

Interview of Senator Lana Oleen by Joan Wagnon, October 14, 2019
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Joan Wagnon: Hello, today's date is October 14, 2019 at 2:30 in the afternoon, and we are in the Senate Chambers of the Kansas State House in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Joan Wagnon, former legislator and member of the Kansas Oral History Project. Today I'm interviewing Senator Lana Oleen, former Kansas State senator from 1989 until 2004. Lana, you represented a Senate district, basically Manhattan, Riley County, tell me the number and what it was about.

Lana Oleen: Senate District 22, and it basically would be the communities of Manhattan and Junction City and Fort Riley, and then there were a couple of smaller towns that were in that mix. I would say a college town, an army town, a rural area. It was a microcosm of Kansas.

JW: That is a pretty good diverse group.

LO: It is.

JW: I wanted to have the readers know that the interview is conducted on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created to interview former legislators, particularly those serving from the 1960s up to about 2000. The interviews are accessible to researchers at the Kansas State Historical Society and the State Library, and the transcriptions are funded through Humanities Kansas. Our video operator today is, you recognize David Heinemann, former legislator.

LO: Yes.

JW: And a board member of the Oral History Project. So welcome and talk a little bit about some of your background. This is a unique series of five interviews of women legislators who were part of a larger group that was interviewed by Washburn University in 1990. I brought you a copy of your original interview. Since it has a lot of really good information about who you were, when you ran, and how you campaigned, and all of that, I'm not going to go over a lot of that. But we will just incorporate this in this interview that we're doing now.

When you ran, if I'm correct, in '88, it was an open Senate seat.

LO: Yes. Senator Merrill Werts had served with distinction and decided to not seek another term.

JW: You were active in politics. You were the Republican county chair, weren't you?

LO: I was. I became active in Kansas politics literally the month after I moved to Manhattan. I was a stay-at-home new mom for that year, and a friend of mine happened to be running for Congress. It was a high school friend from Topeka West, and I said I'd be happy to help. I got involved. I didn't know when I was campaigning if I were talking to a bank president or the man who sold cars. I just knew that I wanted to let them know about my friend.

JW: Well, that's good.

LO: He was a Republican. I worked with him. While he carried my county, he did not unfortunately win the seat.

JW: You were also, if my memory is correct, a master teacher, a classroom teacher, and you had worked for Governor Hayden before you came in and decided to run. I think your mom, who was well known to me as a Topekan, was the head of Alcohol Beverage Licensing there. So you had a lot of connections. This is not totally foreign, that you'd come into.

LO: No, I remember in high school, my mom worked as a legislative secretary during the session for a number of years. She would say, "Lana Page, we're going to have some of the legislators over tonight." People would come over. We'd have shrimp cocktail. I got to meet some of the senators who actually I ended up serving with years later. Senators many times served for a very long time.

JW: They did have a tendency to stick around. Is there anything else about your background that you want to call attention to?

LO: I was always involved in student government, and all of those kinds of ways in which I served, they were of nonpartisan nature, trying to solve problems, being involved, learning—I always considered that a real part of public policy was being able to learn and not only describe to the constituents what I was learning, but also to get a better understanding of what works for Kansas.

JW: That seems to be a common thread through a lot of these interviews that we've done, how much you learn, and how enriching it is to be able to be in a position to do that. It's pretty exciting, isn't it?

LO: It is. I think that when you find other people that have that same kind of discovery method—they want to learn. They want to do what's right. I remember, as majority leader, I would chair our caucus, and then I immediately would go to Senator Hensley's office, where they were having a Democrat caucus, and we would talk about what things needed to be covered.

JW: Good.

LO: I also remember telling both caucuses, "You're a winner. Everybody here is a winner. Somebody sent you here to get a job done, and let's try to work on those things that we can together. There's going to be some partisan issues, but basically the public policy, if it's good for the public, it's good for both parties."

JW: That's a wonderful attitude.

LO: Well, we had good communication.

JW: That's good. I want to focus right now a little bit on your district and how it changed over time and then on public policy that changed during those sixteen years. I'm interested in having you reflect on tangible policies that got adopted because you were here and were part of it and also things that were never resolved. I'm sure there were some that never got fixed. Also your identity as a female leader, whether or not that shaped your perceptions at all. We're exploring that with a lot of the women legislators.

So let's start with your district. Tell me what it was like when you first ran, and how did it change over time?

LO: As I indicated, it was basically two good-sized communities—Manhattan and Junction City. There was Milford, Ogden, a variety. I found that when you are representing what might be called a college town and another, which might be more termed an army town, with the military installation in between, you're covering a lot of bases, surrounded and nestled in there are the rurals as well.

I thought it was important because both towns are a fairly good size to have a presence in each one. I prevailed on some people in Junction City to give me office space. Also my husband as an attorney had an extra room for me there, but I actually had office hours that I would maintain when we weren't in session, listening time for people to come.

I had indicated I would do that during the campaign. Manhattan and Junction City had historically traded that Senate seat. Somebody had it for four years, maybe eight, but that's it, and then it went to the other town. So Senator Werts had been from Junction City, and I wanted to assure people in Junction City that they still would have a regular presence there by their [next] senator, and that worked well.

JW: Is that district still pretty much intact?

LO: No, reapportionment has changed that. It has divided it so that Manhattan is more itself, and then it goes to a rural bend. Fort Riley, Junction City is represented by someone in Emporia.

JW: When you got elected, I think it says in your original interview, you were thirty-nine or forty. You were a mature person with teaching experience and well-grounded in the community, but you stayed sixteen years. Did you change during those sixteen years personally?

LO: I think in some ways I did. I do remember during the campaign there was an element of folks who really tried to put out there that my kids were too young for me to go to Topeka, that they were four and five. That came out late in the campaign [through newspaper and radio advertisements]. My husband and I had to explain, "No, they're in fourth and fifth grade. They're not four and five."

JW: So they were painting you as a bad mother.

LO: Yes. As my husband said, "I've always helped take care of this family. I'll continue to do so." We were able to dispel that, but it got a little bit testy, when your family's involved. However, the strengthening piece to me has always been public education. I just felt that, as a classroom teacher, I was taking that [experience] to a higher platform of being able to raise its visibility, and public education has always been important to me, always will be. It was a natural fit. With the public university in Manhattan, that lent itself, too [to my passion for education].

JW: During those sixteen years that you were there, we're talking about the last decade plus of the 20th century, Kansas was in the process of undergoing a lot of change, too. What did you observe about the change in your constituents and public attitudes or anything like that? Was the change marked? Could you tell it?

LO: I don't want to digress, but I do remember the night that I won. That meant that there were going to be twenty-two Republicans and eighteen Democrats, very close in the Senate, and the House became Democrat that night, 63-62.

JW: I was sitting in the House when that happened, and it was wonderful.

LO: Yes. I just know that if you wanted to get something done that it was going to take a bipartisan effort in order to do it. Plus when things are done in a bipartisan manner, they just seem to last longer. The policies last longer. It's not, "Throw this one out. We're in charge now."

I think that fabric of bipartisanship helped to make me see that that [bipartisanship] was the better option to go, and I think that it also played over well when I was the majority leader. That was a race where a president and a majority leader candidate were running as a team, and I was the outsider on that one. I just made certain—and we'll probably talk about this a little bit later, but things had become in recent years a little more strident, and things were beginning to happen that way during my last term, and yet the moderate and more conservative Republicans, I was the last leader that was elected that way, with support from both [moderate and conservative Republicans].

JW: Yes. So it really did shift.

LO: It shifted.

JW: And your majority leader race was in 2000?

LO: Yes.

JW: Because you did four years.

LO: Yes. Like I said, I was running against a team that was the president and his pick for the majority leader.

JW: Well, one of the things that caught my eye in your 1990 interview was an issue about Washburn University.

LO: Yes.

JW: I mean, here you are representing a Regents institution, having graduated from Emporia State, right?

LO: Correct.

JW: And getting pressure from people like me to bring Washburn into the state system, and you just didn't feel like you could do that. Why was that a difficult issue?

LO: That was a very difficult issue for the Manhattan community in general that I represented. I think the feeling was that there was not enough resources currently, and adding another [institution] to the table would somehow take funds away, or what would be the total picture to that? I was asked to give that [issue some] thought and to take a position during the election, which I did. In retrospect, I believe Washburn thrived by not being a part of the system, but at the time, it was difficult because I was from Topeka, had grown up here, and certainly value Washburn as a great institution, but it was not a piece that really I felt I could bring forward and support since I represented a current Regents institution.

JW: I just thought it was a very good illustration of the pressures that you're on to make choices that are sometimes in favor of your constituency and maybe against what might have been your own interest.

LO: I felt comfortable with my position on that.

JW: Good. You served on a lot of committees. I'm amazed that people in the Senate just go to committee meetings all the time.

LO: Right.

JW: You were on Governmental Organization, and for some reason, you got to chair it that first year you were here. That was unusual, wasn't it?

LO: Right after the first time that I was elected, then I found out about all of these other elections that occur. There had been a very spirited race for the Senate leadership. So here are the new people coming in and not quite certain, but their first votes are going to be about who's going to lead them, and those are very important votes, as well as what committee assignments. So I do remember Sheila Frahm and I getting together and thinking, "What do we really want?" She ended up being the vice chair of Education, which was quite a big step for first year. Joe Harder I believe, was the chair. I wanted to be on Ways and Means, but freshmen

didn't really do that. I was able to secure a position on [Assessment and Taxation]. I felt good about that, and then I heard that I was going to be chair of a committee, Government Organization, and that was the first time a freshman had chaired a committee. It was all men and me.

JW: What was it like?

LO: Well, since you're asking me, I will tell you what the first bill was. They used to have what they called "sunset laws". Every agency would come up, and it would basically say that an agency was going to be terminated the following year. Then the agency would come before the legislature to explain what they did [and why it was needed].

Well, the first bill I ever got was to terminate the Department of Revenue. I knew very little about the Department of Revenue, but it was such a good committee to learn about government and the agencies and the people involved and their commitment to service. It was a very good experience, a learning experience, and I think one which helped me to be more grounded in having a better understanding of state government. Yes, I was representing a district, but I needed to know how things [Kansas government] worked as well.

JW: And there's no better place than Governmental Org. But you managed to move up to be the chair of Federal and State Affairs. Certainly with your military installation, that made sense, but it's kind of a big committee that covers all kinds of things. Talk a little bit about what you saw as your contributions as chair of Fed and State.

LO: There had been a chairman of Federal and State for many, many years, Ed Reilly. Ed was not going to run again, so that was a big hole to fill, I guess one could say, because he had been chair for so long. I remember being asked if I would take that position. I said yes, and then several people came to me and said, "You know what that makes you? The Queen of Vice." All alcohol-related issues, anything dealing with guns, with abortion, with gambling, with military, they all came to that committee. I had a variety of vice chairs and ranking members, but overall, that was a very good experience for me.

It was hard at times. It became very testy. We had carry and conceal, I remember one time in the old Supreme Court room. Sherman—

JW: Smith?

LO: No, Sherm. He was from Wyandotte County. [Senator Sherman Jones]

JW: I remember, a big, tall guy.

LO: A professional ballplayer before that. Anyway, he leans over to me and he says, "I don't want to bother you. I don't want to upset you, Lana, but that man's packing." We were talking

about carry and conceal. I thought, "What do you know?" Sherman Jones, a delightful man, and B.D. Kanan. I had some very colorful ranking members.

JW: You did.

LO: [Ranking Members] always sat beside me on one side, and the vice chair was on the other. We plowed the road and heard the bills and hopefully enacted some really good policy for our state.

JW: We have done an interview with Ed Reilly last month. He indeed is a colorful figure, and also an interview with Ginger Barr, who was chairing Fed and State at the same time in the House. It was pretty amazing.

Did you get a lot of abortion bills in the beginning? That seemed to be what went through there that just hung everything up.

LO: I think they had been requested by Senator Reilly to come to his committee. When I took his place, those bills continued to come to the Federal and State Affairs Committee. I think there was one maybe that went to Public Health, but then it immediately was referred back. Each year, there was something about women, reproductive rights, that came to the attention of the committee.

JW: You were in leadership throughout your whole service. You had a "leadership position" as a majority leader for the last four years. Why did you decide to go for the majority leader position? I'd love to hear you talk about that election, how that happened, and were you the first woman majority leader?

LO: No, the first woman majority leader was Sheila Frahm for a short amount of time, and then she ran with Bill Graves as lieutenant governor. She was there for a bit.

JW: And Alicia Salisbury had been in as vice president, but you were really the longest-serving female majority leader.

LO: Correct.

JW: Which is a big, huge job.

LO: Well, it is. I did not just set my sights to run for that, but several people came to me. As I indicated, there was a team running for president and majority leader, and from that, some people that I had been serving with for some time said, "We want to have a choice on this majority leader position."

I said that I would run, and I do remember the much more conservative members of my party asked me if I would take a call. They called about five or six times at my home to ask me my

position on some things, knowing what my position was on other things. I had always been against the expanded gaming, except for the Native Americans, the American Indians. From those discussions, I had a number of very conservative legislators support me because they felt that I would stand up for them in making certain that their bills got heard, not necessarily passed because many of those bills had come to Fed and State. It was a strange relationship, but it was built on trust. I trusted them, that they were going to be there with their votes, and they were, and there were moderates who did not support me. So it was quite a unique position, but when the votes were counted, I won by one.

JW: That's a pretty slim majority.

LO: It is.

JW: But you obviously got—you served the whole four years. You didn't have to get re-elected.

LO: Right.

JW: It was a four-year term as majority leader.

LO: Right. And Dave Kerr was the president then. We were able to work effectively together on a number of issues, once the election for leadership was completed.

JW: He speaks well of you. We interviewed him last month as well.

LO: People have very different parts of the state that they represent. I happen to represent an area that with the fort and with a public university, we wanted Topeka to not only have our attention but also we needed the funding, both at the federal and state level to make things work. I have colleagues, and I value and respect them, too, but they basically wanted Topeka to leave them alone. They'd come here. They'd do their thing, but don't have Topeka touch me. And yet I was more one of these cheerleaders, bring it in, bring it in! And you can't be that way and say that you need more dollars, if you aren't willing to vote for them. So the ability to go home and explain why either taxes were raised or something was not cut, it's something where you need constant communication with your constituents.

JW: It absolutely is. So during this time, this sixteen years, you worked with four governors—Mike Hayden, Joan Finney, Bill Graves, and briefly with Kathleen Sebelius—two Republicans and two Democrats. Some of the legislative session stood out because some were productive, and that 1989 through 1994 comes to mind, and I read through all the clips. There was a huge amount of work that got done in that time period. We had a divided government, but I liked what you said earlier about—the margins were not lopsided. So you really had to work hard to get things passed, but we did—comprehensive highway plan, water plan, school finance, classification of property, tax reform, mental health, prisons and sentencing reform, children's initiatives, and the death penalty.

LO: Right.

JW: That's a huge, huge amount of work.

LO: It was a full plate.

JW: Which of those were you involved in?

LO: Oh, gosh. The classification through the Tax Committee was one that I worked with. I was never in the Natural Resources line of work. I depended upon others to give me that information and so on. I do remember the classification being really intense. It was a learning curve for me.

JW: For everybody.

LO: Yes, it was for everyone, but people really worked hard. I think the extra meetings that would happen, it wasn't—you knew when things were coming also. There was that understanding that if a bill were going to be heard, then you were going to read that it was going to be heard. When I chaired a committee, I used to have my secretary call folks to come in and testify, on both sides, let them make sure that they knew things were happening. So that openness to [the] process on many of these difficult issues, I think that's why they succeeded is because they were open, and people knew—it wasn't nuanced through. It was known what you were working on and how.

JW: Did you interact with the Governor's Office on those things very much at that time? You're still reasonably new.

LO: I did. I remember during my campaign, every other day, Governor Mike Hayden would call to see how I was doing. I'd hear this huge loud voice, and I thought, "I got to go knock on some more doors."

Then after he left, then Governor Finney, and again I'm going back to my mom for a minute, but my mom had worked for her, and so she knew me as Lana Paige. So she would call me, "Lana Paige, I need to see you down here in the office." She was very well intended and did some [policy] pieces that we don't always give credit where credit's due.

As I indicated before, I worked with two governors that were Republicans, two governors that were Democrats, two boys, two girls, and it just seemed like even though we were changing who our leadership would be, the work of the legislature didn't really change. We had business to do, and we kept moving forward.

JW: And that was good. Now, in 1995, after that 1994 election, the politics and the issues shifted substantially. I'm drawing this from having read through all the clips and the news reports of those sessions. We had a new group of social conservatives in the House. Tim

Shallenburger was speaker. Bud Burke was president in the Senate, and the press reported that many issues were debated, but few were passed. Abortion, extension of the lottery, and tax relief for cars became central, and yet unresolved issues. Did you do much on those?

LO: I have a funny story about the lottery extension. Some of the very legislators that opposed extension of the lottery certainly liked the economic development funds that came from it, but they felt they needed to vote no. As I indicated before, I was chairing the Governmental Organizations committee, and the lottery bill was one that came up. So I explained it, and everybody voted, and it was like 34-3 or 4. Then I was called in by the leadership. They didn't realize that that was the lottery extension bill. So they had to recall it and go through the process again. It eventually passed again. I always thought of that as "Maybe some people weren't paying attention." This was the bill. It was in front of them in their book!

There were times where I think the leadership at the time was pretty open. I always felt I could go to anyone that was in leadership before I became part of leadership to ask questions, to bring people forward, to say that there is something that we wanted to work on automobiles and headlights and that kind of thing. Nothing was too miniscule. People were willing to listen to one another.

JW: The other observation that I made personally was that the first year that I was there, which was '83, there were like 2,000 bills introduced, and you'd get 250 of them passed; by the time I left the Department of Revenue [in 2011], , the number of bills was cut in half, not so much stuff being taken care of, not so much business, not so much moving through. Did you observe that?

LO: I did. I felt like when I first got here, that things were clipping along, but things stood on their own, and you voted on yes or no, and you moved on down the road. Once bills started being conjoined, and topics put into something [else]—there was always something for someone to dislike. That parlay of "You've got to take it all if you want your piece," that conversation started creeping into the process, I would say, maybe the start of maybe my second term.

JW: Did you have any comments on this realignment of the legislature along the lines of the social conservatives? I mean, you saw it. You dealt with it. You were the last moderate elected majority leader in the Senate. That realignment definitely happened.

LO: It did. It happened, I would say, the last four, maybe six years that I served. I also saw some of the people that I had really respected, they were retiring. They were leaving. It wasn't as though they were giving up, but there was a sense of not serving too long in the legislature. As I indicated before, the seat that I represented, the longest anyone had ever served was eight years, and here I was, sitting at sixteen. I felt like, while I had no opposition, I really worked to find someone who I thought would be moderate in their views.

JW: Who did replace you?

LO: Roger Reitz.

JW: Very moderate.

LO: Dr. Reitz, Yes, very moderate. So, yes, I did see that evolving, and the kind of rancor, [as] things [were] being passed out [by special interest groups] on how to vote. Without even reading the bill, you were told how to do it. That was just foreign to me. People go to caucuses, and they learn what's in the bill. So when some people didn't show up for caucuses, I went to their offices and asked them, "What's going on?"

JW: Like a good teacher.

LO: Yes. I said, "Well, the next caucus, this is the bill that I expect you to explain." We'd get their participation that way.

JW: In 1998, Senator Dick Bond, who is now president of the Senate, is quoted as saying, "Abortion politics tied the legislature in knots," but the legislature also passed a record tax cut of 247 million and dropped the state mill levy for schools from 35 down to 20. Do you remember that happening?

LO: Yes, I do.

JW: What was your impression of what was going on there?

LO: That was an incredible session. Actually there was the study, the session, I think it was two sessions that went forward. The abortion issue really came shooting out of the Senate one time. I remember Frank Gaines standing up and offering this amendment to ban abortion. Nancy Parrish could not get to his desk soon enough. People were crying. It was such a shock.

There had been a similar kind of action in the house by Kerry Patrick. Then to have someone in the Senate doing that, it just wasn't genteel. It was such a shock that our Senate president just adjourned the session, just bang, and it was over.

JW: Gone.

LO: Yes. That was a long afternoon and evening of people on this floor talking about what had happened and why it shouldn't happen, and then it was recalled. There had been a plan—there were plenty of votes there to do what he wanted, but it was shut down by leadership.

JW: It was a kamikaze kind of action is what I remember.

LO: It was.

JW: And unlike the very ponderous, slow-moving legislative process that you normally experienced.

LO: It was really, in my opinion, the first invasion of decorum.

JW: That's a good way to put it.

LO: It was just blindsided. Each Chamber can have its antics, but I must say that the Senate hadn't really matched the House on antics until something like that happened. Then we saw just how leveling that can be on trust.

JW: It does. By '99, they're back to calling the session historic because you funded a ten-year Transportation Plan. That was Graves.

LO: Yes.

JW: You always had state gaming compacts. You must have been in the middle of those and a two-year funding of schools that increased base state aid, and you had the restructuring of governance of higher education. That end of the century was a very productive—

LO: It was. I do think that it's important to mention that interim committees—committees that met when the session was on, they were well attended, and there was time to really be able to discuss and examine issues. It wasn't a two or three days' interim. People really got into having a better knowledge base. Also with interim committees, you had House and Senate members together. The same story was being told to both Chambers, the same interpretation to both Chambers. I think that, this is just my opinion, but part of the demise of a continuing of governance is the lack of the interim studies and their deliberations being taken seriously during the regular session.

JW: Why did they do that? Were they trying to save money? Or did they not see the value of the deliberate and careful study?

LO: I think sometimes when people are in leadership, they really aren't in the nitty gritty of the committees. They can be more involved in the public process, but you have to have a learning curve in order to change direction. I think there were budget considerations at one point. We ended up with quite a few joint committees, if you remember, and then the interim studies, and the creation of those joint committees may have taken the focus off of really looking, but having an interim tax committee every year is important.

JW: I couldn't agree more.

LO: Everybody needs to have that information that comes forward and time to look at it, not just in the throes of the ninety days.

JW: You cannot learn what you need to learn during a hearing on a bill.

LO: Correct.

JW: You've got to get up to speed. When you became the majority leader, how did your activities on a daily basis change? You're going around, as you described, making sure that people come to the caucus [to] know what's going on. Did you do less committee work? How did that change your life?

LO: It was interesting. When I was elected majority leader, not one chair was returning. In other words, every committee had a new chair.

JW: Oh, my.

LO: None of them had been vice chairs of those particular committees either. So it was a huge learning [curve]. I became chair of the chairs. We would have meetings with the chair, the vice chair, and the ranking member.

JW: That's good.

LO: Right. We would have those once a week, and we would talk about what issues were there. Then I dropped it down to the chairs, realizing that the vice chair and the ranking are very important, but I had a couple of people say, "We really don't know what's happening." Then we changed it to where I would meet with all three [chair, vice-chair and ranking member].

I had seen prior to that where the ranking member had no idea what was going to happen until he or she stepped into the room. They had not only a leadership role--they had a leadership responsibility. Those three officers is the way I referred to them, they have a sense of doing for consideration of people's bills that have come forward.

JW: And they play a very key role on conference committees because they represent the committee at that point.

LO: We spent quite a bit of time understanding our role as chair and leadership. They were leadership of committees.

JW: I'm getting the sense in talking to you that you had a really strong understanding of process and how to make things work. You really knew how to organize and keep things moving.

LO: The Senate Chamber, it's like a public classroom. As I indicated, all forty people were winners that were in there. In managing a classroom and being floor leader, you have some that need more attention than others. You have some that need private attention. So you're looking out over the Chamber, and you're valuing the process, and you're remembering that everybody is there because a majority of people from that part of the state sent them there. It's

a matter of making certain that everyone's voice is heard. Do all have to be heard during the session? No, but they need to be given their voice, and many times, the very first time that we went into session, and I was majority leader, Senator [Tim] Huelskamp threw out this amendment that dealt with abortion. I remember, I was sitting right there, and I remember walking over to him, and everyone's eyes on what's going to happen, and I said, "Tim, this is my first day here." I said, "I don't want you to upset everyone and everything here. This is an eighteen-page amendment. It deals with abortion. No one has heard this. If I can get this heard in a committee process, will you withdraw it?" and he said, "I can't." I said, "You can't, why?" "I can't believe that they would hear it." I said, "Let me check." Everyone's just kind of in abeyance.

I went to Federal and State Affairs, yes, they would hear the bill. I went back to him. He said, "I'll think about it." By the time I got back to my desk, and Dave Kerr was in the chair. He's going, "What?" Tim said, "Okay, I'm withdrawing it." And that sent, I think, a pretty good signal that we're going to be open in here. We're going to try to respect every winner in this room and use a process where we can.

JW: That was very clever of you.

LO: I don't know if it were clever, but I did not want the first day to be bad for everyone. That would have launched and set, I think, a tone that none of us would have appreciated down the road.

JW: That camaraderie and collegiality that existed in the Senate was important to get things done. What I'm not hearing you talk much about is the political strategy of getting things passed. Were you involved in that as majority leader?

LO: Yes.

JW: Did you and Dave huddle and say, "Okay, how are we going to get the Gaming Compact passed or whatever it was?"

LO: Dave and I had some differences. We represented very different areas. But we also had some things that we held very close in common. Civility was one of those and the ability to not surprise one another.

JW: Those are important.

LO: Right. While he and I might differ very differently on some things, we were always able to talk about it and know where we were coming from. I do remember one particular time though. It was related to increasing a tax and increasing education funding. My job was to go around and count the votes, too. I knew that we had twenty-three if we had Democrat support, but in order to do that, I needed to change the order of the two bills. We needed to do education

first, and then we would do the tax. The education, of course, was important, not only to me, but to the majority of Democrats. The tax one was not as important to the Democrats.

I went to Dave, and I said, if we do the education first, they will be there for the tax. "Are you sure?" "Yes." "Are you damn sure?" I said, "I am. They'll be there." "Well, I'll try it." We went in, and the votes were there for both. So it's that trust factor, that you just—when people told me, yes, they'd be there for a vote, I believed them. I'd rather they tell me that they weren't going to commit, and I said, "I'll go on and keep counting. If I don't get to 21 on something, I'll be back to you."

JW: They trusted you.

LO: Well, I would not indicate who was supporting—"Susan's supporting this, but I'd like for you to support it." It was more an individual one-on-one.

JW: They trusted you.

I want to switch gears for just a little bit. This series of interviews we're doing with the women who had been interviewed previously is to really explore some of the gender roles that are there. In your earlier interview, you commented—this is on page 8 in that, that Women's Caucus where the Republic and Democrat women formed a group called the Steel Magnolias, you said, "Well, I'm not real sure what women's issues are." Have you changed your mind?

LO: I think I have a better understanding of what are termed "women's issues." I still hold the fact that I think there are family issues. I think that there are certainly issues that reflect women's interests more than men's, and I still try to figure out what the men's issues are.

JW: That was in here, too.

LO: It's people's issues.

JW: Bear with me for just a minute. Did you personally experience or witness any party leadership election that was influenced by gender? Did somebody get elected because they were a man or because they were a woman or something in between?

LO: No, but I do remember working with—we had a situation of someone, a legislator who was abused, a lady legislator.

JW: I know who that was.

LO: I remember going to bat for her as to why she was not at a meeting or at somewhere else, that kind of thing, that came up, and I think from that, there were some judicial bills that dealt with abuse that women rallied around because of one person. I'm sure they had their life experiences, too, but they knew firsthand of someone who faced that.

JW: There were a whole spate of domestic violence bills that went through in that time period, yes. Bear with me on this. This is Washburn's question. Personal identity is loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, marital status. I mean, pick one. Did you experience any time in your legislature where you believed your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, work with other legislators, or give good service—in other words, who you were was an asset.

LO: I think [my gender] was an asset for support actually at the federal level for women in service. I was appointed to serve for this Defense Advisory Committee for Women Services. This was some time ago. It was in the early nineties. Seeing the discrepancy between men and women who were training in our military, one of my assignments was to go to Fort Leavenworth and to do an inspection there. This was back when Dick Cheney was Secretary of Defense. Bob Dole had kind of gone to bat for me. I had been selected to serve, and then I was on the Executive Committee and traveled the world several different times.

JW: That's pretty cool.

LO: The DMZ zones. Just Guantanamo Bay, everywhere. But here at Fort Leonard Wood, which is pretty darn close, I went there to see bootcamp, and boots didn't fit women. They could not pass some of their tests and do some of the stuff. They did not have the right size. They only had men's issue for women recruits. I remember raising a big deal about that, and then the same with what your weight was. You had to get back to a certain weight after you had had a child. In the Army, it was six months, which seemed pretty reasonable. In the Air Force, it was six weeks. So we worked at the federal level with that. While it wasn't a state issue, federally I saw quite a bit of discrimination [and helped rectify it].

JW: That was my experience in the very early eighties and watching what came out of the civil rights movement all through the seventies with women and credit. I would have defined those women's issues as issues that discriminated against women in the carrying out of their daily lives. A lot of that has been eliminated, but the subtle things are still there.

LO: We had a good example happen at Fort Riley. Desert Shield happened, and, all of a sudden, 9,000 men primarily were called out of Fort Riley and sent overseas, and that left the women behind. Well if you remember, that was when they had 24-hour TV of what was happening with Desert Storm and Desert Shield. You could watch it all the time. With the men who had been deployed, the women didn't really know how to take care of bills. Their cable TV was being cut off. Each one of these little units, cable TV had services there. So they cut them off for nonpayment. The men were gone for the most part. Some women called me, and we ended up making a call to what is now Cox, and I remember getting one person and another person, and frankly I was not a person who referred to myself as Senator Oleen until that series of phone calls.

From that, I felt like I was Ann Landers of camouflage or something. Those women, a number of them came to the legislature with cookies to thank me, and all of their stuff was turned back on until the Army could make [monetary] provisions. There hadn't been a chance to really make plans for the men to have their accounts covered. That was a [a most important fix for many of my female constituents].

JW: I used to find those situations going door to door, when I talked to people. Child support was a big one. I think those, in my mind, are the issues that primarily affect women more than men. Anyway, I think we've covered that.

Governor Sebelius came in in 2003 and '04. At this point, Democrats are outnumbered 3:1 in the Senate, 2:1 in the House, and the budget issues in 2003 caused her to delay payments to local government. We even changed tax payment deadlines. I was working at Revenue then, but she didn't raise any taxes. I just wonder what you remember about any of those policy issues in that early part. You were still majority leader, or what it was like to work with her. You only were there two years when she was governor.

LO: Right, and we worked together very well. President Kerr did as well. We also had a—the Senate composition and complexion had changed.

JW: How had it changed?

LO: It became more strident. The conversations were not as inclusive. The caucuses, while attended, I think there were other caucuses that were meeting separately. There was more of a discussion of opposition between folks in the House and Senate. They would meet separately. Those kind of events that everyone used to go to, things were just beginning to shift into a less public domain.

JW: Yes, and for want of a better word, more tribal interests. “We like this.” “We like this.” At least that's what it looked like from the outside.

LO: And again, I think that many of the ways that bills were joined and joined and joined together did not give people a clear perspective as to what the issues were. I remember in conjunction with President Kerr, we had six bills, and we just said, “They may have come out of committee, but they need to go back, and they need to be separated because we're not running them this way.”

JW: That's good.

LO: You can't have a good [bill] and a bad [bill] in the same thing and still call it a certain title and so on. There was that strife, I think, of bundling [issues] to avoid clear decisions on policy issues.

JW: How did that affect you personally? Was it frustrating? Did it make you mad?

LO: It was frustrating, but it involved a lot more conversations with members of the caucus on an individual basis. When you are in a caucus situation, you know you have everyone there, but one on one, to me, you can make more progress. Did I want to intimidate and have them come into my office? No. I would go to their office, or they would have a choice. "Do you want me to come here? Do you want to come there? But the two of us need to talk."

JW: I'd just like to underline that, if I could. That feature of leadership, where you go to them, rather than expecting they come on high to you seems to be a very effective strategy, and I see women much more using that.

LO: I think so, too, yes.

JW: They're not ashamed to step down out of your office and go to somebody else's office and meet them where they are.

LO: Correct.

JW: That must have been your real strength.

LO: I started in such a cubicle that if the president of the Senate or the majority leader had come into my office, there literally wasn't a place for them to sit, but I think that either neutral ground or the ability for someone to have you as a guest sets a higher tone.

JW: It does. Well, I think we probably need to bring this to a bit of a close, but I want to go back and do just kind of a retrospective assessment of where we are. These are short questions. As you look back on your time in the legislature, what are you most proud of? This is going to go on your tombstone.

LO: I really felt like I represented diverse groups well. By "diverse," I mean you have a number assigned to you. Mine was District 22, but it was really a microcosm of many different interests. So I think being able to connect, being able to effectively communicate what was happening in Topeka, and what they wanted to have happen probably was my strength.

JW: Why did you leave?

LO: As I indicated earlier, historically that seat has been one that people take turns. I felt like my turn had been enough. I also—when I was first elected, it was a night where a couple of by-the-skin wins, Jerry Moran and I were the two on the Republican side, and then eventually I didn't have opposition when I would run. It wasn't a matter of being concerned that I wouldn't win again. It was a matter of feeling like I had a very good experience with this. It's been long enough. I have some other things that I want to do. I wanted to kind of get back into the higher education consulting and so on. I didn't feel like, with the district that I had, that I really could just have a job and be the senator. I wanted to give my all.

JW: What did you do when you left?

LO: I worked for some foundations in higher education and served as a governmental operations [manager for the Wichita Graduate School of Medical Education]. I did quite a bit of work with the tribes here in Kansas. For example, they wanted to be more involved in commissions and so on. We talked about resumes. We talked about getting involved and so on. So I represented all four tribes. My opposition to gambling expansion beyond tribal gaming was a natural fit for me as well.

Then I did some policy-making work on a Consensus Council. There were eight of us in the US, and we would troubleshoot. For example, when the governor of Maine wanted to paint over all of the Labor statues, murals that were in the capital because he didn't like the Labor Party, a couple of us were sent in to talk with them and to talk with the senators and keep the murals intact. When the hurricane hit in Florida, there were tribes that weren't federally recognized that received nothing for their relocation. So we were tasked to go in and work with that. That was through the Department of Defense.

JW: That was fascinating.

LO: The consensus-building piece, I think, was a part that I still wanted to work with and found ways to do so.

JW: Would you do it again?

LO: Would I run again, serve?

JW: Having done this, I assume that you're not at a point where you really want a full-time job anymore.

LO: No, I like my life the way it is now. Kent and I are able to travel. We've got grandkids who are great. We like our life right now. I still dabble in interests that I have. Some are political. Some are just a part of being American and being engaged.

JW: What advice do you have for other women who are planning to go into politics or into public service?

LO: I frequently counsel particularly women who are looking at public service, school board, city commission, state representative, and so on. I enjoy that and really say, "You have to know the district that you want to represent. If you know them and you feel that you are a real part of it and can bring it back and explain whatever you do, then go for it. I still serve as a mentor to some of the people who are in the legislature now, and I enjoy that as well.

JW: Good. Lana, it's been a fascinating opportunity. We've known each other for years, but we've never talked about some of these things.

LO: We haven't. We haven't really talked about some of the things that you and I did together when we were in the legislature.

JW: What do you remember?

LO: I just remember working on some issues in the Children's Initiative in the old Supreme Court room and being able to move and make some things happen for Kansas kids.

JW: That was one of my highlights of my legislative service was working on that Children's Initiative.

LO: It was a wonderful opportunity. I'm not sure how I fell into it. I think it was definitely House led, but there were some of us that became involved in it. I do remember not too long ago when Marvin Barkis was back with some others for the Oral History Project, and I said something to him about that afterwards. I said, "The Children's Initiative really was something great under your leadership." He was the speaker at the time. He said, "Hey, I just announced it, got out of the way, and the women did it." I think there are many things that women cover and look after that maybe could be lost in the shuffle and in the zoom without some critical eye and that life experience that brings us forward.

JW: So you would say that the increased numbers of women in the legislature have been helpful.

LO: I think so. I think that helps with bringing perspectives forward and perspectives raised. Again, I know that when we were talking about women's issues, I feel that women are certainly voices that need to be heard and many times are the ones that will work towards a solution rather than a situation.

JW: Well, this has been fun.

LO: Yes, it's been great.

JW: Senator, thank you.

LO: You bet.

JW: I'm Joan Wagnon with Senator Lana Oleen for the Kansas Oral History Project.

LO: Thank you.

[End of File]

