

INTERVIEW: JO ANN POTTORF

(REVISED)

Q: Let me just say that you are Jo Ann Pottorf. I'm Sara Tucker. This is February 13, 1991. An interview for the Kansas Legislative Women Oral History Project. And I'd like to jump right in and ask you how you got involved in politics first?

A: Well, by working on political campaigns. I worked on Kent Frissell when he ran for Governor some years ago. I was a precinct committee person and was on the Wichita school board. That was my beginning. My husband had been on the school board prior to that and so, when he decided not to run, I ran for the Wichita school board.

Q: Okay. You are Representative of the 83rd district in Wichita? And have been here since 1983?

A: This is starting my seventh year.

Q: Starting your seventh year. Which makes you a veteran.

A: Right. Well at least not a freshman.

Q: Very much not a freshman. How did you end up choosing to run and succeeding in being elected?

A: Well, I ran because I had been on the Wichita school board for almost eight years and during the...almost the end of that tenure, I was president of the Kansas Association of School Boards. And I lobbied for the Wichita school district as well as the Kansas Association of School Boards. When I was on the Wichita school board, there was no lobbyist for the school district, and so individual members would come to Topeka and lobby on education issues. I pushed for them to have their own lobbying, but when I was president of the Kansas Association of School Boards, I was up here testifying for the School Boards Association, so had some background on what was happening in Topeka. I had done many things on the school board. Besides being president of the Kansas Association of School Boards, I was vice-chairman of the Council of Urban Boys for the National School Boards Association and it was just a period of time that I felt personally I had done what I wanted to do for my own achievement in the Wichita school district, but that also eight years is probably enough on an urban district like that and it was time to run for something else and there was a vacant seat, and so I ran for it.

Q: That's interesting. I'm not sure women would always have said it's time to run for something else. Had you always thought about politics? Had that been something that was out there that you might do sometime?

A: Well, no. But as I mentioned, my husband had been on the Wichita school board and so that...in Wichita, actually, being elected on the school district in Wichita is a much larger area to be elected from than the 83rd district that I currently serve. So I had been elected from a citywide area and, just because of my husband being on the school board and that interest and some political and Republican interest in politics, I did that. But I'd always

been kind of out in front and doing things. I was one of the women who was working and also doing a number of things through the years.

Q: How hard was it getting nominated? How hard was it getting elected the first time?

A: Well, of course, you weren't nominated to run for the legislature. I ran. I didn't have any Republican opposition. I had Democrat opposition. My Democrat opponent had also served on the school board and our backgrounds were very similar, school issues and all. Well, I did have a primary opponent. I did have two primary opponents, but the general election was very close and I can't remember the exact number but it was almost decided by the absentee ballots. So, kind of similar to what happened this year. But a few more, I won by about a hundred and some votes.

Q: What did you do to get elected? What was your strategy? Were there any issues?

A: Well, as I mentioned it was an open seat and so there was....I was not running against an incumbent, which was easy. My issues were education because that had certainly been my background and I think the serving of Wichita area in Topeka, urban district, it was very important to have someone that knew about what was happening in Wichita be in Topeka. So that was one of the things I used. Also, my husband is a small business person and I had some background in business issues. I had done a lot of volunteer work and I think that background also helped.

Q: I guess what I was really asking was you won. What made the difference? What was it you did right and clearly you kept on doing right because you keep winning?

A: I had a good political plan. I had also served as the campaign manager--the first paid woman Republican campaign manager--for a Congressional candidate for Congress in 1976 and, so I had run a political campaign before. I knew how to run a political campaign and had a good political campaign plan. And you have to have a plan and use your plan and I knew how to do it.

Q: What was your plan?

A: Well, it's a whole extensive kind of thing, but door-to-door is much of what you do in running a legislative campaign. Raising money.

Q: I often hear that you can't do it alone. What kinds of people helped you? Did you have people go door-to-door with you? What kind of volunteers did you have?

A: I didn't have people go door-to-door because I think it's important to go door-to-door yourself. I think the voters want to know who they're voting for and I don't think that having somebody else going door-to-door and dropping your literature does the trick. So I went door-to-door in the primary and also in the general election.

Q: Why are you a Republican?

A: Well, probably because my parents were Republicans. Some of that background, I think. The issues of the Republicans. But I did have someone the other day mention that I'm concerned about children, some issues that I guess Democrats are concerned about, why wasn't I a Democrat?

Q: I do ask all the Democrats the same question. I wish to make perfectly clear. So your background is Republican? Why are you Republican now? What is it about being a Republican that you really are proud of and you're comfortable with?

A: My being a Republican and staying a Republican is because my district is Republican and, so, to be elected from my district, I mean you can sometimes be the opposite party, but it's getting re-elected from my district. If I changed parties, and some people have, that becomes very difficult.

Q: But I still want to know. I mean you sound like you really believe in what your party stands for and there are things within your party you believe in. When you say to people, 'I'm a Republican. I think the Republican program is a good one,' what is it that you're saying to them?

A: I don't know any more that people pay that much attention to it, necessarily. I know what you're getting at, but I think people look at the individual that they're voting for rather than the political party, and I think we found this in the past election. That people don't necessarily, because you're Republican or Democrat, vote for you but I think they vote for the person. And I think you try to, as you're campaigning, zero in on the things that the people in your district believe in. Each district is different. My district is made up of a lot of small business kind of people. It's made up of a variety of people. I have university people, and so I think my background in education.... I think those are the kind of things [that cause] people to vote for you rather than just saying you're a Republican. Doesn't necessarily get you the vote.

Q: Whatever works. Tell me about the Kansas Legislature when you first got here. It's been long enough that that may be a real distinction. Perhaps it isn't. If you had to describe how it worked, how would you describe the legislature in 1983 when you first came here?

A: I don't think it was '83 actually because this is starting my seventh year, so I think we're going back a little.... Well, I don't think I had the feeling as many freshman do, and I hear people talk coming in, that it's a bit awesome, again because I'd been up here lobbying for the school district and been over here. I knew who most of the legislators...just because of lobbying efforts, I had to know them. I knew many of the lobbyists, so when I came up here, I felt very comfortable. It was just part of a kind of integration into the process. I was bored my first year because you don't have the committees like I serve on now. And I felt like I had worked all day long at business kinds of things and coming up here, I just did not have that involvement, that personal involvement, and I really was bored many times.

Q: What committees did you ask for? What committees did you get on?

A: Well, I was on Education, of course. That was one I wanted. Public Health and Welfare and Labor and Industry. Labor and Industry was not a committee I was ever interested in.

Q: But they didn't meet the same structure as they do now?

A: They do, but you know, as a freshman you don't necessarily get all the picks of the committees that you want, so usually [you're lucky] if you get one committee that you really want, and then they fill in. And Public Health and Labor and Industry are two that many freshmen get on.

Q: Yes, I had heard that.

A: Kind of serve your freshman time.

Q: How would you then and how would you now define the job of legislator? What did you think your job was and how did you set about trying to get it done?

A: Well, I think the job of the legislator is knowing the perception of your district. So I think you contact the people, door-to-door starting out campaigning you have some feeling of that. Sending out opinionaires to your district, knowing what the people in your district feel. But I think it's the contact back with the people.

Q: So, if I call it constituent services, that wouldn't be nearly enough? But your first job is to know who you represent and....

A: Right. The constituent service.

Q: Now, I always have a picture of the legislature as a place where it makes a difference if you play the game right. If you...whether it's [that] you get along by going along or whether it's you have to take a stand, or whatever it is. I have a picture of the legislature as someplace where you've got to do it right to get things done. Does that agree with how you see it or am I not...?

A: I think there's people that have different views and I think some people like to think that they maybe wheel and deal. I don't know if that's what you're getting at. I think some people talk more about wheeling and dealing than they actually do. I think that that makes them look and feel important and so they're saying all this happened and are starting rumors that sound like something that they're very involved with. I tend to be more, I guess, up and down on issues and you certainly have to build the coalitions to get something passed. I mean, I have a bill that...Parents as Teachers bill that passed last year that I was very proud of the legislation that was copied after Missouri. But it's a bill that any time reports are written about education, and we just had a video yesterday mentioning that bill...but certainly you can't get those things passed by yourself. You have to have people who are working with you. And as a House member, you have to get people in the Senate to help work with you on issues. And so, you build those kinds of coalitions, I think, with other legislators and know who you can work with to get things passed.

Q: So, again, if I were to try to see if I'm getting it right, you see yourself as kind of a consensus builder as opposed to--well, sneaking around sounds awful slanted. Did you have a mentor? Did you have a group of people when you first came in that you felt like you could go to that helped you get things...?

A: No, I really didn't have a mentor because, as a woman, there weren't that many mentors. There weren't that many women who had been in the legislature before. So, it's just like even the United States Senate. I mean, Nancy Kassebaum and I are contemporaries. We were close friends through the years, so that I know some people would look at her as a mentor. I mean, we're peers, so I did not have a mentor at all.

Q: What would you say are some of the bills of which you are most proud having been involved with? Some of the battles, maybe even a bill you didn't get through? What would you say, looking back, you feel are some of the high points?

A: Well, as I mentioned, the Parents as Teachers bill is one. And the time of transportation for the elderly and the handicapped. That was really just trying to get some money in for that, because the state had never had any state money for the elderly and the handicapped transportation. We worked on that issue for a number of years and finally I got it put as part of the highway bill because I had visited with the Governor early on, thinking that it was an important issue for him and he said, well, yes, he liked it but never would really help push it. So his highway plan....You know, again, you build coalitions. The highway plan was very important to him and so he finally said in part of that plan that we needed transportation for the elderly and the handicapped, and so when it came down to it, there was money put in for that.

Q: Is there something that you haven't been able to get through? Some bill or some cause that you see as real important you're hoping to accomplish soon?

A: Oh, I think the education reforms and things like that. And looking at the future, some of those things that are going to happen. I think oftentimes, we have too much legislation, though. I am not one to introduce a lot of bills. People...many times people do that to get their name in the paper and those kind of things. And I just really...I think you look at some good pieces of legislation. You can join with other legislators in getting those pieces passed rather than taking the personal glory for yourself.

Q: I've heard that several times. I didn't get my name on the bill, but I'm still real involved with it. Is that a changing dynamic? Did it used to be that having your name on bills was more important? Is that a difference between men and women?

A: Well, maybe it is between men and women. Possibly so. I think that has to be your own personal makeup. What you feel comfortable with.

Q: What would you say is the result of the number of women in the Kansas Legislature? Do you have any perspective on it, and it could be whatever seems to you to be important? Why there are more? Whether it has made any difference in any way? Whether you've seen any change over the years you've been here?

A: I think one of the reasons why there're more is just like myself, I think, that women have raised their families. I happen to have worked, but I think some of them have done volunteer kinds of work, raised a family, and [are] looking for something else and they run for the legislature. We have several past presidents of the Kansas Association of School Boards that are in the legislature, so that's another thing. And many past school board members and so that's another kind of way women have come into the legislature.

Q: I have noticed that. That and the League of Women Voters and Junior League. There are several....

A: Yeah, and I was a member of the Junior League, too, and very involved in that, but that's not necessarily the background.

Q: But twenty years ago, there were women who had raised their families and they weren't getting elected to the legislature twenty years ago very often.

A: I don't think they ran.

Q: Why do you think they didn't run? This is just personal opinion here.

A: Well, I think because women just were not running for political office and it just goes back to some...like school boards. In some areas of Kansas, there are still very few women on the school board. Women were just not accepted as running for political office.

Q: Okay. So, when you ran your first time or ever since, did you feel that you were not going to get voted for very often because you were a woman?

A: No, I never had any problem that way, thankfully.

Q: You have mentioned your private life several times. I'd like to start with your birth family background. Are you a Kansan?

A: Yes, I was raised in Wichita.

Q: And I gather a Republican family?

A: Well, yes, they weren't involved in politics, but they were Republican.

Q: Did you have a traditional family--father earned the pay and the mother stayed home or...? I'm looking for role models, patterns, etc.

A: Right. I know, and again, the role model's hard. My father was a small business person and my mother's family had a small business in Wichita. She was a part-owner of a lumber yard. Actually didn't work there but she had taught school and during World War II went back to teaching, but basically she didn't work. She did a lot of volunteer work in the community, very active in volunteer work.

Q: One of the great things is that our last twenty years, more and more women have felt free to do whatever was appropriate. But you do seem to have felt free earlier than some women. Do you have any sense of why that was?

A: I really don't because I have always...as I said, going back to the Junior League, I was one of the people that was working. I was substituting, I was working with a political campaign or something like this and still doing volunteer when most of the Junior League members were just doing the volunteer. And I can remember saying, you know, you've got to start thinking of the working person and how you can relate that. It was just a gradual process. I have a very supportive husband and he didn't push, but he allowed me to do the kind of things that I wanted to do.

Q: Tell me about your education.

A: I graduated from the Wichita school system. Went to Stephens College in Missouri for one year--woman's school--and then went to Kansas State and graduated in elementary education as many women my age did. But I started in Home Ec and went into elementary education. My husband was in veterinary school at the time and so I taught one year in Manhattan while he finished veterinary school and then did substitute teaching. And then I was the elementary specialist for a student-teaching program that trained student teachers in twenty-six colleges and universities in Wichita. It was called the Cooperative Urban Teacher Education program and many of those students went into inner city schools. And during that period of time, then, I got my master's degree in urban education from St. Louis University.

Q: Do you have children?

A: I have two grown sons.

Q: Were they already out of the home when you first ran for the legislature?

A: When I first ran for the legislature, mmhmm.

Q: So, what impact has all this had on your family? How do you balance being a person in Wichita and being up here in Topeka? How do you do this?

A: Well, I sometimes wonder and I think this year was so...it seems like everything has subcommittees and so you start at 7:00 in the morning 'til evening. And my mother and my sister were up here visiting the other day and I think they were wondering how I did it, too. Because when I go to Wichita on the weekends, I'm also a realtor, so I show people homes and have open houses, as well as try to be a wife and my children are not there, but also a daughter. My mother lives in Wichita, so it is a balancing act sometimes, trying to coordinate all that.

Q: Clearly, it must be alright with your husband. Do you think...? Is he just special? Are more men changing? How does he deal with the fact that you're not at home all the time?

A: Well, he's very self-sufficient. He cooks. He's an excellent cook. He can do the laundry, except he washed my silk blouse last week in the washing machine. But he has...he's been very, as I said, self-sufficient and doesn't mind cleaning the house on Friday afternoons before I get home or running the sweeper or those kinds of things.

Q: So it's not a big deal. Now you mentioned being a realtor. Here you are deeply involved with education. I was looking at your office with all these marvelous plaques you have which are quite a testimony. How come you're a realtor?

A: Oh, probably because of the flexibility. As I mentioned, I had substituted and been involved in a student-teaching program. I worked for a psychiatrist that was much into the holistic medicine. I did international conferences for him and I've run political campaigns. I think the real estate [is] probably because of the flexibility. I've enjoyed it. I enjoy working with people and it's fun to find homes for people.

Q: What would you say is the cost of being a legislator? And I know that can mean many different things. All the way from prying into your finances--which I'll do as much as you'll let me. Emotional cost? Time? Family cost? What does it cost you to be in the legislature?

A: Well, I don't know that I would say it costs me anything. I think that I gain from being in the legislature, so I think that it's the personal input almost, to me, rather than the cost. And, as I said, if things work out and juggle those kind of things...I guess if my husband were to divorce me, there would be the cost of that, but really, I've gained so much and enjoyed the process.

Q: You sound very positive. What kind of person does it take to be a legislator? My first impression is that you'd have to have a very high energy level. But, I guess what I'm really asking you is can you think of something that would make it hard for you to be in the legislature? What is it about your life that makes it possible for you to be in the legislature?

A: Well, I really don't know. I guess it's just the personal makeup. It works. As you say, the high energy level, those kinds of things.

Q: What have you gotten out of it? You suggested it, but truly what do you get out of being a legislator?

A: Well, I have had, besides just the Kansas Legislature, I've had some personal kinds of things because of it. I serve on the Executive Board for the National Council of State Legislators for the Women's Network. And a year-and-a-half ago, there were eight women from that group that was the executive board that went to Korea and Taiwan and we did international seminars with women from Japan and Taiwan and Korea. Women running for political office. We were there two weeks in Korea and then on to Taiwan and so that's another personal kind of thing. I think I enjoy the political realm and being in Washington, D.C., for meetings and things like that because of legislature or politics. You know, meeting several Presidents and those kinds of things are neat. I have many good women friends in Washington who are involved in many different areas, the National Safety Transportation Board, one friend was through political things, and now vice-president of US Air. You know, those...I think the legislative kind of things. And the offshoot of being in the legislature, I was accepted as One Hundred Women in Leadership America, which is the first group of women in leadership America. So, that again is another kind of gain. So, it's here in Topeka, but it's also broader than that.

Q: Sounds great. It sounds like you are truly in a role that works for you. Do you see staying in the legislature? Would you want to be Speaker, Governor? And I'm not really trying to ask you about your future plans?

A: Oh, I understand that. No, I think continuing in the legislative process at another level certainly has always been an interest. Whether...I don't know which particular level that would be and there are certain times [when] being in the right place at the right time works. I think that's part of it, too.

Q: But this is a profession and a cause which you see continuing in your life, that suits you?

A: Well, I think if the voters elect me, but....

Q: There's always that.

A: And I think we've seen in the last political campaigns and elections that incumbents were defeated and sometimes good incumbents, but the voters thought that they had been there too long. So I think that you have to kind of look at that, too.

Q: I've asked several people this and it really always comes out of our conversations. I did not set out to ask this question. Do you think it works for Kansas to have a citizen legislature? I talked to people who have a terrible time making ends meet. I've talked to people who really have a hard time continuing their family life who don't live in Topeka and being here. And it's interesting to me to look at this and to say, 'Does it work? Does it work to ask people to have another profession and then come to Topeka? Does it work to ask people to have families and come live in Topeka?' What do you think about that?

A: Well, I think it certainly doesn't work for a lot of people because, I think, of the family situation and all, but I would hate for us not to have a citizen legislature. I've known other legislators across the country that are full-time legislators. I don't think they get anymore accomplished than we do at all. And then there're some legislatures that only meet every other year, and still get the same amount accomplished that we do, but I think our process has worked for us and I would like to keep it that way. I think the perception of the public out there thinks we get paid a lot more, wined and dined and all that, and that we're just up here having fun, and I love having people from...well, it's fun to have pages and then their parents coming with them and other people from the district to really realize what happens in the process all day long.

Q: Not to mention the fact that your offices aren't that great, if you don't mind my saying so. In terms of quiet and privacy.

A: We're never there.

Q: Which is, I presume, the reason. What do you think about this incredible revolution that is going on which is all of these women who--thirty-five in the House and nine in the Senate--who are here as part of the process that

used to be a male preserve? Since 1919, we've had occasional women. Sometimes widows, sometimes on their own, but we've never really had very many. Do you have any perspective on it as one of the ones who's part of this revolution? Where it comes from, what difference it makes whether it does make any difference, that women are essentially the same kind of adults being legislators that men have always been. What is your perspective on this?

A: Go back and ask the question again.

Q: How much do you think the experience of having a great many women elected to the Kansas legislature means? Has it changed anything? Does it reflect any other change? What difference does it make now that there are a lot of women here?

A: Well, I think as far as the issues are concerned, I think there are certain issues that women tend to vote together on or think about. I mean, children's issues and that kind of thing, I think we have our own personal background and perception of those issues and, so, those are things that women can get together and vote on that didn't used to.... And it takes more than just the women, but I think women can work together on some of those kinds of issues.

Q: Women get together and can be the difference or spearhead certain issues that have traditionally been called 'women's issues', you were saying. Why don't you think those issues got taken seriously before all the women got here? Or why didn't those issues get as far as the women can take them.

A: Because there weren't men pushing them. Men were interested in, and you've got to also think, you know, the Kansas Legislature has been more rural than urban and more agriculture kind of oriented. So there were the farm issues and some of those things, I think, [which] certainly are very important, but men were pushing many of those kinds of issues.

Q: Do women operate any differently, and I know there's a great deal of difference among them and a great deal of difference among men, but despite all that do you see women operating somewhat differently than men?

A: Oh yes, I think they do. Very much so.

Q: How?

A: Well, again, I think maybe more of the coalition kind of building again. You find women that have common interests with you and maybe you'll work with them on certain issues and know that they're gonna introduce legislation that you're interested in or vice-versa. I think that...I guess, more of the social issues. They tend to find maybe the constituents out there that are interested in social issues and will push those issues, whether it's an issue having to do with pre-natal care or something like this, that they'll carry the process through. Those issues might have been mentioned to men before, but they let them just go away and didn't push the issues. I think women are not afraid to work hard and push an issue and know that it's maybe not going to pass one year, but will pass the next year.

Q: Tell me, what question did you think I might ask you that I haven't or what question should I have asked you that you would like to get on the record about the experience of being a woman, a very successful woman, in the Kansas Legislature?

A: Well, I can't think of anything right now, but I think it's a great project that you're working in. It's interesting, I guess again, going back to knowing women in the other states and we talked about the number of women here, but that certainly is a trend across the United States, the number of women. But it's more in the Midwest, state of Washington. There's still in the southern states...you're still faced with very few women in the legislature and that somehow has to do with political parties. Some of those are dominated more with Democrats and it seems like it's more of a man's world, somehow, down there in the Democrats and not allowing women into the process and very few Republican women ever get elected to the legislatures in the South.

Q: That's interesting. So you really see this as a kind of Great Plains, midwestern phenomenon?

A: I think it has something in it. Going back to...well, just look at our own state with Nancy Kassebaum and some of the things like that. Jan Myers. We kind of really have been fortunate in electing women to Congress, which there are many states that still say, 'We'd like to have a woman in the United States Senate or more women in Congress.' We're a role model example here.

Q: Do you think Kansas does really see women differently than some other parts of the country?

A: I think they're very accepting of women. I think they see them as in partnership and I don't...I can't say that any male in the legislature resents having women in. I'm sure that's not been always the case, but they see them as a partnership and it's just a natural phenomenon that there's going to be more women in the legislature the next few years.

Q: So you haven't had any real difficulties in the legislature or felt that being a woman gave you any...?

A: Oh, absolutely not.

Q: Well, I thank you very much.