

INTERVIEW OF MELODY MCCRAY-MILLER BY FRANCES JACKSON April 21, 2022  
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INC.

Frances Jackson: Today is April 21, 2022. I'm Frances Jackson, and I'm representing the African American Council of Elders at the time, and with me is a former representative, David Heinemann. He's our videographer, and we are at the Dr. Ronald W. Walters Library, and we're here to conduct this interview that is part of the Kansas Oral History Project<sup>1</sup> collection examining the diversity of voices active in public policymaking, for the last quarter of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st centuries.

In these interviews, we learn about policy development through the eyes of those who were directly involved. So today I will interview Melody McCray Miller, and we will continue to figure out how it is that we know about our communities and how we develop them politically as part of what we need to know to continue that process.

So, Melody, I would like for you to just begin by saying to us what it is that you enjoyed about being a representative to our Kansas legislature during the time that you were elected to do that.

Melody McCray Miller: Certainly, and I know, Fran Jackson, that you have asked me to really relate my experiences in the Kansas legislature. At the same time, I will probably integrate—I'll probably also include some of my experiences in the County Commission because that was my initiation into what I would call "political life."

FJ: Yes.

MMM: What I was most excited and proud about was being able to represent people and to reflect a population of people that I knew were under-represented in both these bodies.

FJ: Yes.

MMM: I also was really, really happy about being able to speak truth about issues that were relative and relevant at that time. That was something that I didn't necessarily hear coming from other political minds and talking heads. I have to also think back to when I first wanted to enter the political realm, my father, Billy McCray<sup>i</sup>, former senator, former state representative, and former County Commissioner, first African American County Commissioner, he warned me about some of the pitfalls and some of the—what he called just dirty practices that occurred in the political arena.

So he was really very surprised when I initially stated that I wanted to run for political office. And my reasons for wanting to run were to be able, once again, to represent the masses, to represent people, and to improve what I called at that time "quality of life" for those that I knew were not always being focused on.

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<sup>1</sup> The **Kansas Oral History Project** is a not-for-profit corporation created to collect oral histories of Kansans who were involved in shaping and implementing public policy. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are available to researchers, educators, and other members of the public through the Kansas State Historical Society and the State Library of Kansas and on our website, <https://ksoralhistory.org>. Funding for the project is provided by volunteers, individual donors, and Humanities Kansas, a nonprofit cultural organization connecting communities with history, traditions, and ideas to strengthen civic life. For more information about Humanities Kansas, see their website: <https://kansashumanities.org>

FJ: Yes. So what were some of the points in developing your political speeches that you used to help people to recognize the concerns as well as your intention to be part of the solution?

MMM: Sure. Well, initially I said that I was not the status quo. I was going to represent and lead from a ground level. I felt that that resonated because most people that I talked to, first of all, they didn't even—a lot of them didn't know who their representative was.

FJ: Indeed.

MMM: They didn't know what their representatives did. I was an incarnate. I was living that role, and I felt empowered by those folk, those people to do their work. I never have, Fran, considered myself a politician.

FJ: I get it.

MMM: Yet in order to stay in the political arena, I think you have to learn to play the game.

FJ: Yes.

MMM: But I never, ever considered myself a politician. I always considered myself a public servant and a people's servant, and I still do that today.

FJ: What was one of the more startling things that you learned once you were in this process or in office?

MMM: Oh, my goodness. Initially, it was that once you are elected and you're in the actual body, so let's say the county commission and then I'll speak to the House of Representatives, that once you're elected, it's like a Breakfast Club. It's like a little club. It's not what you thought it was on the campaign trail. On the campaign trail, you are speaking to people. You're speaking for people, and you're speaking about people and their issues. When you get into this little club, as the elected on the County Commission, there are five. Really those are the other four that you're having to work with in order to get your issues, your initiatives not only on the table but highlighted and passed.

Now with that, of course, you have the bully pulpit. That's what my dad would always call it, and that's the public. That's the public's eye. That's going to be the media. So you can put your information out there to the bully pulpit. So now we have social media.

FJ: Yes.

MMM: It's just so different than when I initially began to run, but, yes, you have that option. But in actuality, there are five people that are going to vote on the County Commission, and there are 125 in the House of Representatives.

FJ: I get it, yes.

MMM: In the state of Kansas, it tends to be majority Republican. The most Democrats that we had at the time that I served was forty-five, and of course, what does that leave? Seventy?

FJ: Close.

MMM: Yes. So you still have a supermajority over on the other side. I guess I could say that initially I was shocked by the inequities, the built-in inequities that can be there, particularly for a Black woman.

FJ: I get it.

MMM: And I will shift back and forth, referring to myself as African American and/or Black. I'm both. So I'll just interchange the terms, and that's for the public, the public's sake also. But, yes, superimposed on top of that was the fact that I'm a Black woman. My concept of public policy and the issues at hand and the people that I'm representing were not all Black. That's not what I'm saying, but that's the perspective where I'm coming from simply because that's who I am. I was raised in a Black family. I was raised in a community of majority Black folk. So concepts, ideas, and manners of how I go about things are going to reflect that. It's just a point of reference. It's my point of reference.

So when you superimpose that over the fact that you've got a smaller group on the county side and this captive group on the House side, you start to think, "Okay. How am I going to get these things done that I said I was going to get done, that I've campaigned on? How am I going to get it done?" And then you really do settle in, and you start to watch others work.

FJ: Right.

MMM: You watch how they create their little coalitions, how they build a plan of action, how they utilize not only their caucus in terms of educating about your issue and what it is that you want to get accomplished, but they also were able to look at how you work across the aisle in order to get the majority of the votes that you're going to need in order to get this concept into bill form. You're going to do that with a revisor<sup>2</sup> in order for that bill to actually come to fruition, to be heard in a committee and then be voted successfully out of that committee, and then for it to come to the floor and actually be acted on.

FJ: What advice would you give particularly to women who'd be interested in doing some of the things that you've done politically? What particular advice would you give?

MMM: Just do it.

FJ: If you don't have a dad who's given you that firsthand experience?

MMM: The firsthand experience and the support were immense and my mom. I haven't mentioned why that but absolutely. Just do it. Never wait. There's never a perfect time. But do

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<sup>2</sup> The office of Revisor of Statutes drafts bills for legislators.

go armed and ready to battle. I'm a fighter, and I think there are, I don't know if that came from being smaller.

FJ: We won't tell, if you tell us!

MMM: But I'm a fighter, and I'm very dogged. Once I get my teeth into something, I don't let go. I can remember Ebbis Cranford, Dr. Cranford, he called me "a piece of leather."

FJ: Yes.

MMM: Because I'm so tough.

FJ: Yes.

MMM: If you get into it, you don't let it go. People watched me work like that. That's what they admired. They knew if they brought something to me and I carried it that I was going to carry it till the end. I was not going to let it go until I got it down.

FJ: What person in those environments that you came to really appreciate for their advice, their presence, their support?

MMM: Those that were integral and those that were credible and those that were honest and followed through on what it is they said they were going to do. My gut and my quick thought says that those were rare. Unfortunately, there's not a majority of those in those roles, in those positions.

FJ: Yes.

MMM: I wish there were more.

FJ: When you're thinking about gender, does that apply more to women or to men?

MMM: No, I think it crosses gender. Unfortunately, I do. I think it crosses gender. But the reality is it's still a male-dominated field. You can see the propensity, the majority is going to be males that you're going to be working with or attempting to work with.

FJ: Trying hard.

MMM: Trying real hard.

FJ: And not letting go of the leather, right?

MMM: Yes.

FJ: If you were to pursue a career in any of these political jobs, what would be the most interesting one to you at this time in your life?

MMM: Politically, the only thing that ever slightly crosses my mind at this point in my life is Congress.

FJ: Yes.

MMM: Oh, my goodness. Congress is the state legislature on steroids.

FJ: It is.

MMM: So it's like, "Really?"

FJ: And the cost of those particular races is sort of overwhelming.

MMM: It's astronomical.

FJ: I've noticed that for women, it seems to be even more difficult to raise money. How did you go about creating your budget for these particular jobs?

MMM: I actually had my sister—Frankie was my secretary, my treasurer. I think she played the role of both, honestly. Then I also had kind of a kitchen cabinet. That's the other good advice that he gave me is that you just need a handful of folks that you can depend on that will be there for you.

So when I first ran, Larry was still living.

FJ: I know.

MMM: And he was a strong advocate and did a lot, everything. I also had other family members that worked really closely with me. And then I had, I would say, a couple of, two friends, advocates that were not in the political arena, but they were in either a business arena or the public service arena. So they knew a lot of people, and their work-life was flexible enough that they could be a lot of places. So that's what helped me initially as a county commissioner.

As a state legislator, running that campaign, I built on that. I kept probably that as a base, and then I just built on that. What was helpful, too, was already having the policymaking background.

FJ: Experience.

MMM: Yes, and the record. I had a positive record at the county level.

FJ: I see.

MMM: So Democrats and funders, individuals that fund, that gift money, they knew that I was capable and able and a good bet.

FJ: Yes. So what jobs did you have before you considered running for any office?

MMM: I'm glad you asked. I was actually an educator. That was the major one, but I had multiple jobs before.

FJ: I want to hear about them because I think people don't understand all of that brings experience you can use.

MMM: Oh, it does. Oh, my gosh. I've sold insurance. I've sold houses. I've been a realtor. I then moved myself into the social service sector. I did interim directors. I served on multiple boards. Then I decided that I was going to teach. That's when I got my teacher education and then my certification to teach at the secondary level. That was—a lot of people don't understand. I think teaching is the most noble profession that there is.

That's coming from a teacher. Has it changed? Yes, it has. However, it taught me so much because I had to manage my own classroom, and I did it well. I loved it. I absolutely loved the students. I absolutely loved the courses that I was teaching.

FJ: And I can testify they loved you. [laughs]

MMM: I still see them today. It was such a rewarding and learning experience. Is it difficult? It is difficult. It can be very challenging. to teach. However, that I think was my grounding. That's where I spun off from. That's where I actually—that was my springboard, quite honestly. I was teaching a civics class and I said, it just came to me like an epiphany, "Okay, I'm teaching these students that these are the five tenets of being a good civic individual. One of them is running for office."

I said, "I'm going to take the dive." It was my students that heard it first.

FJ: Really?

MMM: It was. I told them, "You know what? I'm going to run for an elected office." "Oh, Ms. Miller, we're going to vote for you."

So then from there, I went on and built the campaign and ran for the county and ran for the state.

FJ: And along with that, you had a business.

MMM: I'm glad you brought that up because that's still with me today.

FJ: Yes.

MMM: And it's as though I've carried it all along the way. So therefore it is just a given that I have always—you think about successful person—of course, I was going to say successful

women—you think about successful individuals, period. They do multiple things at one time, and they do them well.

So, yes, at the same time that I am raising a family, I'm helping my husband run the business, and I am teaching. I'm on boards. I'm the interim director for the African American Family Preservation, and then I decide that I'm going to run for an elected office, and I did it. And I won.

FJ: Yes. When you counsel other women who might be interested in a political positions, what are the three main things you think that they should really try to understand, becoming a member of that huge political process? Do you think that there are about three things you could share?

MMM: I would think that first you need to build—I quickly wanted to say a persona.

FJ: Yes.

MMM: It is.

FJ: It is.

MMM: You need to build that. You need to become the person for doing these things. Remember you asked me for my opinion.

FJ: I did. It's yours.

MMM: I think you first have to build a persona. You'd be surprised that you don't know that you're even doing that when you start to get involved and engaged in all of these different things that are of interest to you. So I think that that's first.

And then cultivate that. I don't think it's good enough to just build it but cultivate it where it becomes something that actually produces outcomes, produces results for others. I'm a public servant. I'm a servant of people. If there's anything that I can look back on with some regrets, quite honestly, is that I always give and give and given and given, but that's what I saw was that, first of all, build a persona. I cultivated where it actually is creating results and solutions for people, for others, and then at that, once you get to that stage, then you actually are savvy enough to know how to use that to best impact outcomes and people.

FJ: To represent others. Yes.

MMM: But you have to build it.

FJ: That sounds significant to me because for a lot of these things, even if we're just talking about civics, history, or whatever it is, we find things along the way that keep reoccurring without much changing. I have noticed in your political life, you've always been in a position to push a change forward, to make it better.

And to me, some of that comes from how it is that you related to your community to begin with.

MMM: Yes.

FJ: Let's just talk a little bit about how your family responded when they knew that you were going to literally run, your immediate family.

MMM: Well, my immediate family was excited. When I think about my immediate, it's going to be my husband and my children, period. They were all excited. Now take it out a little around to parents and sisters and brothers and cousins. It was just Dad that was hesitant.

FJ: Yes, and we know why, don't we?

MMM: Yes, but I'm such a maverick that I didn't listen. I didn't listen at all. But all of it came back and said, "That's why he said what he said."

FJ: This whole thing of discrimination, how did you navigate that? I saw it happen when you were running. I literally witnessed it.

MMM: I was gifted with the ability to be a positive person.

FJ: Exactly.

MMM: And I've always been very confident. Some will even say it's on the edge of arrogance. I don't. That's not intended, but I can be very confident. So I think by being blessed by those two attributes that it really didn't stop me. I knew it. I was aware of it. I didn't discount it or dismiss it. I just simply pushed forward. I've always been an individual to push forward, push through or push forward.

FJ: When we're dealing with young people in the community, like we've been talking a lot about civics or history or these things that we want to remember that can lift us up, those are the same things that can do the opposite to other people or in situations where you think it's one way, and then it's another. How do you go about navigating misunderstandings?

MMM: Wow. That's more difficult. That is not as easy. What I learned to do, I learned the behavior, and this began with teaching, is to be as clear as possible, to attempt to put my ground rules right out there at the very beginning of a setting, a relationship, a conversation, and if it happens to be something, let's say we're in a setting where I'm speaking, others are asking questions, it's a topic that's controversial, or someone on the other side brings a question that's controversial, I have to be true to self initially, and then I just simply state the facts. I try to state and stay as factual as possible without what I would call any personal bias that I'm going to build into it. That's one way that I attempted to navigate something being misrepresented where it's a divisive setting.

FJ: What is the one thing that you advocated for that didn't rise to the level of your understanding of what the outcome would be and quite the opposite happened? How did you deal with that?

MMM: So predatory lending, payday lending. That was such a battle. It's an issue today. It would have been in 2010. In fact, it was probably '07 or '08. It was towards the beginning of my tenure, and I went gung-ho at the State of Kansas actually eliminating predatory lending, and at the least, putting some restrictions on title loans and payday loans.

I can recall it was Petraeus. Who was president—was it Obama at the time or Clinton? He was Secretary of Defense, and his wife, Holly Petraeus, had advocated for a law for the military to reduce predatory lending and was successful at the Congressional level. So I used that as a template for the State of Kansas. I had all sorts of agencies and organizations that were supportive of it. I even had testimony from Holly Petraeus and others, and it failed. In fact, I don't even know that it—it did get a hearing, but I don't even think it came out of committee.

FJ: That's strong.

MMM: And I tried to also amend it on the floor, which is what you try to do if you really want something to happen. I tried to amend it. But this is where I understand, there's this term in the political arena. "They eat their own." For goodness sake, I could never understand that. They eat their own? What?

FJ: What does that mean?

MMM: Yes, and I watched that happen.

FJ: Especially on that bill.

MMM: They kill bills, wouldn't let bills even get above the line to be heard so that it couldn't be amended.

FJ: Oh, really?

MMM: Yes.

FJ: That's a tactic.

MMM: Oh, yes, and it is used ruthlessly. It is used today.

FJ: And on that note, when you heard that and had to live with it, how did you comfort yourself to know you tried your hardest?

MMM: I knew I'd tried my hardest. I had people that filled the Capitol, the rotunda, chanting, wanting to see this change, and there it was in testimony, all of this support for it. It just didn't happen. So you're disappointed. But yet you live to fight another day.

FJ: Also to be an example of how to get through something that's extremely hard that you cared a lot about that would have improved the whole community. It wasn't just about Black or White community. It was the whole community.

MMM: Oh, absolutely.

FJ: So with that understanding in mind, your children are watching, your family is watching, your community, did you get the support from the community that you thought was offered in a way that comforted you? How did that turn out? That feedback?

MMM: I absolutely did. So therefore I was affirmed that it was the right thing to do, and it simply failed because of the technicalities that can occur at the legislative level. When they don't want something, when leadership does not want something to happen, there are all sorts of ways to kill it.

FJ: That's wonderful to share that. All sorts of ways.

MMM: There are all sorts of ways.

FJ: And not only kill it, but to use it in the election process.

MMM: Absolutely.

FJ: And then when they do that, it's like somebody did pass the law. No, you kept it from happening.

MMM: Right. To flip that, and I'm not sure, I'm sure you were probably going to get to this, but there was an issue that to me tied in my education background as well as my interest in juvenile justice reform. At the county level, I created a million—with Bill Buchanan who was the county manager at the time—we created a million-dollar prevention fund. At the time, I was the only one that was against the addition to the juvenile detention.

FJ: Yes.

MMM: I said, "Why are we building? If you build it, they will come."

FJ: Yes.

MMM: "So instead why aren't we putting money into prevention over here instead of down this dark hole called intervention and locking people up?" So it was successful. In fact, that fund grew because it began to get matched by federal dollars and state dollars to be eight million plus.

What I did when I went to the state level was knowing that there's a disproportionate number of Black and Brown young people in our county jails, how did I know that? Because when I was a

county commissioner, what I wanted to see first was go to the county detention and look and see just what was happening. Who did I see? Students that I had taught. That was gut-wrenching.

That was one of my platforms was juvenile justice reform and improvement. There was a law that I put on the books that was the first year that I was there, I believe, and it was the Disproportionate Minority Contact. What it did was it tied funds to results, to outcomes. If you're not reducing, if you can't show that you're actually reducing this disparity, you're not going to be funded. You're not going to continue to get these funds. So those dollars were those prevention dollars that I had identified at the county level.

The second bill that I'm hugely proud of is the literacy mandate. It's financial literacy, not literacy, but financial literacy at the high school level. That's a state law that I at the time on the House side, Senator Schodorf on the Senate side, and Carol Rupe as a Board of Education, we collaborated and created the financial literacy bill, which became—it's a requirement where students now in order to graduate have to take financial literacy. I'm very proud.

FJ: So your past jobs just went right on up there, and there came the law. So that's one thing we should know about you that we didn't know. What's another one?

MMM: Gosh. Another one, it's not a law. It's an opportunity where you have to know when the time is right to do things. It was during omnibus when we are debating the budget bill. I was able to carry an amendment for—I don't remember the exact, it was in the umpteenth millions of dollars for early childhood education. The speech that I gave turned enough votes where it actually went on to the omnibus bill.

FJ: Did you say, "Hallelujah!"

MMM: That was a blessing.

FJ: That was a blessing.

MMM: That was fun. That made staying up until 4:00 in the morning worthwhile because that's what you do.

FJ: That's what you do. And now that it's been a while since you've been actually active in that sort of political way, are there any other things that you think about or that you do or that you're wishing to do that directly relate to some of the things that you've already done politically?

MMM: I continue, there's another area of interest. Disparities have always been a real heartache point for me, disparities in mortality, disparities in maternal mortality, disparities in juvenile justice system, education, all the way around. So right now what I'm working on is something that's similar to what Vice President Harris is working on, and that is not only raising the awareness, but actually eliminating the disparities in maternal mortality, and in fact eliminating the numbers that are associated with maternal mortality, period.

FJ: They're outrageous. I keep trying to figure that out, even just from a community standpoint. It has to do with just everyday things like "Do I have enough to rear a family, even when I'm just beginning one?" and all of those things. So the work that you have done has really contributed to those things being less unknown to becoming more known in the community and having us figure out a way to deal with them.

MMM: Exactly.

FJ: Finally, can you tell us something that you think would be the best thing for us to do at this moment when we're thinking about the changes that have come with the last two years of COVID and that sort of thing, if you were in the legislature, or if you were on the county board or whatever, what kinds of—and I'm thinking educational things we should have or should continue to do or ways that we can still be aware if not overwhelmed?

MMM: I think that's a tough one. What I would like to see happen is that as a community that we recognize that health should be a given. There should not be a chasm or there should not be a difference in who gets to have good health care and health outcomes and why. So if we could honestly begin to look at what we call those social determinants of health, that it's not solely about race, that it really is about means and income. I mean, it happens to be that more Black and Brown people are going to be in the lower quartile.

FJ: Exactly.

MMM: So therefore it's more of us that are impacted, but it shouldn't be your zip code making the difference in your health outcomes that you have. I think that that's one thing that this pandemic, this COVID pandemic has explored and has uncovered is the fact that it does matter, where you live, who you are, how much money you make, all of these factors come into play ultimately with what your health outcomes are.

It amazes me that so many people are through with this pandemic. They want it over. I do understand it. I do understand that, but it's not through with us, and it won't be. But that's what I think the media plays on and because we have social media now, you can literally only look at views and viewpoints that line up with how you're thinking. So therefore people aren't even thinking about close to a million people died. What? And some of them were needlessly, quite honestly.

So, yes, if we could just really start to focus on the fact that health should be a right, a given, not something that you literally pick and choose who's going to benefit from it.

FJ: Well, with this in mind, and the very lovely expressions that you've shared with us, not only lovely but really sort of some of the best ways to look at, I'll call them opportunities or results that we want, I want to say to you thank you, and it has been a pleasure. There needs to be many more numbers of you.

MMM: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

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<sup>i</sup> Billy Q. McCray served our the Wichita community, and Kansas for many years, as a member of the Kansas House of Representatives, the Kansas State Senate, and served as the Director of Minority Business, Kansas Department of Commerce. Billy McCray also served at the local level, becoming the first African American Sedgwick County Commissioner. He also served on several boards and commissions locally, and statewide.