

Interview of Kenny Wilk by Chris Courtwright, May 13, 2024  
Kansas Oral History Project Inc.

Chris Courtwright: Good afternoon. Today is May 13, 2024, and we're in the historic House Chamber of the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka, Kansas. 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 shortly thereafter appointed me to her bipartisan Council on Tax Reform.

Today I'm privileged to interview former Representative Kenny Wilk, who has had a long, distinguished, and diverse career in public service. In addition to serving as a Republican member of the Kansas House here in the Legislature from 1993-2008, representing the Leavenworth area, he was a member of the Kansas Board of Regents from 2011-2015, including a year as Chair. He was a member of the former Kansas Bioscience Authority Board, and since 2009, has been a key figure for the University of Kansas Health System, where he currently serves as Vice President for Government and Community Affairs. His illustrious career in both the public and private sectors previously included more than thirty-one years at Hallmark as well as service on the boards for the Kansas Technology Enterprise Corporation, the National Institute for Strategic Technology Acquisition and Commercialization, the First State Bank of Tonganoxie, the Metropolitan Mental Health Association of the Heartland, the Kansas State Historical Society, and Kansas, Inc.

As if all of that weren't enough, he served for a time as a faculty member for a special Kansas Leadership Center program designed to help train newly-elected legislators. A longtime resident of the Leavenworth/Lansing area who has won multiple awards and kudos we will soon be discussing for his tireless advocacy for economic development, Kenny is a proud graduate of Ottawa University. Did I get most of that right?

Kenny Wilk: You got all of that right. I'm quite impressed with your research. You did forget that I was an Eagle Scout, am an Eagle Scout. But otherwise you got it all! I forgot actually some of that. So thank you for recalling all of that.

CC: Absolutely. Well, this interview with Mr. Wilk 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 in 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](#), and also the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions are made possible as result of the generosity of KOHP donors. Former House Speaker Pro Tem Dave Heinemann is our videographer today.

During your sixteen years in the Legislature, I suppose it demonstrates your jack-of-all-trades, diverse skill set that you served on so many different committees, but looking over those records, I guess some of the highlights that jumped out to me were that you, of course, chaired probably the two most powerful House Committees, Appropriations and then Taxation. You also chaired the Economic Development Committee, which was certainly appropriate given your background and expertise in that area, and served on pretty much every other prominent panel worth

mentioning, including Federal and State Affairs, Judiciary, Transportation, and Financial Institutions. I hope I cherry-picked most of the top ones, since there are quite a few others on your full list.

KW: That's—I did have the opportunity to serve and chair Post Audit, Legislative Post Audit. I had what was a very fulfilling legislative career for myself, and I like to point that out to folks that are serving today. I think sometimes people pick up a committee or a subject area, and then they get comfortable there, and then they don't want to move beyond that. I actually was quite curious about almost everything. I just always have found interest in every topic that I come across, some more than others. I didn't always move because I wanted to move. Sometimes there were just reasons why I got moved, and I didn't quite understand. But the lesson out of that for me was it created this diversity of experience. It gave me a breadth, not always depth, but a breadth of experience and knowledge coming in that I found very, very useful.

And then I quickly determined, so the best example I can actually share is when you serve on Appropriations, you really do get to learn all about state government.

CC: Oh, yes.

KW: And that experience will help you with any other committee you go on. If you actually have the privilege and the honor of chairing Appropriations, then chairing the other committees really becomes like kind of a walk in the park, but what you learn from all that when you put it all together can really allow you to work in the process. I have learned not many people have ever had the opportunity to chair Tax and Appropriations. I think David Adkins did that. He was in my class. And I always considered that a privilege and an honor.

And people will often ask me, "What did you like better?" and that's a hard one for me to answer because I actually liked them both a lot. The way I described it, I always found Appropriations more about today. You've got to fund the government, keep the government going for the next year or two. So it's really about today. What I loved about tax policy and the way I always looked at tax policy—I had some great mentors that really helped me to understand that tax policy is about tomorrow. It's about tomorrow. It's not just about the revenue. It's certainly the revenue. You were helpful at that. There's always consequences to that—what behaviors are you moving, what finances are you bringing, what is that going to do, not the next year or two, because I learned that as well. All of those types of policies, there's a long-term consequence. There can be a short term, but there's always a long term. So I found that challenge with the tax policy really fulfilling.

CC: Absolutely. Before we delve a little bit more into your legislative years and committee work and big issues and whatnot, let's get some additional background. One question we always ask, are you a native Kansan, and if not, when did your family move here?

KW: I am a native Kansan. My family came here in the late 1800s, both sides, one from the Poland area and the other from Germany, German descent kind of come in, my dad's side of the family more through Canada and actually ended down in the Leavenworth area seeking work as many people did back in the late 1800s in the coal mines. A lot of people don't know, but there

were coal mines in Leavenworth, and the caves are still there. That's how they ended up in Leavenworth. My ancestry runs all of the way back there.

CC: You had been actively involved in your local Farm Bureau when you first ran for the Legislature in 1992, when you were thirty-three years old. So maybe the politics and public service bug was in your blood from a fairly early age. Can we start there and can you tell us whether your family had a history in politics and whether you had a mentor or anything who encouraged you to start down this very interesting career path? I found a clipping from 1992 when you filed that said you were frustrated with what was happening in Topeka relative to both economic development and education, a couple of issues that as we know have remained near and dear to your heart here many decades later. Were you approached by party officials or people in and around your community encouraging you to run in 1992, or was it pretty much something you decided to do on your own initiative?

KW: The short answer is I decided to run on my own, but not, not really. None of us ever decide to run on our own. At the local level, I didn't have anybody coming and knocking on my door, saying, "Hey, Kenny, do you want to sign up and run?" My story is a little bit different, and I always love to share it. Did I grow up in a political family? Absolutely. Nobody was an elected official, but did we talk politics and religion? Every Sunday. Back then, we always went to Grandma's for dinner on Sunday, every Sunday, and I grew up, and believe it or not, I started out in my political life when I registered when I was eighteen as a Democrat because I grew up in a Democrat family. I mean, and we talked politics every Sunday, and it was always heated. The fact of people being afraid to talk politics, it was just the opposite. That's what I grew up with, and I mean, my aunts and uncles would have at it until Grandma rang the bell, and it was time to eat. Then we went and ate, and then it rested until the next week.

So the seeds of that, I didn't realize that. I used to sit on the floor and listen to them go at it. I recall how much I enjoyed that. It has been really a significant event in my life, and again it was more accidental than anything else. I got elected when I was a junior in high school to go to the Kansas Farm Bureau Citizenship Seminar in Junction City, Kansas.

Now the only reason I went is because the name scared me off, but it was a coed event, and a good friend of mine was going, and we decided it would be a great summer getaway. So we went. And that event actually changed the course of my life. And I've told the Farm Bureau this a lot, many times. I've shared the story with a lot of folks here. I was so moved. They had a lot of elected officials. They taught us a lot about citizenship.

But there were some of the elected officials that were speaking, and I can remember to this day, and I've always try to do this—I've still tried to do it—I tried to do it as an elected official. I still try to do it. I always encourage young people because at that event, they'd always kind of close the same way, "Think about running for public office someday. Just don't rule it out. Think about running for public office."

We all need to encourage our young people to do it. That planted a seed with me. And I remember leaving that event saying, "You know what? I am going to run for office. I'm going to do it. That's what I want to do." I didn't know what I was going to run for. I didn't know when I

was going to run, how, or anything else, but when I was sixteen years old, I knew I was going to run.

CC: Let's save this planet.

KW: So it went from there, and we can get into the '92 campaign if you want to.

CC: That's where I want to get into. A fascinating race. I want you to tell us a little more about that 1992 race. You got around 53 percent of the vote and knocked off a Democratic incumbent, Stevi Stephens, in what the *Kansas City Star* characterized on election night as an upset. The *Star* also said that you had been quite critical of her as the incumbent while she had been critical of you for accepting political action committee contributions and also sort of suggesting that you were a bit of a carpetbagger who had moved into the district just to run for the seat.

So this sounds like a fairly bare-knuckled campaign. Were there debates and forums that you both attended, or was the campaign more fought along the lines of radio ads, yard signs, and postcards? Also, do you have any funny front-porch stories to tell about the first time you were going door-to-door and meeting some of your more eccentric future constituents? I will tell you that some of my very favorite front-porch stories often seem to involve somewhat aggressive dogs. Anything you want to tell us about the entirety of your '92 race against Democratic incumbent Stevi Stephens?

KW: Well, yes, there's a lot to unpack there. That all does capture it. Of course, that was my first race. It was only her second. She was a first-term, and really the bigger issue for her—so it was a kind of a combination. We did have some forums. I tried to make all of them. She came to about half of them. And they were fairly spirited, but at the time—I haven't checked this, but I think I'm right about this. I believe I was the third Republican challenger to beat a female incumbent. It was tricky.

CC: It was a tall order.

KW: Yes, it's just tricky. The thing that really helped me the most was she had given—that's back when we had the Allied Officers from Fort Leavenworth that come to the Capitol every year from the different nations around the world. We always had a day here. I don't know if they still do that now or not. I think they stopped. I don't know if they restarted or not. That was a big event. And she gave an anti-war speech on one of the two years that she was here to greet them, and that got picked up locally. That really—that was the lynchpin of the campaign. Now we got into it about some other issues, but that really, really got—that was the lynchpin. I didn't know what I was doing, but I had a lot of good people helping me.

My first primary, I ran against the Vice Chair of the Republican Party who had been the Vice Chair for twenty-some-odd years. Fortunately for me, he just assumed that the Republican nomination would go to him. So he was not worried about this thirty-two-year-old kid.

CC: So this would have been July and August of '92.

KW: Yes. He just dismissed me totally. I think I knocked on about 7,000 doors. I mean, I literally—I've got countless stories. I was different because I had a rural and an urban district. So I hit the urban areas numerous times, but I knew it was going to be a close race. I actually went out—there were some serious dogs out in the rural area, but if you had multiple Republicans registered at a household, I was coming to your house to see you. I walked through mud and rain.

I won by eighty-nine votes. So I won my first race by eighty-nine votes. One of my favorite stories of that night when we're counting the votes. They were coming in, and my mom and family were there. There was only one precinct left to come in, and I was ahead by one vote.

CC: Oh, my goodness.

KW: And my mother had just dismissed it. She was just a nervous wreck. I thought we were going to have to admit her to the hospital. And I knew where that last precinct was at, and I knew I was going to be okay. I said, "Mom, it's going to be okay." Well, we ended up winning by eighty-nine votes.

It was a lot of knocking on doors, a lot of going to parades. It was a lot of hard work, but it was a great experience. Again, the veterans told me this. I didn't believe it at the time. This is an important point, I believe. People complain about campaigns and how hard they are. You get the short—you don't get time to respond. You've got too much going on. It's chaotic. I was told the best preparation you're ever going to get for serving is a good, hard campaign.

I found that to be very accurate as the years went on—learning to manage that chaos, learning to understand, when you get asked a question, you don't get ten minutes to respond. You may get two. You had to learn to think on your feet and be adaptive, and that's what campaigns are about.

So as people are thinking about running for office, people that are running for office welcome those campaigns and take them for what they really are—a great opportunity to learn and to develop the skills that you will need and you will practice every day if you're able to win and serve in this Chamber.

CC: It sounds like the veterans were a key constituency for you. But I have to ask, since this was 1992, this was the first statewide election in '92 after the whole Summer of Mercy protests down in Wichita. Was abortion an issue up in Leavenworth at all during that campaign?

KW: Absolutely. That was back in—again I got some great coaching on that issue. I'm not here to persuade anybody on issues. I'll just tell you the coaching I got and the coaching I shared with others. When you're asked about that issue, if you can't state your position in about ten seconds or less, you don't have a position. So determine what your position is, state it, stick with it. What I found is that people respected that. Stevi and I were on different sides of that issue. It never got debated much. People just wanted to know where you were at. We stated it and moved on.

That was an issue, but back—school finance—property taxes was a huge issue in the early nineties. You know that.

CC: We're going to get there, yes.

KW: I've got to tell you, that's what they wanted to talk about was topics like—

CC: Property taxes, yes. Let's talk about the environment you arrived in for your first term during the 1993-94 biennium. I've always thought that the early nineties was maybe the most fascinating time in post-WWII Kansas legislative history because of how competitive and dynamic things were here at the Statehouse. Setting the table for your arrival, we know that Democratic Governor Joan Finney had gotten elected in 1990 at least in part because both of her predecessors, Governors Carlin and Hayden, had been blamed for some of the property tax reappraisal and classification upheavals of the late 1980s, which you just mentioned.

And Democrats as a result of that 1990 election had taken control of this Chamber here in the House for just the third time in state history. In 1992, the Legislature, at Finney's urging, had just passed arguably the most significant piece of public policy in the last fifty years, the historic, then-new K-12 school finance law, a measure which was designed to comply with constitutional mandates regarding adequacy and equity in the funding of schools, but also to dramatically reduce property taxes in most areas of the state.

Then in 1992, even though Democrat Bill Clinton of course is elected President, Republicans here in Kansas do win back control of the Kansas House by a few seats—thanks to results like an upset win from a scrappy newcomer in the 42nd District—I think it was 66-59 GOP maybe your freshman term?

KW: Correct.

CC: Meaning that when you arrived here in 1993, you and your party were once again seated over here on the majority side of the aisle. Can you tell us what the experience was like for you when you showed up for your first session, and maybe how you went about learning all the legislative procedure and nuances, and who the key stakeholders and lobbyists were? Also maybe whether there were some more senior members of the GOP caucus who helped mentor you and the other freshmen and sort of teach you the ropes?

KW: Yes, again a lot to unpack there. That brings back a lot of memories. So every freshman, you've got to recognize when you come in, you have no context because it's your first time here. So you don't really—but I certainly remember the very, very warm welcome that I and some of the other freshmen got because, yes, you're correct, I do find this interesting, Chris. Today, I have people ask about my previous service, and I remind them that when I came in, the Democrats had been in the majority party.

Unfortunately, we have too many people in our state that don't think that that ever happened or could happen. I said, "It absolutely could." The Democrats were 63-62. I didn't know what that actually meant as far as the majority party because I hadn't served yet. But when I came here, did I ever get a warm welcome. So, yes, I was one of the few that flipped it back over.

When I got here, I liked to think I accepted early on what I didn't know. It took me just a little bit, but I often categorized it this way. When you're sitting around the kitchen table, it's one thing to talk about the issues. When I'm campaigning and I'm out knocking on doors, that's another level, talking about the issues. But once you're actually elected, you're sitting in one of these seats and you're now deciding for three million people, it's altogether different.

I remember, again one of my favorite stories, I had a lot of great mentors. I've got to mention some of them. One of them is certainly Joan Wagon. I've got a story to tell about her as well. I remember one of my first encounters, I'm downstairs as a freshman. We're coming up on the first break. You could not see my desk. In fact, you couldn't even see me because every piece of mail that came in, I was saving it because I was going to read it.

And Rochelle Chronister came down, and she walked into my office. She said, "What are you doing?" And I told her, "I've got reading material here." She said, "You really think you're going to read all that?" She said, "Do you have any idea how much more stuff is coming?" And she took all of it, and she just threw it in the trash can. And I'm like, "What are you doing?" She said, "You can never catch up." She said, "You have got to learn how to trust the staff here, learn the right people to ask questions of, engage, and learn that way. Keep up with what you can keep up on reading," but she said, "the chances of you ever getting through that material are zero to none."

So the seeds were sown right there. I was always interested in Appropriations. You talked about my service on Appropriations. I interned on Appropriations for four years because when Rochelle Chronister was chairing it, she was a drill sergeant, but she also was a tremendous teacher.

I didn't know it, but new House members I guess were not supposed to interface with Senators. Well, I was in 174 West, and Gus Bogina, who just passed, I know you all had a great interview with him, he was right around the corner from me, and he chaired Ways and Means. Well, I was interested in the budget. So I'd just truck over there and ask questions.

One day I got set straight and told I wasn't supposed to do that. So I stopped doing it. He saw me one day in the hall, and he asked me where I'd been. I told him, I said, "I apologize because I learned I wasn't supposed to do that, being a freshman." I never forgot this either. He said, "I don't know who told you that," but he said, "you have no idea how thrilled I am that a freshman member is interested in the budget." He said, "You come over here anytime you want with any question." He said, "You don't need an appointment. You just walk in."

I took those lessons—you know Keith Roe, the Chair of Tax. You know that. I was telling Joan Wagon I got to serve on a conference committee with them. As a freshman, I had all these rich experiences, But I was open to it, and I sought them out. I sought out the senior members, and I sought out senators, too.

Another great lesson that Rochelle Chronister—actually she didn't give it just to me. She'd give it to every freshman. I just happened to take it to heart. It was like the first week, and she said, "I want all of you to get pen and paper." She said, "I want you to go around and meet all 164 other

members. I want you to meet all the House members, Democrat, Republican. I want you to go over on the Senate side, meet every Democrat, Republican. I want you to learn something about them and just write yourself a little note. And when you've got to the other 164, bring it around. I want to see it." Well, I just took that as an assignment. I actually took it seriously. So I went out. That was a tremendous exercise because I got to know people, meet people, and it was really life-changing.

Again, I was just always coached. Representative Wagon was this way, too. Actually, it may have been Joan and Rochelle collectively—I can't remember who, but somebody that was very significant to me, if you're going to work on major policy up here, you really need to make it bipartisan because if you don't, it will be undone when you come back. If you want it to be lasting policy, if you want it to have a chance of working, make sure it's bipartisan.

At that time that they told me that, I didn't, again, no context. But as I got into my years of service, that could not have been better advice. I tried to do that. I actually not only tried to do bipartisan, but most of the major stuff that I did, it was always bicameral. I would go seek out early on in the process, a partner over in the Senate. Again, I've tried to help a lot of folks—I've suggested that to a lot of folks, but I don't see that happening. I don't get it because you have to get through both chambers.

Number one, it's just a whole lot more efficient to do that. But number two, it's a lot of fun. It's a lot of fun. You actually get to know each other. It's a lot more efficient way about doing policy.

CC: This is fascinating, and I agree. We've got a question or two later about how things are different today, and you can expand on this a little more. But it sounds like you got some especially helpful advice to you your freshman term and had some good mentors, not the least of which may have been Rochelle encouraging you to do things. You were learning the ropes fairly early on.

Because all of that was so important and transformative for you, did all of that lead you later in your career to want to be a mentor to newly-elected freshmen? I know you for a time have been helping Ed O'Malley over at the Kansas Leadership Center to sort of teach the ropes to new freshman legislators. Did the value of your experience make you want to help give back in that regard?

KW: Yes, it always had. I've tried to pay it forward. I could spend a lot of the morning here naming names that helped me. Clyde Graeber was another one from Leavenworth that was tremendous to me. He actually sat in this seat. Bill Reardon was on the Democrat side. He helped me with school finance. Those folks always give you great advice.

So I pretty quickly once I got some experience, I always tried to help the new folks. And, yes, today I work with the Kansas Leadership Center in the new legislative program. We don't get into specific issues, but I tremendously enjoy that. I try to help folks just give them a little bit of an edge and come in maybe with a little bit of an advantage. We spend a lot of time down there. I think probably I have had some success on the relationship side, getting them to know each



other. Unfortunately, it's just too infrequent that new members come together in a bipartisan, bicameral way. You get up here, and you end up going to caucuses, and you split up, and the next thing you know, you're never getting with the other, the groups. And that's a loss for the institution. It's a loss for you individually. And it just hampers the process. There's no reason not to get to know folks.

CC: I've always thought Governor Finney was such an interesting figure politically, back to your first term here, because sometimes it seemed like she was from a third party—at least from the standpoint that she was not at all shy about clashing with legislative Democrats any more than she was with legislative Republicans. Even though you were just a freshman during her final two years, did you have any kind of a personal relationship with her? And how would you characterize her relationship with the House GOP caucus as well as the full Legislature? Do you have any funny or fascinating stories about her to tell?

KW: Well, maybe a couple. You know, if you serve up here, you've always got stories if you're paying attention. I did not know her well. I was a freshman. So she really had no need to know me. And probably where I got more acquainted with her than any other, she was for Initiative and Referendum. If you recall, she was very, very interested in that. At that time, that represents an issue where I evolved, but at that time, I was supporting that, and it passed in the House, and we all got invited up to Cedar Crest. So that was my first visit as a legislator up to Cedar Crest, and she had a picnic up there for us. It never passed because it never got through the Senate, but I remember that.

And she was always very kind. Probably my favorite memory there, which will involve you, you will remember the trifecta. I think that was 1993. It was '93 or '94, and I think we're 62-63, 62 for, 63 against. Somebody went out to hide. That's where the vote was going to fall, and I'm sitting next to Kent Glasscock, and it's about 2:00 in the morning. I think Mary Holladay was her daughter's name who was her Chief of Staff. She's sitting down front there, and they're trying to get ahold of Kent Glasscock because I'm voting no and Kent was voting no for different reasons.

Anyway, they wanted to talk to Kent Glasscock. He at that time, as you know: you always have a choice to pick up your phone or not. And my phone rings. Well, I'm a freshman. So I'm pretty delighted. My phone rang, you know? So I picked it up, and it was Governor Finney calling from the truck stop. You've heard the story about her calling—that's a true story. She was very kind. She said, "Representative Wilk?" I said, "Yeah?" She said, "This is Governor Finney." I'm like, "Whoa, Governor Finney." She said, "Is your seat mate handy?" I said, "Well, which one would that be?" She said, "Representative Glasscock," and I put the phone down, and I said, "Governor"—"Tell her I'm busy." He was talking on the phone. I'll never forget this. I said, "Well, he's here, but he's talking on the phone." She says, "Well, tell him I'll wait."

So I cover it back up. I said, "She's not leaving." Anyhow, I handed him the phone, and that was a spirited conversation.

CC: I can imagine.

KW: Not with me, but with him. She was an interesting character.

CC: Yes, she was. At the risk of messing up our timeline regarding your own legislative path for a question or two—and as long as we are talking about prominent people you interacted with—let me take a minute and ask you about a couple of them who were still here when you arrived. You served for a couple of years with future Governor Kathleen Sebelius before she ran for Insurance Commissioner in 1994. And you also had future US Senator Jerry Moran working just across the Rotunda over in the State Senate until he first got elected to Congress in 1996. We're going to delve more into your future interactions with both of them down the road in this interview, but can you tell us about what your initial impressions of them were and whether you had any inkling as to whether they had bright political futures?

KW: I would say I underestimated both of them, both Jerry Moran and Kathleen Sebelius, but fond memories of both. Governor Sebelius, she was a House member when I got here, and I do recall—again, we got great coaching, and they would tell us freshmen, “There’s a lot of people if you choose to tangle on the House floor that you can attempt to tangle with.” They did advise us to not take on Kathleen Sebelius, and I found that to be really good advice. I did not test that advice. I had a number of other freshmen colleagues that did.

Kathleen was a fierce debater on the floor. She also served on Fed and State [Federal and State Affairs committee]. So, again, recall she’s coming off of chairing that committee for two years, and now she’s the ranking D, and my good friend, Clyde Graeber, is the Chair, and I was on the committee. She really struggled not being the Chair. So I’m just kind of taking it all in, but where I want to go with this is I would tell you, I think I probably misjudged her a little bit. I didn’t really understand her.

So then fast forward, and you recall this, we had an interim—I think it was ’93. Bob Miller is the Speaker, and we do the Blue Highway Interims, which I’ve looked back over that over the years, and I wish the Legislature had kept doing that because that ended up being a tremendous experience for me.

So I was on the SRS—Social Rehabilitation Services—at the time interim, and we went out on a Blue Highway tour for like two five-day tours. I mean, we went all over, and we got a bus, and we all met here. It was a big van. Kathleen Sebelius was on the tour, as was I.

That’s where I really learned a lot about her as well as everybody else. One, we learned a lot. We met in schools, in courthouses, and we—the Blue Highways had to do with getting off the interstate and going to the small towns. I was really taken aback by how many people would show up in the interests that we had, and I remember Kathleen—I believe she was the Ranking D on that tour. She had a depth and breadth of experience that you just don’t have when you’re a freshman. At that time when we did those, they were really not partisan. We were out really trying to hear what the state wanted to say. So I learned a lot about her there and really came to respect her. As history has suggested, she’s done very well.

Jerry Moran, again, he’s another—I mentioned Gus Bogina—I met Jerry, and again didn’t know the House members weren’t supposed to be trotting up—so I went over and visited Jerry all the

time. We really became pretty good friends, and to this day, I think we still have a great relationship.

We worked a little bit on some policy, but not significantly. He did help on the process side. I always sought out mentors that could help me both on the policy side, which is really important, but what you have to figure out up here, you can be as good as you want to be with the policy, but if you don't understand and appreciate the process, you're not going to get very far. So you may need mentors for both of those. It's not always one and the same, and I was always looking for people that could help me learn both.

Jerry was the Senate Majority Leader for several years. He did a great job. He's obviously done—well, they both have done well. So I think it's just a testament to Kansas and some of the good stock that we had—

CC: Had here during that era.

KW: That's right.

CC: I found a clipping that reminded me, you were first appointed by Speaker Miller to the Taxation Committee, where you and I got to know each other so well, just prior to the 1994 session after Barbara Allen had given up her seat to fill an opening on Appropriations. A couple of legislative powerhouses are leading that House Tax panel in 1994, with Republican Keith Roe as Chair, and his predecessor as Chair, Democrat Joan Wagnon, serving as Ranking Democrat member. To jog your memory, some of the key tax issues passed that year included a decision to pay income tax refunds to military retirees, reduce the property tax assessment level for certain not-for-profit entities, and provide a new methodology for taxing recreational vehicles. Any recollections of your first year on Tax working with some of these people and some of those issues?

KW: Absolutely. So I actually got appointed during the interim. My first year, I was not on Tax.

CC: '94, yes.

KW: And again I got some help. So I do not like doing tax returns. I still don't like doing tax returns. I don't do my own tax returns. So the thought of being on the Tax Committee, that was kind of my context. It really didn't exist. But, again, I had some great mentors that said, "You really ought to get on the Tax Committee." I said, "Okay, if you're telling me I do"—and then I immediately, immediately, really, really enjoyed it, and just found it—Keith Roe and Joan Wagnon, that was a great committee.

I was a bit of a pesky freshman. The military retirement pay, which was a 63-million-dollar deal, that was—I'm from Leavenworth. I want to carry that bill. So I go to the Chairman. You remember Keith well. He's explaining to me that freshmen don't carry 63-million-dollar bills. That's not how it works. And I just was like a bad penny. I would not go away. I never forgot this. He said, "All right. If you want to carry that bill, you've got to prove to me that you're going to be ready." He said, "We don't have bills come out of our committee that aren't going to

pass on the floor.” That’s just the way that committee worked. If it came out of committee, he wanted that bill and so did the Ranking Member, wanted it to pass on the floor. “If you’re going to carry that bill, you have to be ready.”

So I spent like—he gave me a couple of weeks. [Attorney] John Frieden and there were other folks that were involved with that. I’d go over to their offices at night and prep, and I worked with the staff. I mean, I worked my tail off. I literally spent two weeks up at night, prepared. So I’m thrilled. This is my first big moment in the House, carrying a major bill.

I carried it down there. I think I maybe had two questions, and they were more just—but the bill passed. I remember saying something to Keith afterward. I said, “You know, you run me through the wringer and made me do all this.” I said, “There was no debate.” He said, “Well, did it ever strike you that maybe people sensed that you were prepared, and that’s why you didn’t have the floor mess?” He said, “That’s the way you want to do it. You always want to over-prepare, be ready,” and he said, “That will create your brand, if you will, and people will know, if they’re going to come down and question you on the bill, they’d better be ready to go be tested because you are.”

Well, again, great lesson. I never forgot that, tried to carry that one forward, too. When I was able and had the opportunity to chair committees, I would look—I did kind of do what he did. I didn’t just go pluck a freshman. Sometimes they asked, “How come you didn’t ask me to carry a bill?” “Well, you didn’t ask me. If you want to carry a bill, you got to say something. Don’t wait in the back of the room. Step up and say you want to carry a bill.” Those are the people that are hungry and want to do it.

Yes, that was a great experience, and we’ll come back to this, but you mentioned Bob Miller. I supported Bob when he ran for—I know we’re going to come to this later. But I supported him when he ran the first time. And my first appointment, I wasn’t even sworn in. I got elected November 5th or 6th, and he called about—well, it was after—when he got nominated to Speaker. So it was the first week of December after he’d been officially nominated, and he called and asked me if I wanted to serve on EPTSCR. I remember saying, “Yes, I do. I want to serve.” “Okay, good.”

So I hang up the phone. I thought, “I wonder what EPTSCR is.” I picked back up the phone. I said, “Hey, I agreed to serve on EPTSCR, but what is it?” That’s how hungry I was. Of course, that was Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research, which then—we’ll get to this, but I come into the Legislature with a much deeper passion and commitment to research than anybody ever knew. That was one of the main reasons I came. So the fact that I get this call by accident—and Miller didn’t know it at the time, but I go on this committee for EPTSCR. Basically that’s a research program to help states that aren’t getting their fair share of research dollars from Washington, DC. And I end up serving on it for several years. But I sowed the seed then for my interest in longer term and research.

CC: Let’s talk about the 1994 election, which was a smashing success pretty much up and down the ballot for your party, as well as its aftermath. Governor Finney had decided not to run again, and GOP Kansas Secretary of State Bill Graves was elected Governor after defeating Democratic

Congressman Jim Slattery in that year's gubernatorial race. Graves was a moderate Republican, but a great many Republicans elected to the House that year turned out to be more conservative than their new Governor.

This led to a fairly dramatic event that you alluded to a minute ago that occurred here at the Statehouse prior to the 1995 session when Speaker Miller was challenged within the GOP caucus and subsequently defeated by Tim Shallenburger, long a champion of the more conservative faction, in the race to determine who was going to be Speaker of the House for 1995 and 1996. Can you tell us what you recall about that Speaker's race, and maybe if you are willing, who you supported and how that shook things up starting with the 1995 session?

KW: Yes. There's a lot to unpack there as well. You've really got some meaty issues here. I remember that well. Now again, context. I'm a sophomore. I'm coming back to start my third year. It's my first experience of re-electing a Speaker. So I mistakenly thought that that was going to just kind of be a formality. I supported Bob Miller. I supported Bob Miller in my run in '92. He's running again. He'd been good to me. So I'm supporting him for re-election. I wasn't necessarily on the inside of the campaign. I maybe thought I was, but I wasn't. I later learned I really wasn't, but I was still trying to help.

So I remember sitting here in the Chamber when the vote came in. I don't even think it was very close. Tim won. Initially, that's kind of a real emotional reaction. But, again, I learned a lot from that. So I didn't like that. Things changed for me. I liked Tim, and I got along with Tim. I didn't quite know how it was going to work out. Things went along okay. I wasn't as satisfied probably as I was with Miller, but I'm still going along okay. I actually end up on Appropriations, so I'm fine.

Then Tim, through a series of votes that are made and some other things, I get removed from Appropriations. And I think I still might be one of the—there's not many Republicans—they've been removed from the committee, but I'm not sure any of them have been removed during the session. I was removed in March of that year. I was very unhappy about that. I didn't like the way it was handled.

But, you know, there's a great lesson there, too, and I probably overreacted. He apologized. The bottom line, and I like to share this with folks, I think sometimes, and I was guilty of this, I think I put a little too much emphasis on who was the Speaker and what appointments I was going to get and of let that kind of consume you a little bit. You really shouldn't do that. You've just got to kind of roll with the punches. They're going to be what they're going to be. There's some things you can influence, some things you can't.

Tim and I ended up—we talked. I like to think we're pretty good friends today. We've talked a lot about that. I think—I always find this an interesting question. This is an observation now after about twenty-five or thirty years of it—different leaders both in the Senate and in the House have had a tendency on a rare occasion to remove people from committees. That seldom works out for either party. It seldom works out for whatever the leader thinks they're going to accomplish. It certainly doesn't necessarily work out for the member. I wish there was less of that because it hangs over people. It lets that be a threat to them that really shouldn't—just stay focused.

And that's what I tried. It took me a bit of time, but again I had some folks help me with it. "Hey, let it go." So, first of all, I get removed from the committee, and I think four years later, I end up coming back chairing the committee. I want to repeat that. I get removed from the committee. I got sent to what I thought was the equivalent of legislative Siberia when they put me on Judiciary. I mean, that was the one committee that I just didn't want to be on. But then I ended up coming back and chairing the committee.

So you can bounce back from those things. You don't want to take it too personal. Keep your head down. Keep working. Keep learning. Keep growing. You can get to where you want to go. You kind of have to know what you want to do here. That always helps, but if you really know what you want to do and be willing to work hard, build the relationships, even when you get derailed from time to time, you can pop back.

CC: You mentioned some of the shake-ups. I guess along the same line, I always thought that some of the brightest young minds in your caucus during that era, especially David Adkins and Kent Glasscock, sort of had their upward mobility at least temporarily derailed when the whole 1995 shakeup happened.

I know that Phill "Two LL" Kline was quickly installed as the Tax Chair under the new regime, notwithstanding the fact he had never served on the committee before. At the same time a lot of the more moderate members were purged. Everyone had figured that Kent, who had been Vice Chair, was going to become Tax Chair since Keith Roe did not run for the Legislature again in 1994, but Kent was suddenly no longer on the committee at all after the purge. A lot of lobbyists and reporters would still talk to him in the hallways and then tell me they thought of him as the Tax-Chair-in-exile.

Maybe your own experience with some of the changes and new faces in new places was just a little better given that you at least temporarily you ended up on the Appropriations Committee as you mentioned. I guess any additional thoughts about this era and how well you got along with Speaker Shallenburger, Phill Kline and others who may have been more conservative than you, and then as you mentioned, of course, your initial stint on Appropriations, even though you were just there for a few short months, did that help you continue to learn some of the nuances that you were going to need later on when you became Chair in 2001?

KW: Oh, absolutely. I think my first go-round was with Robin Jennison when he chaired Appropriations, and he was a really good Chair, a good teacher, too. One of the guys that I'll always be eternally grateful for, not the Phill Kline you referenced here who was Attorney General. He was in my class, and he and I actually got along very well, worked together on a number of topics. But we called him Old Phil Kline, and you know who I'm talking about, the other Phil Kline. He chaired Appropriations, and he was a tremendous mentor to me. He actually was on the committee when I first started chairing Appropriations, and unbeknownst to a lot of people, I tell the coffee pot story a lot because we kept a coffee pot, and the Chair was responsible to make sure there was coffee in the coffee pot all the time.

I quickly figured out that's the best investment you could make. People will come and get a cup of coffee behind, and you could chat. Whenever Old Phil would give me the look to head to the coffee pot, I'd get up and go back and get a cup of coffee with him, and I would be about ready to do something really stupid. He wouldn't say it publicly. He'd just say, "Kenny, I think you might want to do this and this, and you might want to try this or this or just wait a day or two on that." And I was smart enough to know if Old Phil Kline was giving you some advice, you followed it. He was tremendous.

Just a word on Tim Shallenburger because Tim, we had our differences, but you know, we aired them out, too. I didn't run around hiding. We'd talk about it. And he was never personally mean. I don't think I was ever personally—so all the people—I like to think I got along with everybody. I tried to.

The thing about Speaker Shallenburger at the time, and I've thought a lot about this over the years, he always let the process work. He always let the process work. Again, I attribute a lot of this to my mentors. By the way, I've got to mention Dave Heinemann, too. I served with Dave. Dave was a big rule guy, a process guy. The one place where he was very creative—I know they don't do it today, but I have no idea how many amendments he crafted here on the floor. If you had an idea, you could go to Dave on the floor, and he'd whip an amendment for you, and off you were going. So, a lot of people that helped.

But back to Speaker Shallenburger. I appreciate the way he always let the process work. Whether he agreed or disagreed, we used to use the analogy that Speaker Shallenburger always left the back door of his office cracked open, and it was the pathway home. You just had to figure out how to get there. He wasn't going to give you the map to get there, but he was going to let the process work, and he did.

Him and Dick Bond, I believe served together, and the two of them did not always agree, but I know they got together. I'm not encouraging any kind of bad habit here, but I know they had a cigarette from time to time together, and they talked every day, most days twice a day. And the process worked.

The legislative process, as messy as it is, as inefficient as it is, when you actually let it work, it's still one of the best, if not the best, processes democracy has. And you've got to let it work, and you've got to deal with the mess. You need a quiet leadership about you if you're a Speaker or a Senate President to let that part of it work.

And Shallenburger was really good about that. And I respected that because a lot of times, he would be voting no on stuff, but he'd say, "Hey, if that's what the Chamber wants, have at it." And I don't recall him ever holding anybody's votes against them. He might tell you, "I think that's a bad vote for you, Chris, but if that's what you want to vote, go ahead. I'm voting no, but you go ahead if you want to vote yes," and we'd move on.

He let the process work. Keeping the process moving along up here is much more challenging than people think. And if you're in leadership in either chamber, that really is your job. Your job is to keep the process—I remember Dick Bond being obsessed from Day 1—as soon as we'd

gavel in, he'd basically say the only thing he was thinking about was going home. How do you get the place to get its work done and go home? Well, that sounds simple, but it's not.

CC: You've got to be a facilitator.

KW: That's right.

CC: You certainly always seemed to have a good working relationship with Governor Graves during his eight years in office. Can you characterize the extent to which the two of you relied on one another from 1995 through 2002?

Also, as we have discussed, the mid-to-late nineties was a time defined by some strong internal disagreements within the increasingly dominant Republican legislative majority, with Graves himself frequently siding with the more moderate faction. This was a period where both the state and national economies were quite strong in the mid-to-late nineties, and one of the flash points involved tax policy, with major reductions being a top priority of many of the conservatives.

During these years, Kansas enacted a major car tax cut plan in 1995, several reductions in the statewide mill levy for schools, and a broad smorgasbord of tax cuts in 1998. Graves and other moderates during this time, especially over in the Senate led by Dick Bond, were wanting to move a lot slower on many of these cuts than many of the more conservative House members.

I know that you had not returned yet to the House tax panel, and you mentioned that both Shallenburger and Bond were institutionalists who were guiding the process and the debate, but do you have any stories or recollections about some of these tax cut battles of the mid-to-late nineties?

KW: Yes, I was very fortunate. I had what I considered to be an excellent relationship with Governor Graves. Kent Glasscock was a good friend of mine, and actually I met with Secretary Graves when I ran in '92. He ran for '94. So I got involved in his gubernatorial campaign in '94. That never hurts, and he won and I won.

So we actually spent a lot of time. I learned a lot about that part of the process. The executive branch is significantly different than the legislative branch. Again, I'm not saying every legislator ought to be obsessed with the executive branch, but to the extent—you have to work with the executive branch. So you do need some understanding, some appreciation of their role if you actually want to pass policy.

I felt like I got a good window into that. I spent a lot with him. A lot of the policies that you're talking about there, I was intimately involved. And you categorize Governor Graves as being a bit more moderate. I tended to be right of him on most issues, but we were looking for the common ground. I probably would have went a little bit further than he would have went on most of the tax policies, but we found ground that worked for everybody.

I do remember him being somewhat cautious. Where I ended up, I was probably a bit more aggressive on some tax policy. What really ended up heavily influencing me was I'm chairing



Appropriations in 2002, and right, wrong, or indifferent, but 9/11 had happened in 2001. And, Chris, you'll remember this. From about February to April 2002, everything just collapsed.

Remember, we had passed a budget. We had a base budget in place. In April, we left town. You did the revenue estimates. And I'll never forget that. You sent them, and I think it was like 400 and some odd million dollars. It was unbelievable. And then what we had to go through. We had to raise taxes, balance the budget. I actually at the end of that session, 2002, when we finally got it all done, that had been the longest session in history up until a handful of years ago.

That really made me a bit more cautious on the revenue side. I'm like, it's just you have to keep the fundamentals of state government working for the society to work, and there's a base level of funding that you just have to have, and if you go too far, as we know, it just is impossible.

So I think Graves was more cautious. But if you think about that, had he been more aggressive, the 2002 debacle brought on by no one's fault—it was just a terrorist—I remember one of our favorite stories. I remember being in Graves's office, Steve Morris, me, the Senate President, and the Speaker, and we're all just numb. The whole place is collapsing. And Governor Graves said, "What can I do?" We basically had to throw the budget out and redo the entire budget.

I'll never forget, we all looked at him. We said, "You know, the best thing you can do is just get on the road and go out and tell people to start spending money. Tell them it's going to be okay."

It wasn't COVID. It was 9/11. You remember that, Chris. Nobody was spending money. People stopped going out to eat. The whole economy just froze up.

So he did. He put together a—I don't know if you remember that. He went out on the road and just really put together a campaign saying, "Hey, look, we're going to get through this, and the best thing you can do to help us is just start—live your life. Take your trips. Go out and eat. Do the entertainment. Do whatever you were doing before. Do it again."

Collectively, we all came together, and we got it done. But there was a lot to learn, a lot to experience there. I hope no one ever, ever goes through that 2002 experience. Just like I wasn't serving through the COVID years. Those were hard years as well. Those are things brought on not by any action you take, but you've still got to govern.

CC: Moving into the 2000s and you just mentioned the 2002 struggles that occurred after the 9/11 recession, but before we get into a lot of the specifics regarding the key issues and your days chairing Economic Development and Tax committees, we should note that you twice ran for Speaker yourself, just prior to the 2003 session and just prior to the 2005 session. You told the *Lawrence Journal-World* when you announced your legislative retirement in 2008 that those two unsuccessful bids were among your biggest career disappointments.

But I guess putting a counterfactual historical spin on all of that, with hindsight being 20/20, it is certainly possible that your greatest legislative achievement, the Kansas Economic Growth Act of 2004, may not have gotten across the finish line had you not been the Economic Development Chair. Basically had you been Speaker of the House, you would have had to be less of a policy

wonk and more of a big picture guy dealing with everything from intraparty squabbles, committee rosters, vote counts. and even parking place assignments. I am wondering if you ever had any kind of blessing-in-disguise thoughts about all of this as the years have gone by?

KW: You know, that's a good way to put it. So the answer to that would be yes. I think it probably was a blessing in disguise, but I also want to say the only thing that would be more disappointing is if I was sitting here saying, "Chris, I wanted to run for Speaker, but I didn't. I'll always wonder, could I have got there?"

I wanted to run for Speaker, so I did. The 2002 race, I kind of dismissed that. That was more just kind of a—the 2006, when I ran against Melvin Neufeld and Michael O'Neal, I wasn't ready to be Speaker in 2002. I did think I was ready to be Speaker in 2006. It was something I wanted to do. So I got into it. I ran hard.

There's kind of two fundamental paths up here, particularly if you're looking at leadership. Are you more interested in policy or are you more interested in the political side? Now you need both. You've got to have the politics to get the policy. I thought really jumping in and leading on the policy side was the best way to move up and get into a significant leadership, to be Speaker. So I really leaned into the policy. I liked the policy. The politics were okay. I tried to use it to get the outcome, but I really leaned into the policy. Well, that didn't work out for me.

So it was very disappointing at the time. I didn't like it at all. But again I did have myself a pity party for a day or two, maybe three or four. But then I moved on. It made me a better legislator because I learned what it was like to run. I didn't win, but I still learned some things.

And then when I came back—2002, and when I finished in 2008—there was not too much—I can't remember any significant issue that I wasn't right in the middle of it. I leaned in real hard to some eco devo stuff. I think you're right. Had I been Speaker, I would have still had that interest, and I'll come back to really what motivated a lot of that, but I don't know that I would have had the time and energy to put into it. That did take a lot of time.

Those years were some of the most fulfilling years that I had. By that time, I liked to think that I had taken some of the mentorship that I'd gotten, some of the experience that I had and pulled it all together to actually move the ball down the field. And that's what you're trying to do.

CC: Well, this is your chance to in fact crow a little more about the importance of that 2004 legislation I just mentioned and all of its offshoot economic development initiatives. Your vision of having Kansas become a major player in the biosciences industry was fulfilled, at least for a number of years. The state successfully acquired NBAF, the animal health corridor was developed, and there were any number of successes we can point to repeal at that time edging out Governor Kathleen Sebelius and US Senators Claire McCaskill and Sam Brownback because of your multiple successes in the eco devo arena. So feel free to take a victory lap or two at this juncture.

KW: Well, thanks for bringing that up. I had a whole lot of help. A lot of people helped move all of that across the finish line. Secretary Wagnon who was over in the Department of Revenue,

after we passed that helped with the financing part of that, which was really quite tricky, but let me take a second and back up. I'd like to tell you that when I was sixteen years old, I filled all this out and written myself a diary, and it all played out exactly as I had written it. That's not the case. But there's a lot of pieces that kind of all came together here.

The reason I share that is I want people, if anybody happens to listen to this, particularly if there's a young person who's thinking about running for office, it's really a special place, and you can really do some cool things. But you really need to think about it. You've got to dedicate yourself to it.

I actually haven't told this part of the story. I don't talk about this a lot, but my dad died when I was young. I was twelve years old, and he died of cancer. I remember the feeling of that. I kind of spun out of that. By the time I was an early teenager, I thought, "I want to do something about cancer. I was so angry about it. I thought, "I can just be angry or I can try to do something to make the world a better place and maybe get rid of the cancer." I didn't know what all that meant. But I knew I was going to do something. I didn't know what. But I knew I was going to do something.

So now I go to the Farm Bureau, the Citizenship Seminar, and now I decide—so I decide public service is where I'm going to weigh in. Little did Bob Miller know when he called and asked me about serving on EPTSCR, he hit the sweet spot. Again, I didn't know what I was going to do, but I knew I was interested.

You talked about the Economic Growth Act and what we did in 2004. A piece that has less conversation is what we did in 2002, when we did the first major research piece. That was during the 9/11 debacle, and remember we did a \$50,000,000 bond piece, and we built what is the Hemenway Building because I wanted to do something—when Kent offered me the Chair job of Appropriations, I accepted with one condition. I told him before he finished making the final offer that if he'd give me the job, I was going to do something with research and development. I didn't know what, but I was going to do something. He said, "That's fine with me."

I would respectfully suggest that piece of public policy was very successful. It was a mixture of the state putting in 50 [percent], and then they had to match it with another 50, and then they had to raise another. It was a collaborative effort which was successful. That sowed the seeds. I knew then when I didn't get elected Speaker, I wanted to do something much bigger with the economy.

Frankly, again, I'm really wanting to move the research on research and development. I had studied some history. As you know, Kansas had missed the whole wave of computer technology. If you go back to the fifties and sixties, I just thought it was always sad that we missed that. Now, again, go back to the Anyway, we did. We came up with that plan. That plan ended up building the Hemenway Building, which is now a major cancer research—it built BRI out at Manhattan, and a story that's kind of forgotten—it funded the wind tunnel down at Wichita State. So all three of those major investments—we did some other deals, some money with some polymer down in Pittsburg. We had a little entity to run that thing.

early 2000s. Nobody's talking about biosciences. It's all the life sciences but really had not dug into that. And the seed was planted that Kansas can play in this field. We should play in this field.

I was on the KTEC board, so I had access to some really smart, great people. So we just started noodling the idea. I'll never forget. I got to work with Nick Jordan. So immediately, back to what I mentioned, immediately went and found, worked with Steve Morris on the 2002 policy, from the very get-go got Nick Jordan, and we worked on the Economic Development Growth Act, which was more significant. That ended up really moving us into the biosciences.

I won't get into all the detail. I know there's criticism of that, rightfully so. I just wish the people that criticized it would look at the fact—because there's no perfect policy. Anybody working on major policy initiatives, I don't care what they are. There is no such thing as perfect policy. You've got to try to get it right directionally. You want to try to make sure there's accountability. You want to try to minimize risk, but you want to maximize outcomes. I mean, you're really trying to move the needle.

You can look at the STAR bonds down at the Village West area. There's all issues that you can point to there that maybe aren't quite right. You can't argue with the success of what that has done. So the bioscience is kind of the same way. Would we have NCI, comprehensive NCI designation right now? I'll let others decide that. I've heard Roy Jensen say but for the KBA and some of those fundings, that wouldn't have happened. Today, Chris, we have nearly 30,000 Kansans, Kansans, getting their cancer care now at a comprehensive NCI-designated institution. Nobody thought that was possible in 2002. Dream big.

NBAF. Again, I had the privilege of being at the table for that. Nobody thought we were going to get the National Agri-Biodefense—They laughed at us. It's being built. It's soon going to open. That's going to transform food sciences across the globe. That's Kansas. Those institutions are in Kansas. What John Tomlin has done with NIAR, which the seeds were sown with that wind tunnel and other investments. Look at the tech center down there.

Those are big accomplishments. Lots of people played in it. But that was driven by state policy. It was driven by help—and Kansans just don't—we don't dream big enough. We don't dream big enough, and then we don't want to stick with the dream when we get it. It's not easy. We worked really hard on that. Nick and I—there was no place we wouldn't go. There was nobody we wouldn't meet with. We stayed with it afterwards. Again, I know it's not perfect policy. It could have been better. It probably should have been better, but directionally, I would say that Kansas got some good outcomes from that. Today, we're kind of perceived as an animal health corridor in the country from Columbia to Manhattan, Kansas City is at the hub of that, and that all came out of that initiative.

So I do feel good about that. It could have been better. I always welcome the constructive criticism of it, but I just wish people would take a look at it, the critics would widen their lens a bit, and look at some of the positive outcomes that we got.

CC: Yes, well during your final four years in the Legislature, you chaired the Tax Committee for the 2005-2008 sessions, and this was the period when you and I worked together the most. There was certainly a great deal of important tax policy developed during this time, if memory serves, including decisions made to repeal the estate and corporation franchise taxes and lower corporate income tax rates.

But probably at or near the top of the list would be the so-called “M and E” bill that exempted most business machinery and equipment from property taxation. A number of pro-business folks in the Legislature, especially in your caucus had been pushing this for several years, and Governor Sebelius then jumped in and also came out in favor of it in 2006. So the writing was on the wall that it was going to be enacted.

But of course the property tax base is like a balloon in that when you squeeze one side of it to reduce that particular part, the other side gets bigger. In other words, the concern was about the extent to which removing a major class of property from the tax rolls was going to shift the burden on to all remaining classes, especially residential. So the 2006 exemption legislation contained an intricate formula that set up so-called “slider” payments that were going to reimburse local units of government for five years for at least a portion of the lost receipts in an effort to minimize some of the mill levy increases and tax shifts that were otherwise going to occur as a result of the “m and e” exemption. The payments were scheduled to decrease over the five years and “slide” away before ultimately sunseting altogether based on the theory that economic growth brought about as a result of the exemption would have boosted everyone’s tax base back to at the very least a hold-harmless position.

Unfortunately for local units of government planning on these funds, what ended up happening is that by the time the payments started going out in 2008, there was really only one initial set of payments that ended up going out because of the onset of the Great Recession. Policymakers grappling with the state budget in that era needed to shore up the state’s coffers, and they of course repealed the balance of the payments.

I did find one press report saying from early 2008 when the first and only payments were going out quoting you, and you said you wanted to keep track of not just of the payments that were going out, but also “how much business the tax break was attracting and the economic effect of that on local governments.” And I think it is to your credit that you have always had this kind of cost-benefit analysis equation in your mind, even though maybe not everyone has been that diligent.

So feel free to talk about the exemption and slider payments, but also more generally given your expertise in both the economic development and tax policy areas, what do you think about the inclusion of mandatory benchmarks in exchange for tax concessions, and even depending on the circumstances, some form of clawbacks? Should policymakers as a rule seek to tighten tax breaks down to ensure they are maximizing their bang for the buck? I think your opinion above all others is especially relevant on this issue.

KW: Well, as far as a mandatory scorecard, that all comes down to how would you construct that? As I just said, there’s no perfect policy. So I think certainly there needs to be a high-level of

accountability, and there needs to be some flexibility. Yet, everybody needs to understand, here's the investment that we're making. Here's the return that we anticipate. Did we get it or not? If we didn't, why didn't we? You need to be able, in my opinion, to always assess—I don't think you should just pass policy and walk away. You've got to pass policy, keep assessing it, learning from it, and don't be afraid to adjust it when you need to. That would be the part. And if it's not working, you should repeal it. It's okay.

Let me back up here a little bit. I made a mistake on the M and E . It's one of the regrets I have. I don't have a lot of regrets, but that's a regret that I have. I believe it was you, me, Arlen Siegfried, and Gordon Self, we could not get that out of committee. We all wanted to do it, but the business machinery equipment property, that impacted the locals quite tremendously. So we needed a solution.

It was a Friday afternoon. I don't know if you remember, I called you and Gordon up there in my office. We locked the door, and I said, "We are not going home." We had Arlen Siegfried. "Until we get this out." We got on a whiteboard, and we spent three or four, five hours up there until we came up with the Siegfried Slider. That's what we called it. It was to help the locals.

Well, you know what? My regret is, we should have hard-coded that. What do I mean? We put that into statute, and we made it too easy for the Legislature to not keep its commitment. We made it too easy. So when the budget kind of tightened up and things got—that was one of the first things that we didn't fully fund. And we didn't do the accountability—hindsight sometimes, Chris, is a lot better than what you have. We didn't really kind of assess and watch that as it went along to make the adjustments.

Most of us run saying we're for local control until actually, the rubber meets the road, and then we want to do—you default to the state. That's one we should have been better partners because we actually ended up—now I had left in-between. So when I say, what do you mean "hard-code"? Put a super-majority requirement in there. Instead of it taking the majority of the Legislature to undo the relief, make it two-thirds. Make it to where it's really hard. You have to go to tie the Legislature's hands—

CC: The so-called lockbox concept.

KW: Right. So I regret that. I still think that policy overall has benefited Kansans, but where it's not fair from a state standpoint, it did put additional pressure then on local property taxes, and I think we probably didn't pay as much attention as we should. I think incentive packages—everybody in the country is doing it. You've got to play, but you've got to be responsible. Most importantly, you've got to build in the accountability and then follow it, assess it, and be willing to make changes if you need to make it.

CC: We were laughing offline earlier about some of our adventures in 3:00 AM tax conference committees. I do want to personally and publicly thank you for something you did on your way out the door as a legislator that always meant a lot to me. I seem to recall that just before you left, you and David Huff and Tom Thull, the three of you being the House Tax Committee leadership at the time, took Gordon Self and I out to a very fancy lunch to thank us for putting up

with you during so many of the 3:00 AM conference committees over the years. That was a kind gesture that was very much appreciated. I want you to know that.

KW: Well, Chris, thank you for mentioning that. The thanks needs to go the other way. I never claimed to be the smartest guy up here. Again, I got some good coaching. The staff, and you were right at the front of the line there, you and Gordon Self. I realized that when I got—you know, Tax gets some of the best staff up here. They're all great. I thought all the legislative staff was just great, but the ones on Tax were really special. You guys were super to us. You always helped us.

I think there might be a little bit of a lack of trust in some of the institution now, and I wish people—I never had a day in my sixteen years of serving up here, and frankly the staff has helped me—I don't know if you were supposed to have helped me after I left. I've always had 100 percent trust in the staff up here. I never found anybody misleading me. They always gave me the best information they could get, as timely as they could get it. Dragging opinions out of you guys was always hard, but I always valued that. I had nothing but positive, rewarding relationships with the staff across the board. I can't say enough about the quality of the staff that served the Legislature during my time.

CC: Jumping ahead a little to late 2010, even though you were no longer here at the Statehouse and were in the early stages of your career over at KU, incoming Governor Brownback evidently thought highly enough of you to make you Chair of his transition team after he was elected. Can you tell us what that experience was like and what all the transition team did? Did he and some of his people coming back with him from Washington need your help and insight in figuring out the more localized political dynamics in and around the Statehouse here in Topeka?

KW: So that, as you mentioned when we started the interview, I've had the opportunity to do a lot of things in public service and feel extremely blessed and honored. This was one of the highlights. I thought I might be on the transition team. But when the Governor-Elect asked me to Chair, I didn't necessarily expect that. So that was quite an honor, and frankly, very fulfilling. Just let me say I've known Sam Brownback for a long time. I helped him with a lot of campaigns. He's a good friend, a good man, and it was a great honor to do that and one of the most rewarding things I've ever done.

Every transition is different. We could spend all day on this. We won't do this. He was tremendous. He dedicated about four hours of every day to the transition. Most Governor-Elects don't do that. So it was very collaborative. It was his style. Certainly, it worked for me as well. It was a very collaborative approach. I liked to think I added some value for them because that is—that's a big change. In fact, if you were interviewing former Governor Brownback, he would tell you that transition from the fed back to the state, that is a big one. That is a big one.

They were all very open, very collaborative. We obviously did the budget. Of course, you've got a lot of people to hire. You've got all kinds of policy to do. I was part of all that. Then you've got to get ready for the inauguration. One of my fun stories about that is when we're kind of going through how it's going to work, before he made the formal offer, and I said, "It's okay. What's the basic boundaries?"

One of the things I said to him was, “Look, if I’m going to Chair your transition, then I’m off the table for any kind of an appointment in your administration.” The governor said that’s his call, not mine. I said, “Well, not really.” I said, “If you want me to Chair your transition, I will only do it with that understanding. I will not be in the hunt for any position because I think your Chair should be totally neutral and to be angling for any kind of a job, trying to line up the best staff.” There’s all kinds of things a Chair could do.

There were all kinds of speculation, what job I might get. I was never in the hunt for any job and didn’t want a job, and I think that actually helped me stay focused on the best interests of his administration and the transition. I take a lot of pride in that. I think we did some good work—again, collaborative. There were a lot of good people that helped.

It was very fulfilling. I would again, if you have the chance, if you get invited by any governor to be part of a transition, I would encourage you to do it. It’s a big time commitment, but you learn a lot. You get to see a whole different side of how the state government works. It’s really fulfilling.

CC: Well, Governor Brownback did not appoint you directly to a post in the administration as a cabinet secretary or anything, but he did subsequently appoint you in 2011 to the Kansas Board of Regents where you served a four-year term including your final year as Chair of that prestigious body. Before we get into the more traditional issues of higher ed funding and governance and tuition, I want to touch briefly on upper level college athletics. Our mutual friend, Ed McKechnie, told the Kansas Oral History Project recently that during his first few months as Chair in the summer and fall of 2011, the issue that came out of nowhere and totally dominated all of his time was the back-channel discussions going on involving conference realignment.

You may recall that this was an era where Nebraska, Colorado, Texas A&M and Missouri had left or were leaving the Big XII, and TCU and West Virginia were being brought in to backfill. But OU and Texas were also making noises about leaving for the Southeastern Conference, something that we at least held off for another thirteen years. Everyone in this era back in 2011 was up in arms about what that could mean about the possible implosion of the remainder of the Big XII Conference, not unlike what we have seen happen to the Pac 12 over the last year. Here in Kansas, there was a lot of buzz about whether KU would get an offer to go join the Big Ten Conference, and what that would mean should KU and K State end up being in different leagues relative to a possible end to the historic rivalry and these kinds of questions.

Do you recall a lot of this going on during your first year or so with the Regents, and was the full Board under a great deal of pressure to try and make sure the Big XII stabilized and somehow kept KU and K State together? I know that by the time you became Chair in 2014, a lot of that had at least temporarily calmed down, so maybe it wasn’t as much of a headache for you and the other members of the Board as it was for Ed when he was Chair in 2011?

KW: Well, I started July 1, 2011, and I believe on July 2, 2011, we had our first conference call. There were three of us that got put on. So it was Fred Logan, me, and Robin. Do I recall?



Absolutely. Just like it was yesterday. So we're confirmed. We're sworn in. We get one day. They set up a briefing call with us, and we get a full briefing on the meltdown of the Big 12 and the major lawsuit that Dodge City had with the Board of Regents, and we're looking at each other like "You didn't want to share this before the confirmation process?"

CC: Welcome aboard.

KW: It was a major, major—I'll never forget it, and the first several weeks and months. So to really kind of summarize that though, I think it's a great testament to leadership. It's something else that I think Kansas has got right. So I believe the Big 12 is today what it is because of the governance structure in Kansas. Here's why.

When we got on the Board, and for the most part, I think it's—the Board of Regents, by the way, another great experience. I'll always cherish it. It was a wonderful experience, much different, but very wonderful. The prior Board—there's six stay; there's three new ones. The prior nine had basically been—and Ed was right in the middle of that. But they had authorized KU and K State to negotiate—the president and the chancellor were free to negotiate with the Big 12 with one exception. If they could not keep both schools in and there was anything where they might become separated, they had to come back to the Board.

That was basically the direction the Board set. So the Board, unlike Texas and Oklahoma and other places, they had multiple Boards all trying to micromanage this process. We did not. We trusted our leaders. We put the white lines down, and it was real clear. We did not want our schools separated. So the prior Board had that. The new Board comes in place. We stick right with that. And Bernadette Gray-Little and Schulz, they both did a really great—it was hard. It was really hard.

So I think it was Kansas that really kind of anchored that, and our university leadership was more empowered than the others, and that's what kept it on track. It was pretty scary because you didn't want to be—so you joined the Regents, and the first big thing that's going to happen, your school falls out of the Big 12. I would say out of all that—we did finally get past that.

After we got past that, the Board of Regents tries to stay out of athletics as they should, but athletics as a whole is just so overrun. The collegiate world—I enjoy it; you enjoy it. We enjoy it, but there needs to be a bit more of a balance there. And it really makes it hard for the leaders of the institutions because they could spend a lot of time on athletic-type stuff when you'd really rather have them on the academic side.

But we managed to get through it. Again, I think Kansas and our governance structure here, we have one Board of Regents for all of our school, and the continuity that the Board of Regents has really proved to be the right call.

CC: The stabilizing factor. I know when you were a Regent, you appeared as a guest speaker at the annual Kansas Economic Policy Conference in 2012, over in Lawrence at KU. Just months after major changes in state tax law had been enacted by many of your former colleagues here in Topeka, and you cautioned everyone about expecting any kind of quick or immediate

determination regarding the extent to which the tax cuts were going to boost the Kansas economy.

So you were certainly on record at the outset of that era in terms of calling for patience. But given that you were on the Board until 2015, can you tell us what sort of pressure did the Regents feel about Higher Ed funding issues and accelerating tuition given what was happening with the state's overall fiscal situation because of what many were saying were less-than-stellar ongoing results coming in from the so-called tax experiment?

KW: Yes, that was a tough time. I won't get into the details. I wasn't in the Legislature. I did pay attention to the 2012 tax policy, and I certainly had some views on that, and I knew it was going to be tough. It ended up being tougher for Higher Ed than I thought. Then that trickles down.

Even during my legislative days, I've always considered our universities in Kansas to be—I just described them kind of as jewels in the Kansas crown. I think by and large people love our institutions here. We've got six state institutions. We've got a wonderful set of community colleges, tech schools. So we have this eclectic mix, and I think it's really, really important to have this menu of choices for our children to make, to find the school that fits best for you.

Chris, for you and I and others, at our point in life, there's nothing more important than our children having an opportunity to get their education and then find their careers and have their families be here, and I think the public education system and our Regents system are paramount into that objective. So I was committed to trying to do my part as was the Board when I was there to sustain those institutions and make sure we kept the quality choices there.

So we had to go further on tuition, further on fees. You don't like doing those things, but I think at the time, I thought it was the right call. We did our part to try to hand it off to the next group. That's what we all do here, trying to keep our institution solid. I do think that part of our institution, our structure of our state, Higher Ed, all of them, not just the six schools, are so important to our future. That's what's going to help keep our kids here and grandkids here. There's really nothing more important.

Even the bioscience. Nick and I talked a lot about that. Our dream in 2004, if this thing actually materialized, and of course, we're twenty years later now, is that parents and grandparents could say, "My children and my grandchildren are in Kansas because of"—whether it be working in one of those fields, and they come back here because of, and we need to have more of those options. I think families want to be here. They want to be close—and I think Kansas is a great place. But we've got to keep working to create those opportunities.

CC: Our of curiosity, even though you're no longer in the Legislature, you were on the Board of Regents during some of these years. But you described the closeness of your relationship with Governor Brownback. Did you have the opportunity, now we're a decade or so away, to express any thoughts to him about the whole 2012-2017 wild rollercoaster ride of tax policy changes? When all this was going on in 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2017, major changes in tax law happened, did you get a chance to weigh in privately to the governor? Would you be willing to talk about some of that? What he maybe should have done differently?

KW: So the answer is yes. When I left the transition, the governor pulled me aside and he said—he started in 2011, got elected in 2010. He'd been sworn in. So I'm leaving. I stayed on, I think a week or two after he was sworn in, but now I'm leaving. He pulled me aside and said, "Look, if you ever think I'm making a mistake or doing something you think—I want you to call me." He said, "Don't ever hesitate to call me." I said okay.

So I had his number, but I never called. I didn't until 2012. And I won't go into all the detail, but it's the final package that they're going to vote on, and I did call him. I expressed a grave concern. He and I have talked about this since. So I'm not sharing anything that he and I haven't talked about because I don't like to disclose private conversations I've had with any governor. But that policy was so important. I really, really encouraged him to get a different tax bill. That obviously was not his choice, and I tried to help in the years as they moved along, but I wasn't necessarily successful in that. We disagreed on that. That doesn't make him a bad person, and he's still my friend. But, yes, we disagreed on that particular policy.

CC: In a similar vein, you were the Regents' appointee to the Kansas Bioscience Authority. But there had been a number of controversies building in the years since you had left the Legislature involving oversight and even personnel matters, and even the funding mechanism, which was sort of a tax-increment finance concept, was becoming increasingly scrutinized not long after you had departed the Statehouse.

But I do want to add that Ed McKechnie also told us that he believes the KBA was absolutely a key partner of the broader team that successfully got the critical NCI cancer designation for the KU Med Center, and you said you think so as well - as does Dr. Jensen. So it's not like there still weren't major victories coming in for the KBA and its allies.

Anyway, can you tell us about what all the KBA was facing when you were there, and then when the decision was finally made to liquidate its assets and shut it down, you must have had some opinions about all that. A lot of these final decisions, of course, happened during the time when the state was under extraordinary fiscal stress in the wake of the aforementioned tax experiment. Were you at all disappointed that Governor Brownback and some of his then legislative allies may not have seemed as supportive of the biosciences programs as perhaps Governor Sebelius had been a decade earlier?

When everything was being liquidated around 2015, the *KC Star* ran sort of a biting editorial noting how ironic it was that Nick Jordan, who had worked with you so closely on the law back in 2004, was watching the KBA dissolution happen with a front row seat as Brownback's Secretary of Revenue. So there was a lot of this controversy that was becoming very public back in 2014, 2015, when everything was going on. What were your thoughts at that time?

KW: Well, I was disappointed. I'm not going to pull any punches on that. I was actually on the Board. I was appointed by the Board of Regents. So again some lessons learned there. While Nick and I, we passed that in 2004, we both left the Legislature about the same time. And in hindsight, what we didn't do is we didn't recruit any legislative champions behind us. So that was a policy that was not a state policy. Any time you've got a state policy, it could be changed.

Well, we didn't have the people behind us that had the depth and really the history of what was behind it and why it was there. That was maybe the most important thing.

I always felt some responsibility that I didn't recruit somebody to do that. I tried to kind of do that from not being a legislator. That didn't work. At some point, of course, then the financial crunch is coming, and you can see the writing on the wall that it just wasn't going to survive. So, it was disappointing, and yet I feel like it was in place long enough that there were some real positive—had it happened three or four or five years sooner, I think that would have been a real disappointment.

Again, I would have been 100 percent open to changing the policy and making it better, adapting, I said that, assess—figure out what's working and not working, doing some of that, and I think it could have really gone—there were some great investments in that portfolio, and I think there was a lot more good work that could have been done.

And maybe most importantly, I hope people as they look back on that policy and the further away we get from it that they don't look back, and I'm not saying this because of Nick and I, I'm saying it because I hope they don't deem it a failure because it was a big idea and it was an expensive idea. I don't think it was a failure. It could have been better, should have been better, yes. But it was a big, bold swing, Chris, and I think in Kansas, we need more big, bold swings. I want to see a next generation of legislators pick whatever their targets are and really try to help our state move forward and advance them. Don't be afraid of it. Don't be afraid of the failure.

CC: Swing for the fences.

KW: Go after it. Try to make a difference.

CC: It is probably indicative of how important your voice has remained on key public policy matters, even in your current job with the University of Kansas Health System, that the press asked you to comment in 2019 when Medicaid Expansion failed getting across the finish line by just one vote over in the Kansas Senate. You made several points at that time in an interview you gave, which are going to sound very familiar. Those points included observing that most people eligible for Medicaid Expansion do have jobs; that, notwithstanding traditional legislative opposition to more state spending, Kansans are already paying the federal tax dollars that would primarily subsidize the program; that the decision to not expand was "huge" in terms of the fact that it was costing the state north of a \$1 billion per year; and that it meant that over 150,000 additional Kansans were going to remain without coverage.

These were all the points that proponents, as you know, of Medicaid Expansion continue to make to this day. I think it's interesting that we're here in 2024 and current legislative leadership tends to challenge many of these assertions that you made in 2019 and that are still being made today, even as they remain steadfast in their opposition to expansion. I assume that both you and likely the entire KU Health System remain in favor of Medicaid Expansion for many of the same reasons that you cited five years ago?

KW: That's correct, yes.

CC: I also want to note that you were quoted in early 2021 still during the heyday of the pandemic talking about the impact of COVID and its associated deaths and trauma on the morale of hospital staff, which must have been just horrific. Given how stressful all of that was just a few short years ago, do you have any thoughts about the seeming resurgence of the anti-vax movement in this country, and I am assuming that a lot of the people you know who were then on the front lines of that crisis also likely have some fairly strong opinions about that effort as well as some of the revisionist histories being written on social media as we speak?

KW: Yes. So, again, a lot of unpack there. You know, the whole Medicaid issue, just a comment or two on that. You know, I think when you get away from the Legislature and then you continue to play in different roles, you can kind of look back on it—maybe the best way, you have a better view from the gallery. You can kind of look out on things and maybe see a bigger, broader view.

And I respect the people that have different views, but let's work through it. The fact of the matter is, the 1965, the first Medicaid plan, that's optional. Kansas doesn't have to be in that. We didn't get in it until 1968. The last state didn't get in the first Medicaid until 1982.

So they're optional. There's I think forty-one states now that are in. I believe Kansas will expand Medicaid. I don't know when. I don't know how. But why don't we all come together and do a plan that's right for Kansas and Kansans? I think we can do that. That's kind of the side I've been on. It's still open to any dialogue on that, trying to find some common ground on that.

In regard to COVID, golly gee, who would have ever thought we'd have a pandemic and go through that? I admire what the Legislature had to go through there. Those were tough times. It was very tough times in the health care field. But, again, standing back, taking a look, one of the things that concerns me, and I don't quite understand it, we've just lost so much trust in our institutions.

And maybe it's a default. All through that process, I always felt like—and I worked with a lot of people—KDHE, CMS, all over the country. I never felt like anybody was intentionally trying to mislead us. Chris, I could tell you there were days at the hospital. There were long days. We would start the day with a policy or procedure for caring for the COVID, whether it be outpatient or inpatient. It might change at noon, and it might change at 6:00 at night.

And people would get upset because we were changing—well, it was because our folks were learning. That's how fast the knowledge was coming in. You're trying to assimilate it, put it together, and offer the best advice. But I always felt like people were really trying to do the best they could do with the information that they had. And I still think that's the case.

But we seem to have lost so much trust in our institutions. We're a country of almost four hundred million people now. We've got three million people in our state. If we want to remain civil and make the progress we need to make, we've got to find that trust back in our institutions. That's what concerns me. I'm not quite sure why it got lost, but we all need to be thinking about and asking the hard questions. How do we get back to some level of trust with all these

institutions for our society? COVID certainly has exposed that. I think it was out there before COVID, but COVID really exacerbated the whole situation.

CC: Getting back to our mutual friend, Jerry Moran. I saw a video online where you were among a group of officials who presented him with a special Catalyst Award back in 2022, and you were positively beaming during this presentation. I gather it meant a lot for you to be included in honoring him in this way, and can you talk a little about your longtime relationship with him?

KW: Yes. I know he's US Senator. He's still Jerry to me, Jerry to a lot of folks. Jerry to me represents really some of what's best about elected officials. I think you'd find this across the spectrum, by the way. So he actually started, I mentioned here, I got to know him in the State Capitol and worked on some things.

But when he went to Congress, as you know, he went to Congress for quite a while. I had, and I worked at this, I had a great relationship with all of our federal elected officials particularly when I chaired Tax. I thought it was part of the job as a Chair, whatever committee I was on, to try to help bridge some of those relationships on key issues where federal and state crossed over.

I think because of Jerry's past experience in the Legislature, he always had a high sensitivity to the state perspective there, and I think that continues today. I've had a philosophy. I haven't done as good a job with it as I should, but I really do think the best governance is a governance close to home. So if the fed can move it to the state and the state can move it to the local, I think that's the way to go.

I think Jerry is very much of that mold. So you're always looking for avenues where you can do that. But when the fed needs to play, when they need to step in, they need to step in, the state the same. I think we shared that in common. I find him a solutions-oriented guy, not necessarily obsessed with the perfect. He'll go with the good to make the progress.

I guess at the end of the day, I've gravitated again, I'll give my mentors a lot of credit for this. I want to work with the people that want to govern. And, unfortunately, there's just not that many. All of them get to legislate. A few get to govern. So I tend to gravitate to those folks that want to govern, find those solutions, and try to move our state along.

CC: Turning our attention back to a few final questions involving your sixteen-year career in the Legislature and given that we have already talked a lot about some of the dynamics within the GOP caucus, and you've mentioned the importance of bipartisanship, can you tell us which Democrats in particular you worked with the most often, and which ones you thought may have been the most effective?

KW: Well, there's a lot. If I back up again, I want to start with Representative Joan Wagnon. She was tremendous. Of course, she went on and did some other things. You know, Bill Reardon, I think I mentioned Bill. Bill was a guy I leaned on a lot for education. In fact, one of my fun memories there, somebody told me early on when I was a freshman, if you had a question on K-12, call Bill Reardon. So I did. I know for a fact because I heard it happen, I'd ask Bill on an

issue, and he'd say, "Well, I'm going to vote yes, but you need to vote no." And his caucus heard him give me that advice, and they kind of jumped on him, and he said, "Look, I know Kenny Wilk's school districts. He shouldn't vote yes for this. He should vote no." He knew everybody else's school district. If you were a freshman, you didn't even know what you didn't know. But he helped you. I never forgot that.

All my ranking Ds on Tax, Tom Thull and Tom Holland. Ed McKechnie. I would say Ed was the master at incrementalism. He learned not to try to take the whole elephant really, just take a bite at a time. Get \$100,000 here, \$50,000 here, and then you kind of keep growing it.

He was able to pass that on to Rocky Nichols. Rocky and I were in the same class. We didn't necessarily start out being the best of friends, but certainly ended being some really great friends. He was my ranking D on Appropriations, and I thought we had a great working relationship. I don't think we ever wanted to agree to disagree. We always hammered it out. Rocky was great to work with, wanted to govern.

I could go on. Dick Reinhardt, Mel Minor, all great folks. And I tried to build those relationships across the aisle.

CC: I guess a similar ask about lobbyists. Which ones did you respect the most, and maybe which ones did you dread the most seeing coming into your office, regardless of how effective they may have been?

KW: Well, you know, that's a hard question. I can't think of anybody that I disliked. I'll tell you what I appreciated more. So Kathy Taylor, she worked for the KBA. The folks that were tied to the associations, the Farm Bureau, that were dedicated to—you always kind of knew where they were coming from. They didn't have multiple agendas, and I appreciated that. The contract lobbyists that are switching badges all the time, I found that to be a bit more challenging.

But just let me say, I kind of come in, I think I was a little tainted when I come in, I just didn't know. I'd heard all of these things about lobbyists, what they do and what they don't do. Much of what you read in the media, I don't think is correct. I found by and large nothing but positive relationships. I did not have lobbyists lie to me. It was my job to make sure I was asking the right questions and again holding them accountable, but I found them all to be responsive and pretty good to work with.

I always tried to be straightforward. I didn't flip flop a lot. I did change my mind, or as I liked to say, I tell people this still even today, don't ever ask a legislator to change their mind. Don't do that. You've got to allow them to make a new decision based upon new information. And when you do that, if you then do make a new decision, you need to let the people know that thought you were still where you were at.

I always tried to let people know if I made a new decision. And I did do that from time to time. I think you have to be open to the learning process.

CC: Understood. Okay, I guess, same for state officials, especially Cabinet level. You worked with quite a number of different Secretaries of Commerce, Revenue, Transportation, and SRS over the years. Any particular memories regarding those relationships or working with their staffs?

KW: Yes, that's something else. For anybody that might be listening, might be viewing this, if they're in the Legislature or going to be in the Legislature, build a relationship with the Secretaries. Again, I got coaching on this. I actually went around and met all of the Cabinet Secretaries. I set up an individual time with them. I'd go around and introduce myself. And then in later years, certainly when I chaired, I always tried to have a great relationship with the Secretary of Revenue when I was chairing Tax. There's no reason for it to be adversarial.

And by and large, I want to say this, I found—because I served under both Democrat and Republican Governors, I'm Republican, but I found the administration almost always was pretty—they weren't real partisan. They're just trying to do their job. And they were always helpful.

Dan Stanley, I do remember, I'm a freshman legislator. I'm trying to get my first piece of legislation. It had to do with blood testing. That's back when AIDS was just coming on. Drug testing for guards in prison, when they had bodily fluids tossed upon them. I thought that was a do-nothing piece of legislation. It would be really easy to get done, and things are not going well for me.

I go to see Dan Stanley who was Secretary of Administration. I'll never forget this. I'm telling him what I'm trying to do, and he says, "Well, you know your problem, don't you?" I said no. "Well, you've got a we-be problem." "What do you mean a we-be problem?" He said, "You're dealing with the we be here before you get here, and we be here after you leave."

He was talking about the bureaucracy inside the Corrections, and I had not worked with them. I had not reached out to them to say, "I want to help with this problem." So then he just told me, "You are never going to get this done." He explained to me why, and then he gave me some names to call, and kind of—I backed up, started over, got a mentor or two to help me, too, and then we got it across the finish line. But I'll never forget that we-be story.

CC: If I could make a random observation, Mr. Chair, it has occurred to me that maybe you somehow belonged in a different and perhaps even earlier generation of legislators than the one you served in. I always thought your strong suit was working with others, regardless of policy differences, to get things accomplished. My memories of Kenny Wilk in the Statehouse will always be how friendly you were and how much you were a back-slapper who loved to laugh and converse with people here in the hallways, whether they were Republicans, Democrats, reporters, lobbyists, constituents, or janitors.

So now that I've complimented you on this comes the trickier question to think about, and you've already mentioned some of this. Given that you have been around the policymaking whirlwind in one form or another since the early nineties, how would you compare and contrast the institutions of state government today, especially the Legislature, with the way things were



three decades ago? What are the biggest differences, and are those differences generally positive or negative in your mind? Please feel free to talk about anything you want from changes in technology, to increased political polarization, changing perceptions about the role of the public sector, accelerating influence of powerful special interest groups or just anything else.

KW: Yes. A lot to unpack there. I guess I fall into a kind of a different group. When I started in '92, elected in '92, started in '93, we didn't have email. We didn't text messages. I lived through that evolution. That had a profound impact.

CC: You had the pile of unopened mail on your desk.

KW: Correct. Today you don't see piles at all. But I also want to make a run at that question by saying I believe particularly the Kansas House, the Kansas House of Representatives is by and large a reflection of the state of Kansas. I've told people that. You've got to step back and think about that. We've got some wealthy people here. We've got some people that are not so wealthy. We've got Black. We've got White. I'm convinced I served with a member or two that couldn't read. And people want to challenge me on that. "Wait a minute. They got elected from a district that they were representing." It doesn't mean they weren't smart. They were representing their people.

This was an elected body. By and large, I think the body reflects our three million people and things have changed. We're a more divided country now. We're a more divided state today than we were during the nineties. I don't like that. I wish we were more united, but I think this institution is a reflection of our population.

So where it's going, I'm not quite sure. I do see more signs of really civility up here. I see some signs of cooperation that I didn't see maybe ten years ago or so. It seems to be a bit more of that in the wind.

We can get into what we all think. I do think it's important for our future and for our children and for Kansas to make progress for us to continue to be able to solve some of these major problems and come together as a state. It's not going to get easier, but there's ways to go forward. So, yes, I do think it's different. It changed a lot from when I left than from when I started. It's changed since I left.

CC: I'm pretty sure that I saw recently that your son has somewhat followed your path at least in terms of influencing, if not directly making public policy. Am I recalling that he is now one of the key lobbyists for the Kansas Chamber? I'm assuming the two of you must have had a lot of dinner table conversations over the years.

KW: Yes. That's one of the great surprises in life. I never would have anticipated him landing in the job that he's landed in. It kind of happened by accident actually. He got started with it, but he really enjoys it. He's really dug in. Others tell me that they think he's done a pretty good job. I'm proud of him.

I think we've got to be careful because it's easy to discourage our young people from being involved in public service, elected office, government relations, lobbying, whatever it may be, and we need good, young people involved in all aspects.

So I'm proud of him. I don't know where he's going longer term, but he seems to have found himself a home. He spent a lot of time running around in the chamber, and I'll always appreciate my colleagues—that's back when we used to bring our kids here on Fridays. I mean this place was full of kids on Friday mornings. We actually were here five days a week, and we'd bring our kids in. So he actually grew up here at the Capitol. So he seems to be pretty comfortable.

CC: Anything else you want to add about what the future holds for you? I assume at this point the chances are not high that you would ever re-enter electoral politics yourself?

KW: You nailed that one. I do not see any future runs for public office. But I will stay engaged. I like to help candidates. I like to help people if I can that are serving. I care deeply about our political process, our country, our state, our communities. I appreciate the work that people do. So if there's places I can contribute, I want to try to do that. I consider—it's been a privilege and an honor for me to get to serve in the many capacities I had. It's my turn now to try to pay that forward, and I'll do the best I can to do just that.

CC: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your time today.

KW: Thank you.

[End of File]