give them a little deeper appreciation and understanding of the past natural history of the state that we live in.

AC: I notice through your legislative introduction of bills and resolutions, of course, there are quite a number of resolutions honoring maybe a fellow legislator, maybe somebody in your district, maybe an anniversary, maybe somebody who's passed away. I'm sure that means a lot, particularly to your constituents for you to take the time.

DH: Certainly. That connects them to state government to know that people are thinking of them while they're up here serving.

AC: That's right. We've talked about all of these major committees that you've served on—Tax Education, budget through the Appropriations. As you think back over these last twelve years, some of the major policy issues that you felt the legislature has dealt with that you were involved in, again, whether it's taxes, clearly education, the state budget—you think about the recession, probably just about the time you come to the legislature, there was a recession.

DH: There was.

AC: One of the first bills you got to deal with, and issues, of course, whether it's gaming or abortion, some of those federal and state issues. Any sort of policy issues that really kind of stand out in your mind?

DH: I can think of both a budget and a tax issue that I think were pivotal to the state of Kansas and to my service here. It started in 2009, my very first year. The budget was tough. We were in a crisis. The folks on Appropriations—I wasn't on Appropriations then—they were having trouble coming up with a budget that people could agree on. Some of us in that centrist group did not like the direction that the discussion was going on the budget. I was able to offer some suggestions to Speaker O'Neal at that time, and I don't remember the nature of them then.

Evidently they impressed him at the time, even though they didn't make it into the final budget because when we came back to Topeka the next January in 2010, he replaced two sitting members of the Appropriations Committee and appointed Representative Mark Rhodes and me to Appropriations.

I really enjoyed that process, but again we were in a very difficult budgetary environment. It was tough to come up with a budget that made sense and that people could accept. It became so divisive that I ended up teaming up with Representative Bill Feuerborn who was the ranking minority member on the House Appropriations Committee to develop an alternative budget to the ones that leadership wanted to pass. We succeeded in getting that alternative budget passed.

But along with that budget, you had to have some money to afford what we intended to do in what we thought was still a very austere budget. So a companion piece of legislation increased the state sales tax for three years by 1 percent. After that three-year period, it was intended that would revert back to the previous tax rate.

AC: So your relationship with the speaker then, in terms of developing that alternative budget, that alternative policy?

DH: I was not put back on Appropriations that next year. He may have regretted making that appointment. Mark Rhodes, of course, went on to serve as chairman of the Appropriations Committee a year or two later.

AC: In terms of working then, was Bill Feuerborn an example then of trying to find that middle ground regardless of the consequences? At that time, that was, in your view, the right thing to do?

DH: Yes, I think it was the right thing to do. That was a pretty extreme action to take. We were working across the aisle against the best intentions of leadership in the House and also in the Senate. To get a bill passed, you have to have both chambers. It was bipartisan and bicameral in nature that we finally got that budget passed and the tax bill to support it.

AC: You mentioned that's on the budget side. Didn't you say there was one policy on the substantive side?

DH: Three years later, Governor Brownback had succeeded in reducing income tax rates significantly in the 2012 session. It became apparent that there was no feasible way, or at least not the will, to reduce budgets to match up with that reduced revenue stream. It finally became necessary, I think it was in 2013, when that three-year sunset on that one-cent sales tax was staring us in the face, and income tax had been cut. It became obvious that, "Hey, we can't do away with that right now."

There was a lot of attitude that “Those folks that voted for that income tax cut need to be the ones that step up and vote to do away with the property tax sunset—I mean, the income sales tax sunset and keep that tax rate at the same level.” It took several iterations of conference committees to try to come up with a bill that would pass. In the end, I don't know if it was in May or June—it may have been in June. We were still working to find a compromise, and I would give a lot of credit to our tax chairman at that time, Richard Carlson. He worked very diligently to try and find that middle ground where he could get sixty-three votes in the House and get something passed that made sense.

It finally became apparent to us after that last iteration that they were going to need some votes from those of us in the middle. It became apparent to some of us that this is as far as we can go, and we have moved that bill in the right direction, and now we need to supply the votes to go ahead and get it passed. I was one of the centrist Republicans that stepped up and made that vote, too.

AC: In retrospect, a little remorse that you made that tough decision, and were one of those votes to move that forward?

DH: No, I think it was the right decision. It was not a bill that I was in love with. There were some components of it I really didn't support at all, but we had gotten as far as we could. It finally had to be done.

AC: Maybe that very point in terms of an effective policy maker to be able in tough situations to be able to make that realization that, “Okay, we're not going to get everything we want, but it's time to move forward.”

DH: That's right. We can't stay at stalemate and impasse forever. Finally you have to accept this as the optimal. It may not be the best from our perspective, but in terms of the entire body, it's optimal for what we can achieve.

AC: So that would be good advice for any public policy person to keep that in mind.

DH: Absolutely. Part of that goes along with the concept that serving in the legislature is a people business. It's very important that any new legislator understands that your success, your ability to function here and achieve some policy success that means something to you is dependent on the network of friends that you develop among your colleagues. If you stay within your narrow philosophical group and don't reach out and try to befriend and understand other folks in the Chamber, then your ability to get anything done will be limited.

AC: Just thinking about the legislative process, since we're in this building, usually during the session, there's a whole bunch of people just outside the door called lobbyists, how do you view that interaction between the policymakers and the legislature in terms of the lobbyists?

DH: They are an integral part of the process. I don't know how we would function without them frankly. We can't be experts in every area of subject matter that we have to deal with as legislators. We have to depend on lobbyists to provide us some perspective along with legislative staff, both in Research and Reviser's Office. They're a very important part of the process. I don't know how many incoming legislators I've explained that these folks who trade on honesty—if they aren't honest, if they're not truthful, they don't last very long as a lobbyist. Most of these folks are very good at what they do because they do trade in honesty. Those that maybe don't all the time, you'll figure that out pretty quickly.

I would also advise not to think of lobbyists as personal friends because they have an objective. Even those whose objective is almost always going to be in synch with you or your districts, it's somewhat different from yours, your function, your role as a legislator.

AC: You mention that sort of honesty. I always think of your words are your bond. Your words are worth something. I suppose would that be the same for policymakers that sat in this chamber as well?

DH: Certainly, yes. If you develop a reputation as someone who isn't always truthful or forthright, then that limits your effectiveness.

AC: You mentioned a couple of governors. Of course, you got to serve in your legislative role with several different administrations. Any thoughts on how the Governor's Office interacts with the legislative process and with legislators, particularly with trying to set policy? Any thoughts there in terms of the governor's role in that setting of public policy?

DH: Well, they're all different. I've served under Governors Sebelius, Parkinson, Brownback, Colyer, and now Kelly—five different governors in the last twelve years, each of them with their own personal style and staff style and level of accessibility for legislators.

AC: As you think back over these last twelve years, the accomplishment you're most proud of? I guess that doesn't necessarily have to be a bill or a policy. Sometimes in this chamber, sometimes it's—I don't know if “preventing” is the right word, but maybe somebody has some ideas that maybe you don't think so—and in the process, it doesn't come to fruition. It's not something new or a new policy, but it may prevent a major change to an existing one. Just as you reflect, as you're getting close to the end of your twelve years, some of your proudest accomplishments in the public policy area?

DH: Before I touch on those, I'll touch on a couple of pieces of unfinished business. I'm sure it's true for any legislator, when you retire, there's some things that didn't get accomplished that you really worked hard on and hoped to get across the finish line, and it didn't happen before you retired. For me, Medicaid expansion is in that group, and that's another issue where, to some extent, some of us were bucking the wishes of leadership. But, again, it's a representational form of government. Our primary loyalty has to be to our own constituents and not the wishes of leadership.

I think in a way the amount of power that legislative leadership has can be a deterrent to true representational government, and I think Medicaid expansion is a case in point where numerous polls have showed that the majority of Kansans think it's time for us to pass Medicaid expansion, but yet up until this point, legislative leadership has been opposed to the policy. So committees have been stacked to make sure that the policy couldn't move through the normal committee process, and that has led to some unusual attempts to try to go around the normal process to get the bill passed. That's not idea. The best legislation needs to come through the committee process and be fully vetted by all the pros and cons. That was never available to those of us who supported expansion. So that's a frustration that we didn't get that done. Now all four of our neighboring states have done so, which creates another problem for Kansas, I believe, because expanding Medicaid has or will create a more robust and economically healthy health care system in our neighboring states, which means that they might possibly have an advantage to us when it comes to recruitment and retention of health care professionals.

AC: Would you say in your district that's—again you talked about statewide, but in your district, the constituents you've heard from, that at least a majority would favor that expansion?

DH: I think so. I think it's felt more in rural Kansas than in urban Kansas.

AC: Have you lost any hospitals in your district?

DH: No, we have not. I think we may have one or two that are kind of on the edge.

AC: That was a frustration. On the other side, something that you were able to be a part of to get it across the finish line?

DH: Well, this was in 2017, when I was majority leader. The Brownback tax cut of 2012 was still in place, but frustration with that policy had reached a level where many legislators felt that we needed to overturn some components of that income tax cut of 2012. There were a number of attempts to do that, starting early in the session in February of 2017. There were numerous iterations to try to find a policy that could find the votes to pass. We did find the votes. We've passed the bill. Governor Brownback vetoed the bill.

It was finally determined by enough individuals that we have to do this anyway, and there is no other alternative other than to override the veto of Governor Brownback. We succeeded in doing that. Serving as majority leader at that time, I was right in the middle of those discussions, "Hey, this is something we're going to have to do. There is no other alternative."

AC: I was going to get to that. Your service then as majority leader in this chamber. So maybe was that the biggest challenge during those two years, do you think?

DH: I think so, yes. I would say it would be.

AC: You talked about your relationships with leadership over the years, and then in 2017, 2018, here, you're sitting in that seat. Were there things that you learned or remembered from your prior experience before you got to be majority leader in terms of your interactions then with your fellow colleagues, particularly in setting public policy?

DH: The majority leader always functions as the gatekeeper for legislation. It's the majority leader who decides what bills are going to run on the floor of the House. That's quite a bit of power to wield. I made the decision early on that I wanted the process to work. If a bill survived the committee process and appeared on the list on my desk, I was probably going to let it run on the floor in the House. I did that with the majority of legislation and with the approval of Speaker Ryckman. Ron and I developed a good working relationship, and he supported my approach to go ahead and let it run. Let the body decide.

I can only think of one or two bills that I decided just weren't ready for primetime.

AC: The office has to have certain benefits. Just in terms of that time as majority leader, the success during that time, you probably look back as one you feel pretty good about.

DH: It was a unique time during my twelve years. During the first eight years, the more conservative wing of the majority party was in full control of leadership and basically the Chamber. Then that changed in the election of 2016. Enough centrist Republicans were elected that I was able to be voted in as a majority leader. So we had Ron Ryckman who comes from the more conservative wing and me from the centrist wing elected to two of the top leadership positions. We were good friend before that election, and we still are. So we determined to make it work.

I remember in the fall of 2016, after the elections, but before leadership elections, Ron asked me if I thought we could make it work, and I said, "Yes, I think we can, knowing you and your personality and me. I think we can work together. It will be a little bit of a dance because there are two wings to the caucus. They don't always get along, but I think it will be healthy."

Given the numbers in the caucus at that time, it really wouldn't have worked to have two conservatives in those top two positions or two centrists. So we made it work.

AC: That's good. As I think about when you made that decision to work with the House speaker to be the majority leader, the campaign for that, kind of the dynamics of that. Were you back in that pickup truck driving all over Kansas?

DH: I used a car then. I didn't know that my colleagues would be that impressed with a pickup truck. Yes, I worked hard at it during the month of November between the general election and leadership elections. It was close. I think I won by two or three votes. I'm glad I had that experience.

AC: And, again, I think in terms of the impact of public policy, as you've indicated, being in the legislative leadership gives you that opportunity to leave that mark in terms of charting public policy. It's a unique opportunity as you know. Out of 125, there's only one or two who have that opportunity in a term. That's really good.

I'm going to change gears on you here, and this is just kind of a standard question we're asking all of our people that we're visiting with. It's a personal identity question. Personal identity is loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, marital status, and so forth. Did you experience times during the legislature when you believed your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, work with fellow legislators, or provide constituent services? Were you ever given committee assignments or tasks that you believe were functions of your personal identity?

DH: I think in a broad sense, those of us that are white males have an advantage that other groups do not. I think that makes it easier for us to function in any position of power, such as serving in a legislature. On a more personal level, I think my assignment to some of the committees was a reflection of my past experience and knowledge base, serving on Agriculture, serving on Tax Committee, serving on Education Committee. Those were a reflection of where I came from and what my experience was.

AC: That's for that. Was there any single thing that prompted you to not run for re-election? You've had a good run, unopposed. I assume that if you had wanted to serve another term, that probably would have been in the cards with your constituents?

DH: I think it would have. For the first ten years of my service, I had no thought of when I might retire. I just wasn't ready. I wasn't thinking in that direction. Then a little over two years ago, I just realized, "You know what? I don't want to do this forever. I think one more term will be enough." So I made that decision about the same time I filed for re-election in 2018. I kind of kept that news pretty much a secret until June the 1st because I've always thought it's important for a legislator when they retire to have someone in mind to take your place to make sure that the people of your district are well served by whoever follows you. So I wanted to make sure that I did that, and I think I did.

AC: Then I guess now as you have a chance to think back over these last twelve years, any changes you've noticed in the legislature or in the public policy process or in the institution itself in those twelve years from when you first came down to that well compared to now?

DH: I think the decline in civility in the body is a real concern to a growing number of my colleagues and me. We see at both the national and the state level, a tribalism, a divisiveness, an unwillingness to reach out to others that think differently than we do gets in the way of passing the best policy. I think it's increasing, and it's in society at large. I think that's a very unfortunate thing.

AC: How about, too, over these last twelve years, the work in terms of the legislative branch with either particularly the executive branch or I guess in some ways the judicial branch. Has that dynamic changed, do you think, over these last twelve years? I know there's different governors, and, of course, different perspectives, but kind of on an institutional basis, is that still about the same, or has that evolved through the years?

DH: I think it evolves with the issues and with the players at the time. In particular, the relationship between the judiciary and the legislature has been pretty contentious throughout my twelve years of service, and most of that is related to school finance lawsuits. That's just the nature of it. It's a contentious enough subject matter that there's some natural antagonisms between the two branches of government, and that's gotten in the way of being productive on both sides of that issue.

So I'm glad it's finally behind us at least for the time being. I hope we can keep it that way. I know we're going to have budget difficulties again. I hope the new legislature can find a way to pass a budget that does not renege on the promise we made to the school children of Kansas and also to the Supreme Court. I hope we don't go back down that road again.

AC: I was thinking, too, just as an institution, so the legislature, and here you're in leadership, just kind of the organization, and the day-to-day operation, and certainly as majority leader, you have a big part of that. Is the institution still functioning as efficiently as a group of 125 people can do that may want to head in different directions? As an institution, has it improved? Is it about the same? In terms of the legislature, as an institution?

DH: I think it's improving, especially in regards to transparency, and you mentioned earlier that we've taken some initiatives to increase transparency in government, and that's an ongoing process. We haven't completed that work, but it's much better than it used to be. We continue to look for ways to make it apparent to the folks back home what we're doing up here and how we did it. That's a good thing.

AC: So you're going to have a little break here. Would you ever think in your maybe wildest dreams at some point down the road that you might return to the legislature or maybe state government in some other capacity?

DH: No, I don't have any ambition in that regard. My ambition was to do some traveling with my wife. Now with the pandemic, we can't do that, but that time will come. But, no, I have no ambition to have a job in the legislature or a major role in state government either. Twelve years was enough.

AC: What about at the local level? I assume there's always a county commission seat that might be available.

DH: Well, some legislators do that. They serve on the legislature, and they go back to being a county commissioner. I did that for sixteen years. That was plenty of time. I may not be electable as a county commissioner anymore.

AC: There's going to be a person to take your place, and, of course, a number of new legislators that will be sworn in in January. Any general advice you might give for them in terms of helping to set good public policy for our state?

DH: Remember that your primary function is to represent the people of your district, and that your effectiveness here will be directly related to the relationship of your colleagues in the body. I think those are the two things that you need to keep foremost in your mind.

AC: Good advice.

DH: It occurred to me not too long ago that it wasn't by design, but over the years, I have mentored a pretty large number of freshman legislators as they've come in, after they've been elected or in some cases even before they were elected. I've reached out to them and offered advice and direction and tried to help them understand what they're getting into, #1, if they're still campaigning. But then helped them understand what it's going to be like after they've been elected and what they can expect and how they should react to all of this newness that they're going to be facing when they move to Topeka that first time.

AC: Are there any other things that you'd like to share with us or anything that I haven't touched on that you think would be helpful for the record here in terms of public policy or any other issues that you'd like to share with us? Not that you have to, I just want to give you the opportunity, just in case.

DH: I can't think of any issue right now. I think probably the committee I most enjoyed serving on was Taxation. That comes from some personal history as well. I believe my father served on taxation when it was Assessment and Taxation back then. During my time serving in various roles in the Kansas Livestock Association, I was always on the Tax Committee there, and KLA always supported the concept of the three-legged stool. I learned that lesson early on at KLA. I also learned the lesson of the importance of use-value appraisal and actually was working within KLA at the time that use-value was passed back in the eighties.

So I really thought it was important, coming from an ag district that I serve on the Taxation Committee and bring that perspective of respect for that three-legged stool that has served state government so well in terms of providing the necessary revenue.

AC: That's good. Well, on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project and Humanities Kansas, I certainly appreciate your time to spend with us today to talk about public policy, past and future. It sounds like you've had a great run in terms of twelve years. You've certainly touched on a lot of important areas to our states. Thank you very much for the time today.

Interview of REPRESENTATIVE DON HINEMAN by Alan Conroy, August 20, 2020

DH: Thank you, Alan.

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