

Interview of Jim Gartner by Chris Courtwright, February 16, 2024
Kansas Oral History Project Inc.

Chris Courtwright: Good afternoon. Today is February 16, 2024 in the afternoon, and we're here in the historic House Chamber at the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka. I'm Chris Courtwright, who served for thirty-four years working as an economist for the Kansas Legislature in its nonpartisan Research Department before retiring in 2020. For full disclosure, Governor Kelly appointed me shortly thereafter to her bipartisan Council on Tax Reform, and I currently serve as a board member for a bipartisan 501(c)(4) public-policy-based organization known as Kansans First.

Today I'm privileged to interview former Representative Jim Gartner, who served in the legislature from 2016 to 2022, and has had a long, distinguished and very fascinating career in both the private and public sectors. He proudly served in the Marines for three years from 1966 to 1969, including some time in Vietnam, which we will get to in a minute, worked briefly at Goodyear and shortly thereafter took an entry-level job with Southwestern Bell, where he turned out to be quite upwardly mobile, and in fact would continue to remain employed within or by the telecommunications industry for many decades.

Jim received his business degree from Washburn in 1974. By the 1980s, he had become a Statehouse powerhouse, and by the late '80s, he was one of two lobbyists responsible for overseeing all federal and state issues that affected the company. Even after retiring as Vice President of External Affairs in 2001, Jim remained a fixture at the Statehouse and continued to lobby for AT&T until 2014. A longstanding asset to his community, he has served on the boards of both TPAC [Topeka Performing Arts Center] and also the United Way of Topeka.

You also in 2009 get appointed to the Auburn-Washburn School Board and were subsequently elected to several more terms. He is still there in 2016 and serving as the board president when a prominent Topeka Democratic legislator [Annie Tietze] announces her resignation from the Kansas House, and the party is suddenly looking for someone to replace her just prior to the summer of 2016 special legislative session that is dealing with a school finance funding mandate from the courts.

Re-elected to that seat three times before opting not to run again in 2022, you did not stay out of the game for long, and just within the past month have returned to state government at the request of Governor Kelly as a special liaison of sorts between the so-called second and third floors here at the Statehouse - aka the administrative and legislative branches of government. Did I get most of that right?

Jim Gartner: Yes, you did, correct.

CC: This interview with Mr. Gartner is conducted on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and significant leaders of state government, particularly those who served during the 1960s and subsequent decades. The interviews will be accessible to researchers, educators, and the public through the KOHP website, ksoralhistory.org, and also the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions are made possible as a result of the generosity of KOHP donors. Former Kansas House Speaker Pro Tem David Heinemann is our videographer today.

During your time in the legislature, Jim, you served on a number of committees, including the Veterans and Military; Energy, Utilities, and Telecom; Agriculture and Natural Resources Budget; Legislative Post-Audit; and Taxation panels. And I think we will be delving into your work on the House Taxation Committee in particular here in a few minutes, if that makes some sense.

JG: Yes.

CC: Okay, before we jump into your legislative career and committee work and big issues and whatnot, let's briefly go back in time and fill in some of the prior history we mentioned and get some additional background. Are you a native Kansan? If not, when did your family move here?

JG: A native Kansas, born and raised here in Topeka.

CC: A lifelong Topekan. I do want to thank you once again for your service to your nation. As we mentioned, you joined the United States Marine Corps in 1966 and found yourself deployed to Vietnam in 1967. You were only there a short time before being wounded. Can you tell us a little about the circumstances under which you decided to join the Marines? Anything you recall about your training, and then if you would care to, how you ended up getting wounded?

JG: Sure, Chris. Let me start by thanking you for having me today. I went to parochial schools here in Topeka, elementary schools, and ended up at Hayden High School for four years. I was really a pretty good student the first year. The second, third, and fourth, I liked to party a little bit more. I thought to myself when I was a senior that, yeah, college sounded good, but I just was not ready. I needed more discipline in my life, more responsibility. I'll never forget, the Marine Corps recruiter came to Hayden to talk to the senior class with his dress blues on. I was just blown away, just looking at this gentleman and thought, "Gosh, that really would be sort of neat if I do that."

I was seventeen at the time. I went home, asked my parents to sign a waiver because I was only seventeen, and after a long discussion, they did. So I went to the recruiter who signed me up at seventeen. Back then, you could sign up, and you'd have 120 days before you left for boot camp. So I went ahead and signed up, went, took my physical down in Kansas City, and then came home and partied really hard before I left in July for San Diego boot camp, MCRD.

So that was—I was on my way. I made it through boot camp, which isn't the easy thing in life, but made it through there, and then was—of course, they do a lot of testing. They want to actually find out what would be your best military occupation for this individual scholastically, taking tests, and I ended up being a combat engineer, which a combat engineer handled explosives, looked for mines, all those types of things. So away I went to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina for school.

After graduating from combat engineer school, back to San Diego, Camp Pendleton. I believe it was at that point that they were asking actually for volunteers to go to Vietnam. I'd been in almost a year, and I thought, "Well, I'm going to go. I might as well go now." So I went ahead

and volunteered and left from San Francisco and flew to Honolulu to Okinawa and then on into Vietnam, I think arriving early July or early May, excuse me, of 1967.

From that point, it was—I'll never forget—I reported in Vietnam, and the sergeant said, "Where do you want to be assigned?" and I thought, "Why is he asking me?" And he said, "Well, as combat engineer, you could do heavy equipment here around Da Nang, or we could send you out with the infantry as a combat engineer."

I'll never forget it. He flipped a coin. He pulled a quarter out of his pocket, flipped it, and said, "Heads, you go out into the field. Tails, you stay here," and it was heads. I'm not sure they had any numbers to fill. It was the flip of a coin.

So the next morning, I got up in the morning, ordered a helicopter, and away I went out into the field to join an infantry group out in the field that had been on search and destroy missions and just on patrol. It was somewhat frightening because I get off the helicopter, and they had had a firefight the night before. So there were a number of bodies already decaying in the field, and I'm going, "What did I get myself into here?"

I had to sort of calm myself down a little bit, but away we went. I joined in. So wherever the infantry went, we were attached to them as combat engineers, carrying explosives on our back, twenty blasting caps in my pocket, of course, a rifle, and—so wherever they went, we went. We were out in the field. We would come back at base camp for a period of time, and then go back out on patrol. I know a couple of times we were very close to Cambodia. In fact, I think we were probably in Cambodia a couple of times.

So I was there approximately two months. We were on another thirty-day patrol out in the field for thirty days. I believe it was the last day, the twenty-ninth day that we were going to a different location to take over another base camp for another outfit, and we ran into considerable fire that morning out, crossing some rice paddies. We took cover. In the meantime, they called in napalm strikes on the particular area we were receiving the fire from, and after a few minutes, our commander said, "Okay, let's get up and move on." The command came down. We did get up, and all of a sudden, a lot more fire started. So the napalm really didn't do any good.

The commander at that point in time said, "Well, we're going this direction. Let's run away from them." So everybody started running, and, of course, at that point, I had all the explosives on my back, and I was carrying mortars for the mortar group. I wasn't the fastest person. A sergeant came up behind me. He called me. He said, "Engineer, hurry up, or I'm going to stick my boot right up your back to help you."

And all of a sudden, I felt this sort of warm and hot feeling in my foot. I went, "Oh." So I went down, and I heard everybody screaming for a corps man, and I thought they would come look at me, of course. Well, no, the sergeant behind me was shot through the back. And I perceive it might have been the same round that hit my foot up in the air. I mean, the probability of that happening was in the millions. So it entered the bottom of my foot and came out the top, which I didn't know at that point because I was laying there.

Finally, I had to say or sort of yell for the corpsman to come up and check me out, and he did, and he said, “Yeah, we’re going to have to take your boot off because that’s no good. That boot won’t last any longer” and threw it to the side. He wrapped my foot up and said, “Just stay here. You’ll be fine. We’re going to call in a medevac chopper” to come in and get the sergeant and myself. They did, and the chopper came in.

The Marine Corps at that point in time didn’t have the best equipment. Their choppers were not like the ones you see on TV and old films, Hueys. It was an old, mechanical, piston-driven chopper, and here they come in to pick us up. Of course, the VC are still there. So the chopper, as soon as it comes in, they just fire away at the chopper. We’re on the other side. They help. They have the sergeant on a tarp, and they put him up in the helicopter, and then they’d take me up, hopping up, and put me up and lift me up where I’m hanging under my arms on the platform, and the gunner looks at me, which they have helmets and visors. But he looks right down at me and doesn’t help me. And I’m screaming at him, “Help me!” He had a medevac tag on. And I understand why. All the fire from the other side was coming in. He had people dropping over in the helicopter, and all of a sudden, the helicopter starts taking off, and I’m still hanging there.

So we get up to approximately—I probably have inflated this over the years—but it was probably ten feet up, and I had to make a decision. Either drop, or I’m going to probably die because he’s not helping me in the helicopter. So I drop back into the rice paddy. The helicopter does get out of there. Then the commander asked us to come back where we had more cover. He tries. He has someone make a crutch out of a tree limb for me. One crutch doesn’t do it when you need two. Finally, a gentleman, a Marine, he was a forward observer for the artillery group, came over, picked me up, fireman carry, fireman’s carry, and said, “Let’s go.”

So he carried me. I was shot probably at 8:00 AM, 8:30 AM, and here we go, and he’s carrying me to a location where a helicopter can come in and medevac me. He carried me through fire, open fire, rice paddies. I never prayed so much in all my life. You hear the bullets breaking the sound barrier. They pop. My head was towards them, and I kept telling him, “Turn me around. Turn me around” because I knew if I did get shot in the head, I was a goner. I’d rather be shot in the rear end than the head.

He finally got me through that. We—the medevac chopper came in at 4:30 that afternoon. So he carried me all day and put me on the helicopter. They had given me some painkillers, but I’m not sure mentally I was all there because I forgot to even ask his name. I didn’t know him prior to that because he was in the artillery unit attached to infantry.

Over the years, I’ve tried to look for him. I’ve come up with—I’ve tried to find his name, find him. I’ve had people scour the records in DC, the Marine Corps records to no avail. But basically I mean he saved my life.

So back to Da Nang to the hospital, surgery, and then on to Japan. I thought I’d end up going back to Vietnam, but they said, “No, you’ve broken a couple bones in your foot. They’re going to take six months to heal.” I ended up coming back to Great Lakes Naval Hospital, I think the 4th of July, the 5th of July of ’67. I remember calling my family, and they were having a party, a 4th of July party, and they thought I was calling from Vietnam. When I said, “No, I’m in the

hospital in Chicago,” it went from sheer joy and laughter to just quiet. Everybody was very quiet. “Oh, my gosh, what has occurred?”

I stayed in Chicago, rehabilitated, and then went back to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and then on to Subic Bay for the last year to guard the naval magazine: Subic Bay, Philippines. And it worked out perfectly because I didn’t have to go back.

CC: Understood.

JG: So that was a long Marine Corps story.

CC: A fascinating one. When you did get out of the Marines in 1969, you apparently went to work for a short time at Goodyear here in Topeka. Can you tell us about that job, and maybe why you ended up not staying there very long?

JG: Sure can. Of course, I needed a job. They hired me like the next week. They needed tire builders. Back then, I was building passenger tires. They put me in a work group. I believe I worked 3:00 to 11:00 if I remember correctly. I was probably one of twelve individuals that worked different machines. These gentlemen had all been there for years, and they would look at me, rookie, laugh at me because I’d be over there for eight hours trying to build enough tires. That was piece work. You were getting so much per tire. And they were all sitting down after six hours. They were finished over there, just having a great time while I’m toiling away over there, trying to build tires.

And they finally—a lot of them would come over to me and just say, “You do not want to be us in thirty years.” I said, “No, I really don’t. I can’t even build tires now.” They said, “Well, you can get the GI Bill. Why don’t you go to school? Why don’t you go to Washburn?” I went, “Oh, that sounds pretty good.”

So just by happenstance, I was in, after six months, I was thinking about quitting and going to school, but then I was in a car wreck. I really couldn’t build tires anymore. I went to work one night, and they asked me to try to build a tire and throw it on the conveyer, and I tried it, couldn’t lift a tire up, and my supervisor said, “Oh, that’s okay. Just throw them on the floor,” and I said, “You know what? I’m going to school.” And I walked out.

CC: So your efficiency at making tires apparently was not as advanced as some of the grizzled veterans at Goodyear, but I know there is an interesting story about how you ended up getting in on the ground floor at Southwestern Bell. Can we hear about that?

JG: Yes. It was quite interesting. I had quit, of course, walked out, quit Goodyear. My aunt worked for Southwestern Bell. One night she was at my parents’ house, and she said— asked, “What are you doing?” and I said, “I’m getting ready to go to school, but I do need a part-time job.” She said, “Well, we’re hiring telephone operators.” I went, “Telephone! Men as telephone operators?” She said, “Well, yes, we need to hire men in non-traditional jobs.” She goes, “Go up and apply.”

The next day, I went up and applied. A couple of days later, I took the test. It was funny. The gentleman who was in charge of our placement bureau at Southwestern Bell, his wife worked for Speaker Braden. His name was Emil Lutz. Emil looked at me and said, “How is your work background?” and I said, “Not good.”

I told him the truth, what went on at Goodyear, and he called me two or three days later, and he said, “At least you tell the truth, and you passed the test. So we’re going to hire you.” So I started as one of the first two male telephone operators in the state of Kansas.

CC: Interesting. I’m guessing it was a long and winding road from telephone operator to vice president of external affairs who is helping guide state and federal policymakers in their thought process. Can you give us a little bit of your overview of your very fascinating career path through the telecom industry?

JG: A number of different jobs from operator to night relief chief operator into management to Hays, Kansas, the network department, back to Topeka in network design which designs central office equipment, expansions to management development, to college recruiting, and then to Salina as a community relations district manager, which that encompassed—I had all the way out to the western border and actually had some of Topeka at that time. I had a couple of people that reported to me here in Topeka.

I loved Salina. My family loved Salina, and I received a call one day from my boss for another boss who asked how would I like to come up and be a lobbyist for Southwestern Bell in Topeka. It was funny. When I went to Salina, my family, I had a boy and a girl. Oh, they fought. They fought very hard. They didn’t want to go. We moved back three years later, and they didn’t want to leave Salina.

So we moved back to Topeka, and that started my lobbying career in 1987 with my cohort at that time. We replaced two—they had been here at the Capitol so long, Schaub and Ewing were their last names—Bill Ewing and Ed Schaub, and they brought on Danny Koch and Jim Gartner. So we replaced them.

Of course, things started happening on the dereg, the deregulation. The first thing was cell service. The old, big mobile phones, they deregulated, and we had to have the legislature approve that to get it deregulated in the state of Kansas. So that was one of our first jobs.

CC: First big challenges. I can imagine that you could write a book about all of the fairly complex policy issues you were tracking at all levels of government during your time in public affairs for the industry, given what was happening with the AT&T break-up, deregulation, new technologies, and, of course, the challenges of making sure consumers in a relatively rural state like Kansas are going to be able to maintain and improve their access. Can you tell us a little bit about all that and also which prominent state or national officials you may have interacted with during your years in public affairs? Did you routinely work with Senators Dole and Kassebaum and other members of the Kansas delegation on federal issues? And then also maybe any funny stories or memories or key issues beyond the one you just described that were in play here at the state level?

JG: Well, at that time, there was so much going on in the telecom industry. Everybody, I mean from breaking AT&T up to sort of putting it back together later on. It was quite interesting. But when, of course, we broke up into various regions, everybody, every region was out trying to get further deregulation. That was the key word. Call it what it is. We had very interesting names. I think in Kansas it was called TeleKansas I and TeleKansas II that we were over here showing, trying to show the legislature that there was more competition in the residential market than we needed—we were no longer a monopoly and needed to move out from under that umbrella.

At the same time, at that point for those three years, we also, as you pointed out, had the responsibility of the federal delegation. So we would make trips to DC, spend some time with the Congressional delegation of not so much the senators in particular, but, of course, all their staffs. For example, Leroy Towns was Pat Roberts' main man. So when we went there, we would talk to—we'd run into Representative Roberts at that point in time. Then we'd also have long discussions with the staff because they would always have at least one that had—their main responsibility was telecom. So we would talk to them.

It was nice that we had—Southwestern Bell at that time had a pretty big presence up in Washington, DC. We had a suite over at the Watergate that we would take staffers and sometimes the Congressmen in particular or women would show up and build those relationships. That's what it's all about. That's what we did for those three years from '87 to '90.

CC: 1990. Okay. Jumping forward to 2009, you're appointed to an opening on the Auburn-Washburn USD [437] School Board. Had you been involved prior to that with that particular school district? I'm assuming you were approached by someone to fill that vacancy?

JG: Yes. I had really no past experience with school boards, working with school boards. As you've already pointed out, I had more experience working with not-for-profits on their boards. A gentleman by the name of Bill Sneed who passed away a year and a half ago, I had asked him to serve on the Topeka Performing Arts Center Board, which he accepted.

So this was sort of a turnaround because he was president of the Auburn-Washburn School Board. When he saw that I lived in that area, he asked me to come out and interview. So there were I think eight or nine applicants that interviewed, and luckily I was their choice.

CC: I'm guessing that the whole smorgasbord of issues you dealt with during your many years on the school board including budgeting, relationships with superintendents, staff, ensuring the best educational opportunities for students - all of that also included an introduction to a somewhat byzantine world of the state school finance formula, not just how it was being interpreted by the courts, given the constitutional mandates for adequacy and equity, but also the legislature's decisions about how to best comply with all of that. Do you feel like your decades of previous experience working with state policymakers helped you at least understand their thought process even if you may not have always agreed with the outcome? In other words, did your previous work with the legislators here at the Statehouse give you any kind of leg up on your school board colleagues relative to understanding decisions that were being made here?

JG: I would say yes. The experience did give me more of an insight on what was happening here at the Capitol with the legislature, and I could then pass that on to my school board members because they really didn't know the process that was going on up here. So I think it helped that aspect.

But it was a whole new world for me. Budgeting for schools and school boards was completely unreal. It took me probably a year just to sit down with our finance gentleman to go through because they had all of these different accounts. Of course, we were very concerned about what was going on here at the legislature on the funding level, of course.

CC: That's where we're going to head next. During your final four years on the board from 2012 to 2016, the state was deep into the self-described experiment on its tax code implemented by former Governor Brownback and his supporters. This was an era where the state finances collapsed to a point where the situation was making national news. I also think it was during this time that lawmakers began trying to implement the so-called block grant funding concept for K-12 schools and begin moving away from weightings in the formula that had acknowledged specific student demographics and other factors.

So with all of this as the backdrop, is this one of the reasons you decided to jump more directly into what was going on at the Statehouse? When Annie [Tietze] announced she was resigning just prior to the 2016 summer special session involving school finance, you must have seemed like the perfect choice to be her replacement, given that at that point, you were president of the Auburn-Washburn School Board. At that point, were you approached by party officials or was getting plugged into her seat something you sort of sought out on your own ticket?

JG: I didn't seek it out.

CC: Bill Sneed didn't have a hand in it?

JG: No, he didn't have a hand in it. It was really - going back a little bit, my nine-and-a-half years on Auburn-Washburn School Board did show me what was not happening at the Capitol, and that stuck with me. So when Representative Tietze approached me probably in January of 2016 that she wasn't going to run again for another term. I said, "I don't think I want any part of that. I know the process." But, of course, as I learned, I didn't know the politics. So, at that point, I was going, "No, I don't want to have anything to do with that."

A month later she calls me again and says, "Will you at least think about it?" And I said, "Yes, I'll think about it." And two weeks later, she calls me again and asks, "Are you going to run?" I said, "Okay, I'll do it."

I think June 1st was the filing deadline to file. Two weeks later, she calls me and says, "I'm resigning. I have some physical problems, and I just don't want to serve out my term." So there I was for a two-day special session I think that year.

CC: You just mentioned you knew when you took the seat that summer that you would be running again in November since you had already filed to retain it. Can you tell us a little about

your 2016 campaign and what you remember about running against Republican Richard Kress? History shows that you had little trouble in that race and received well over 57 percent of the vote. Were school finance and the Brownback tax experiment key issues in that race?

JG: Yes, both issues were key in that race. But I had no idea how to run a campaign and reached out—Annie Tietze helped me considerably. She had a base of volunteers that came over and helped me. It was I think a lot easier for me at that point because it takes a lot of legwork, a lot of hard work. You have to raise money. And that was easy for me because of all my relationships with lobbyists. They knew who I was. I could call them, and I think it made it a lot easier to raise money. But if you're going to run for office, you'd better put 100 percent into it because it is not easy. You've got to really work hard.

CC: Yes. You got into this a little bit, but that campaign, you're campaigning for re-election to the legislature in 2016 because you were appointed that summer, and that must have been different from what you experienced running for re-election to the school board. The money component as you mentioned certainly being some of it. But I'm guessing there was a lot more door-to-door, public forums, media questionnaires, and interest group surveys to complete, certainly a larger set of constituents. What are some of your recollections about that campaign itself? And then without naming names, do you have any amusing stories about eccentric Topekans you may have met on front porches that first time around? Front porch stories are always good.

JG: Well, I did attend every forum. I tried to attend every opportunity, every invite which at that point, I think it's still true today, my opponent would not show up. I think that was maybe a plan, don't show up so they don't have to speak about issues. But going door to door, you run into so many interesting folks. I think the thing that every year after that, I was amazed on the amount of dogs people have in their house. All day long, no one's there, and you knock on the door, and a dog almost comes through the window to get you. It was truly amazing.

And I had a few people, of course, "Are you a Democrat or a Republican?" and I would say, "A Democrat" because on my cards, I didn't put Republican or Democrat. I wanted to introduce myself, tell them what I stood for, and then if they ask, fine. A lot of doors were slammed in my face. But, on the other hand, a lot of nice, most of them were very nice people. I enjoyed going to door to door except for the dogs.

CC: The next question is one from 20,000 feet. Without getting into any specific school finance or tax issues, all of which we're going to get to shortly, can you tell us once you had transitioned from the lobbying world to actually being in the legislature yourself, how your perspective must have changed. As a long-time Statehouse fixture, I'm guessing that not too many things surprised you in the new role about legislative inner workings and nuances, but maybe just a few did. Any thoughts you may have had along those lines now that you were even more directly and intimately involved with policymaking as a voting member of the legislature? Or was it all a fairly seamless transition for you?

JG: The process was pretty much seamless. I knew the process, had been around, understood it. What I didn't really understand was how politics can really get so involved. I still question that

today. And then on the other hand, I was surprised how hard it was to be a legislator. I think good legislators, and I count myself as a good legislator when I served, you work from almost dawn to dusk every day during the session if you want to do a good job for your constituents.

So I was totally impressed. There was a lot of work, a lot of reading, a lot of involvement with constituents, especially in session when they'd come by and want to visit with you, and I'd listen to everybody. Now I might not agree with their viewpoint, but I'd try to explain what my position was.

A majority of the legislators do that every day. Some don't. I always questioned, "How are those folks getting re-elected again, every two years?" But they do. Some of them just don't put a lot of effort into it.

CC: Understood. When you get here in 2017 with your first legislative session, you were assigned to the powerful House Taxation Committee during a particularly contentious and interesting time. You continued to serve on the tax panel through the end of your tenure in the legislature in 2022 and became one of its most highly respected Democrats, and in fact, served as ranking member during your last four years.

But by the start of the 2017 session, the Brownback tax experiment had already undergone some significant and ongoing stress since its implementation in 2012. In the intervening years, the legislature had painful spending cuts, so-called smoke and mirrors budget gimmicks, and even back-filling tax increases on the table pretty much every year. Back-filling tax hikes had been enacted in both 2013 and 2015, and by 2017, it was clear additional surgery was going to be done on the state tax code, as you will recall.

A number of lawmakers, especially new ones who had gotten elected in 2016 and had gotten an earful from voters about the extent to which the state's fiscal crisis had sort of become ongoing and institutionalized, seemed ready at that time to end the experiment. The legislature approved Senate Bill 30, which repealed the controversial non-wage business income exemption and also restored the individual income tax to a three-bracket system after it had been reduced to two brackets for the prior four years. Governor Brownback evidently was not enthused with this approach and vetoed that bill, but the legislature by this time had simply had enough and rather remarkably rounded up two-thirds majorities, which of course, included both Republicans and Democrats in both Chambers and overrode his veto.

All of this must have seemed a fascinating environment for you to have landed in during your first regular session, I'm guessing, in 2017. Can you tell us what you recall about the dynamics on how all of that occurred?

JG: Yes, as I have already pointed out, that was one of my main causes that I ran was to overturn the Brownback tax experiment. So when I was elected, it was a key issue. We had a unique freshmen class. We had I think about fifty-one new freshmen. A number of them were moderate Republicans. I would think about thirty. I think Democrats were up to forty-one if I remember of the House, made up of the 125.

What was I think unique and made our class such a great class is that the first day we were here in orientation, now Senator Brenda Dietrich, who was the superintendent at Auburn-Washburn when I was there, she and I had talked about establishing a partnership, a Chair and a Vice Chair, for the new freshmen class, and we did. We agreed. We were up in front of the class and offered our services, and everybody accepted. From that point on, every week we would have a legislative lunch with just our class, and we would learn about the budget. We would learn about the rules. We would learn about tax issues, and that went on all session.

By the time towards the end of the session when the tax issue—I think it was Senate Bill 30—came before us, we were there. I mean, we had talked all session, and a group of women legislators had splintered off, had come together to talk about the Brownback tax experiment and Senate Bill 30. So when we had the opportunity to override the veto, we were all there.

CC: So that institution or that mechanism of a class caucus had not really existed before until you and Brenda sort of put it together?

JG: I'm not sure, Chris. I don't know. I don't remember anybody telling me that, "Oh, yes, that's happened every year." In fact, I was asked to come back two years later and speak to the incoming new class, and I pleaded with them. I said, "You really need to do this," and, of course, they didn't. But I laid it out there for them on how it just—you build those relationships with those new legislators, and, sad to say, a number of them didn't make it the following term.

CC: During your first full term in 2017 and '18, did you have a lot of personal interaction with Brownback or his successor, Governor Colyer? Any memories of meeting with them or stories about how effective they were in dealing with the minority party?

JG: No. I mean, the only time I think the caucus ever saw Governor Brownback and maybe Governor Colyer, they would never stick their head in the Democratic caucus or agenda meetings. The only time I saw them is out in the hall. They would wander around the rotunda every so often and just shake your hand, shake legislators', shake lobbyists' hands, and that was it.

CC: You were in the House at the same time future Governor Kelly was a state senator from Topeka. I'm guessing you must have known her for some years. Did you work with her a lot on Shawnee County delegation issues during your first term? Did you two cohost constituent coffees or anything together? And do you have any stories you can share about those days? Also, were you at all surprised when she decided to run to Governor in 2018?

JG: Well, I knew Governor Kelly. I lived in Hays for three years from '84 to '87, and she was there with—or Salina, excuse me—she was there with her husband who was a doctor. I'd forgotten that we had crossed paths out there. And then I saw her one day at the Capitol as a lobbyist when I was a lobbyist.

So we had become acquainted throughout the years, but when I filed to run for Representative Tietze's office as a legislator, Senator Kelly reached out because that was in her senatorial

district, and she offered to help me go door-to-door. In fact, she sort of showed me. One day, we got together, and she went door-to-door with me to show me how to do it.

We would work together on various things during the legislature from her Senate perspective, and she was so excellent—she still is today—on the financial side because she was on Ways and Means over in the Senate, ranking. So I always looked to her to for advice, especially on budget items.

CC: You were surprised or not when she was going to run for Governor in 2018?

JG: I believe she was planning on running for Congress. I think she actually was starting to raise money to run for Congress. In fact, I gave her some money for that. And then I think—I don't know if she took another look at it and said, "Maybe I'll hold off here" because I believe Congresswoman Jenkins was running maybe for re-election. Senator Kelly at that time thought, "Well, maybe I'll wait a little bit." So she did not run for Congress, and then it didn't surprise me a bit that she ran for Governor in 2018.

CC: As you indicated, soon-to-be Governor Kelly in 2018, of course, prevailed in a three-way Democratic primary in August, and then sort of in a three-way race that November. You, on the other hand, ran without opposition in 2018. Were you helping her or other Democrats with strategy and messaging or anything during the 2018 cycle, given that you were getting sort of a free pass that year?

JG: I did help. We did do some door to door and some other items for—of course, financially, I helped her. Whatever I could do. I was also hoping other Democrats in Shawnee County. I did help on their campaigns also.

CC: After Governor Kelly was elected, I'm guessing that your interactions and those of your caucus with second floor may have been more frequent during your final four sessions from 2019 to 2022 than they had been in 2017 and 2018?

JG: Yes. More interactions, especially two years ago. That would have been 2022 when the Governor had put forth the sales tax on food bill to eliminate that. We spent a lot of time working together on that issue.

CC: And that feeds into my very next question. I know that you and others have expressed frustration about the refusal of the 2022 legislature to fully exempt food from the state sales tax as of July 1st of that year, which is what the governor had originally proposed, and what some people, yourself included, said a significant majority of the legislature likely supported. I know that at one point during the 2022 session, you made a procedural motion to bring the full and immediate exemption bill out of Tax Committee and place it on the House General Orders calendar. Do you recall how Republican leadership reacted at the time you made that motion, which ultimately was defeated, and what their rationale may have been to not wanting to vote on letting the full food exemption happen on July 1st of 2022?

JG: I do remember that very well. We strategically—we knew it wasn't going to move forward. So we came up with the strategy to pull that bill out of committee. I actually went to the well. It was late at night. I forget what day it was. I pushed my button and went and stood by the Speaker, and he did not recognize me. So I believe someone told him that that's what I was going to do. So he just ignored me.

We adjourned for that evening. So the next day or two days later, I made the motion, and it has to sit over twenty-four hours, and I worked my tail off on trying to get Republicans because I believe it needed seventy votes, and I was hearing very positive things about it.

That day was the day they would take our class picture of the legislature. So we were filing in to the steps on the west side of the Capitol, and a Republican said, "I think you have your seventy." And I was just elated.

Well, by the time we took our pictures, they had caucus, Republican Caucus. He comes back to me and said, "Well, you did have. You don't have now because they twisted so many arms and put so much pressure on them." I ended up getting a total of forty-eight votes. I think I had maybe seven Republicans. So that's the way this process works.

CC: Looking back at your final election in 2020, I would note that although you did have opposition that time around, you received nearly 55 percent of the vote in the general election against your GOP opponent. Was there a specific reason you decided to not run again in 2022? Was six years here in the people's House more than enough? Was it time to move on into retirement and play more golf?

JG: It was a combination, Chris, of all those things. I became very frustrated as a legislator, as a Democratic legislator, trying to get really good things accomplished for the people. And being in really the minority, it's so difficult to get anything on the big issues. The legislature passes hundreds of bills every year. Most of them, everybody comes together and supports. They're not—when you get to those education funding, tax issues, Medicaid expansion, I mean, the list can go on and on. You just can't make any headway because Republicans just will not—their ideology, leadership, they don't—in my opinion, they don't really care what their constituents think. Once they're up here, they do what their ideology and what leadership tells them to do.

CC: As we mentioned earlier, you have very recently re-entered the political arena, working for Governor Kelly. And certainly in addition to your expertise on tax policy, you have a great deal of background relative to school finance as we have discussed. I know that just last week the Kansas Supreme Court officially relinquished its oversight of the *Gannon* decision that had compelled lawmakers to provide additional funding. Although the dropping of formal oversight had been expected to occur at some point, a number of advocates expressed some concern that a this could now encourage the legislature to again start down the slippery slope of not adequately or equitably funding public schools relative to what is otherwise constitutionally mandated. Are you hearing that concern expressed by legislators? Have you had any conversations with the governor as to whether she might be similarly worried?

JG: I haven't had a conversation with the Governor about that, but I'm sure she is worried. Most of the legislators that I have talked to, especially on the Democratic side, are very worried. But, you know, every year education is under attack, be it vouchers, be it special ed funding from the Republican side.

We just have to be steadfast. We cannot give up on this, moving forward, on education funding and following now that the Supreme Court has released—I wish they would have kept an oversight on that. But since they haven't, we need to keep doing it. That's one of the—I mean, Governor Kelly is the Education Governor. She continues to fund, fulfill that requirement, put in a cost of living. So I hope that continues.

CC: Again, by way of full disclosure, I would point out that we've known one another for some years, and I was a member of your staff during many of the years you served on the Tax panel. I've never known a single person who has a bad word to say about you. That's especially remarkable, given the multitude of different jobs you had here working and influencing and directly making policy in and around the Statehouse. Do you think your disarming nice guy approach has made it easier to work with people over the years who might otherwise have had different viewpoints or perspectives?

JG: I think so. I've always tried to approach every encounter, again relationship building. Every encounter is to—or approach something with common sense. I had great mentors after serving—why I wanted to serve on the Tax Committee. Not many people want to serve on the Tax Committee. But I had mentors over the years that I followed like former [Representative Joan Wagnon](#). I had you in the Research Department that we had a number of conversations about taxes; and Representative Tom Sawyer who was the ranking on Tax when I came in. So Tax was just something I always wanted to sort of dig my teeth into and really get to know and educate myself on.

CC: Given that you've been around the political whirlwind here at the Statehouse since at least the 1980s, how would you compare and contrast the institutions of state government today, especially the legislature, with the way things were three or four decades ago? What are the biggest differences? Are those differences generally positive or negative in your mind?

JG: It has changed over the last thirty years. The legislature—when I first started lobbying, it was more moderate. Things could get accomplished every session—maybe not everything, but we were moving right along. And, of course, I always, the old pendulum as people point out, moves back and forth. And then we started moving towards more conservative thinking, ideology. That's occurred over the last ten, twelve, fourteen years, and that's what we are now. I think it's going to be a while longer before it starts swinging back. I just think we need more common sense, more middle-of-the-road folks in the legislature that can work together and compromise and get something accomplished.

CC: Anything else you want to add about what the future holds for you? I know you continue to play a great deal of golf. I gather the chances are not high that you would re-enter electoral politics yourself?

JG: The chances aren't real high at this point. I'm enjoying being the Governor's Legislative Liaison this session, working very hard on tax issues. But you should never say never. I will leave that open, but for right now, I think—I'm not sure what I'm going to do next year, to be quite honest.

CC: Thank you so much for your time today.

JG: Thanks, Chris. I appreciate it.

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