

INTERVIEW OF PAMELA JOHNSON BETTS BY ERIC SEXTON MARCH 25, 2022
KANSAS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Eric Sexton: Today is March 25, 2022. I'm Eric Sexton, Government Affairs Consultant for Foulston Siefkin Law Firm, formerly of Wichita State University. With me is former Representative David Heinemann who is our videographer for today. We are in the State Capitol to conduct this interview as part of the Kansas Oral History Project, which is a collection examining the diversity of voices active in public policy making in the last quarter of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century. In these interviews, we learn about policy development through the eyes of those who are directly involved.

Today I'm honored to interview Pamela Johnson Betts who served the state government in a number of capacities, primarily administrative that were at critical points in our state history. Pamela served as the Secretary of Aging during the Sebelius administration. I hope I have that right.

Pamela Johnson Betts: Right.

ES: And following her service, and she did that service after she had served as the Executive Director of the Kansas African American Affairs Commission. But she's done many more things than that, and you'll hear from her about all of those things as we proceed. Thank you for agreeing to do our interview today. Pamela, can you please introduce yourself and let us know why you are doing this interview today?

PJB: Sure. First of all, thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about government and from my eyesight, my perch, it's unusual since I've been gone from state government a while. So this is an honor to be selected as one of the ones that could give a viewpoint.

As you indicated, I'm Pamela Johnson Betts. I'm a fifth-generation Kansan. I am a native Topekan. I am the only child of Leslie and Charles Johnson. I'm a mother of three. I'm a graduate of Washburn University and Kansas University. One of the things that I also had the pleasure of being involved in is attended Washington Elementary School, which was noted in the landmark *Brown v. Board*. The other flip side of that, I also was one of the few African Americans that attended parochial school, Topeka Lutheran School.

So I've been around for a little while. I did community service for about fifty years, then had a government career that spanned about that same amount of time. It is an honor honestly to be able to talk about some of those years with different administrations. I've been fortunate enough to serve in three different [governor's] administrations—the first, Joan Finney; and then Bill Graves; and finally with Kathleen Sebelius.

I have been a trailblazer in some areas, a couple anyway, first African American school social worker hired by Topeka public school district which is the district that I graduated from. And just recently was named a Woman of Influence with the Greater Topeka Partnership. Prior to that, one that I really adored was being named Businesswoman of the Year by ABWA [American Business Women's Association]. So I've been around a little while.

ES: Yes. That's awesome. We'll talk more about that. And now for our commercial break, the Kansas Oral History Project is a not-for-profit corporation created to collect oral histories of

Kansans who are involved in shaping and implementing public policy. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history reviews are accessible through the Kansas Historical Society as well as the State Library of Kansas and on our website, kansasoralhistory.org. Funding for this project is provided by volunteers, individual donors, and Humanities Kansas, a not-for-profit cultural organization connecting communities with history, traditions, and ideas to strengthen civic life, which is what we're all about today.

With that, I just want to jump in and get started. You started telling us about yourself, but tell us a little bit about your history and your educational background and then maybe begin to think about how did that affect you to get to start to think about public life?

PJB: Sure. As indicated, the history has been that I was born and raised in Topeka, Kansas. That many people don't often understand. They often say, "Why are you still in Topeka?" and it's because Topeka is a wonderful place to live, that offered some opportunity.

So when I graduated from the University of Kansas, I knew that I wanted to go into public service because my passion has always been for advocacy, and I joke that my career in state government took it from cradle to grave because I've been able to be involved in child care licensing and ended up my career in government as the Secretary of the Kansas Department on Aging. So a lot of things going on there.

I'm going to be honest though. One of the other reasons why I got involved in public service in government is that when I came along I really had a desire to be a news anchor. I wanted to be involved in communications in some way, and that just wasn't practical in my day and certainly was not encouraged by family, "You've got to find something else." So state government was a way that allowed me to invest in making a difference in our community.

ES: That's awesome. I want to again still tie back to your history because I did a little bit of homework. You had an intersection in your childhood life with the actual Brown v. Board of Education history. Tell us a little bit about that, and then what did it mean for you now, and looking back, what did it mean for you during that time.

PJB: Sure. With the Brown v. Board involvement, it was just two years ago that people started to recognize that we had a connection. I knew that I went to Washington Elementary School. I knew that my best friend was Cheryl Brown Henderson, but I can tell you, the daughter of Oliver Brown. I can tell you that the Brown family never talked about that. So I didn't discover that my best friend, her family were the Brown v. Board of Education case until I went away to college my first year and was studying in a history class and saw the picture of her sister, the little one in the coat, and I'm just amazed it's like not talked about. So even though we grew up here and this is where that landmark case was, the etiology of that, it was not something that we talked about.

But I think that recognizing the impact that was made on the world in terms of civil rights and diversity that it got me thinking in terms of, I really wanted to be a part of that. So I started thinking about advocacy. But that was after I ran to my dorm and called Cheryl Brown Henderson and said, "Cheryl, you guys never talked about this. Why?" And it was something that somehow our community did not celebrate until recently, and I'm not sure exactly why, but I

know that I was part of ,with Cheryl, working to make sure that we saved that building, the Monroe School, because it was filled with books and ready at any time to be either torn down or continue to be a warehouse.

ES: Right.

PJB: That was the beginning of two young black women going into the community and trying to get support to keep the building. We weren't very successful in the beginning, but right now, there sits a Brown v. Board park.¹

ES: Absolutely. That's right. Would you say that that experience there was your first recollection of advocacy, policy, how do I engage in politics?

PJB: I would absolutely say that that was the clarion call that helped me determine that it was going to be something that I wanted to do. Certainly there's been other times prior to that, I have to admit as an African American woman, you don't go through life without having something that hits you in the face that makes you realize, "I need to advocate for that. I want to be involved in making a policy that makes things different, that recognizes and sees me, that equalizes that playing field a little bit."

ES: I'm going to follow up real quickly. You mentioned something, a policy. What was that? I'm just curious now. What was again, was it the school? Was there something before that where you go, "We have to engage to make this happen"?

PJB: Oh, there are a number of things. I think it actually happened for me in seventh grade when I went to, I was the only African American in my class. I had relatives, two other African Americans were in the school building. But in seventh grade, I experienced something that was pretty traumatic, and that was that my White teacher at the time slapped me. He felt that I was too strong and that I guided and used my leadership skills to undermine him, I guess was the thing.

The interesting thing is my dad has never touched me. And just as this gentleman hit me, my mother came up the stairs and pulled open the doors. So she was able to see the aftermath right when it happened.

I went home and stayed for about a week. It was like, "I don't want to go to that school anymore." And my mom said, "You will go back. We dust ourselves off. We show them that we're going to continue the path." And I said then, "Mom, we need to sue him. Let's just sue them right now because we need to change something," and she said, "We absolutely won't be suing anybody. You absolutely will go back, and when you go back, you're going to walk with dignity with your head held high."

So I think probably that at twelve—

¹ The Brown v Board of Education National Historic Site is operated by the National Park Service. To learn more, visit the website at <https://www.nps.gov/brvb/index.htm>

ES: Thank you for sharing that.

PJB: It was a thing that I knew that life wasn't fair, that even if I had then leadership and a direction that somebody didn't like, that I had a right to not be slapped. So we can start there, and then it's just carried on quite honestly.

ES: Again one of my chief questions here is "What was the moment that inspired you?" and you just hit on it. I think that's really important for our listeners to hear those experiences because many of them have had those experiences. Did they listen to them or not? We want to encourage them to listen to those things.

Let me ask you this though. Tell me about the first call from a governor asking you to serve. What was that like?

PJB: Before you get that call, there is little rumblings in the community. So I had kind of been hearing. I was like, "No, that's not going to happen. I can't even believe it." So while there was something in the back of the head that said, "Something's brewing," I was still in denial. When the actual call came, at least from Governor Sebelius, it was pretty shocking. And it came on a bad day for me because I was at the Kansas African American Affairs Commission, and they were moving us from 14th and Topeka Boulevard to this ramshackle of a place on 6th Street that I wasn't happy about, but you don't have choices at that time.

So because we were moving, I had on, uncharacteristic for me, jeans, my then-husband's old socks, and I looked terrible. So my secretary said, "The Governor's Office is on the phone." I was like, "No!" "Yes." I think it was actually Joyce Allegrucci, but I'm not sure who called. It was Joyce. She said, "The Governor wants to see you today," and I'm like, "Can we do it tomorrow?" and she said no, I needed to come today. She goes, "And if you could be here in just a little bit," and I said, "Honestly, I've got on socks." She's like, "Come, she won't care."

ES: Oh, my gosh.

PJB: For me, I wasn't even that excited that I was being offered a position. I was more upset and demoralized that I was going to look so horrible. And then I go, and I walk in, and Governor Sebelius in her graciousness, looked and smiled, and then she said, "Uncomfortable for you, isn't it?" and I said, "Oh, absolutely." I don't want to be here. I hardly heard what she said. But I think if you get it in the right moment, it's nothing but excitement, glory, and then kind of a "Am I going to be able to do this?" I did have that beginning thought but then recognizing that I've been through so many trials and tribulations, this was going to be okay, too.

ES: But the special part is that it doesn't always come in a lightning bolt, wrapped up in a pretty bow. It comes in a pair of socks and jeans. But when the call comes, the call comes.

PJB: Yes. I was ready to serve. I knew that. I just wanted to put my best foot forward and wasn't able to do that. But thank god I'd known Governor Sebelius for a long time. So she'd seen me in better days and knew that I could clean up if necessary.

ES: Right. You had also served under Joan Finney.

PJB: I did.

ES: How were those two administrations different? Again, from the same party, how were they different leadership styles? How did you learn or learn, whichever way you want to put that?

PJB: Governor Finney was just one of those very open, easy, knew no stranger kind of people. So when you went out in a crowd with her, she knew everybody's name, and I was thinking, "How does she know that?" She'd write little things on a piece of paper, and I'm sure for me those pieces of paper would have gotten lost. But somehow that seemed to be a system for her that worked. Because you could go back like seven months later, she still was able to identify, "Eric, how are you?" and did the glad hand kind of a thing.

Her style that was different from Governor Sebelius, not just their demeanors and style, Governor Sebelius was more regal. I'm going to use the word "aloof" but I mean it in a good way because she truly was a people person, too, and very engaging. But when we were out with community, there was a total difference in terms—she knew people, but my observation is she tended to nod at people. She was not one that would go up and glad-hand. She did that very easily, but that wasn't her natural style.

I think the other piece of it is, Governor Sebelius was much more, and again I use this word meaning no, not pejorative in any way towards Governor Finney, but she actually had cabinet meetings. We did things that, and she had retreats so that we all got to know each other a little bit better. The people that were part of her administration, there was interaction.

Governor Finney at the time had her daughter, which was unusual if you recall—

ES: Yes, I do.

PJB: Mary Holladay was her Chief of Staff. So a lot of the information that we got or things that were to be done came through Mary Holladay. After a while, you understood that Mary spoke for the Governor.

I think the other thing that was different about the two administrations and maybe not leadership style but maybe because Governor Finney had Spencer, her husband, with her at almost every step of the way, and I have to tell you, Spencer and I became good buddies. We would sit in the corner. I think at some point they started taking me because I was Spencer's buddy.

Back to policy, I think that Governor Sebelius planned out almost, she would road map where she wanted things to go within each agency. One of the things she said to all of us early on for seasoned people that had been involved in politics and understood the lay of the land better than me, I was a newbie, at one of the retreats, she said to all of us, "If but not for me, you would not be here. So please understand that things that are going to happen good in your agencies, I get that message. The other times, you're going to handle things that occur within your organization."

That was the right call. It was the right message. But for me as a novice, it was like, “Whoa! What have I gotten myself into?” But certainly that was a learning experience. I understand then that in this administration, the word that came out was always the company line, as it should be. She was not going to be surprised. If you were the unlucky Secretary that surprised her, you would be taken to the wood shed. I never had to go.

ES: Congratulations.

PJB: I know. Thank you. I’ve certainly talked to some of my fellow Secretaries that had. I think the other piece of it was that because she ran her ship, she knew what was going on and could help mold policy for the state that was in the best interest of Kansas.

ES: That’s awesome. In all of your service in administrations, forgive me, please remind me, were you the lone minority in most of those administrations, or at least at the senior level? I was just curious. What additional role and responsibility did that put upon you or was put upon you? Does that make sense?

PJB: It does. In the Finney administration, I served in two capacities. One was as a special assistant to Dr. Azzie Young who was the Secretary of Kansas Department of Health and Environment. Once Dr. Young left, then Dr. Robert Harder took over that position. Under Dr. Robert Harder, I was Special Assistant. I played a dual role, if you will, under Dr. Young, as I was Director of the Office of Government and Community Relations. So many times my job was to come to give testimony at the legislature.

One of the things I’m proud about at Kansas Department of Health and Environment that I think impacted policy maybe was that we had a health office. In that health office, I was instrumental in making sure and helping to ensure that health information and pamphlets were done in Spanish. So I recognized early on, again my desire for diversity and inclusion, that we wanted people to get health messages in all segments of our population because if we take care of one, then we enhance and help others.

When Dr. Young left, I got a call from Mary Holladay who said, “Pam, Mom wants you to stay” because I had come under Dr. Young quite honestly as her Special Assistant, and I did. I was encouraged by that. But I can tell you that it was a turbulent time. So I wanted to feel honored and say that I was probably asked to stay because I did a good job, but a piece of me understood that that too might be politics, because if you get rid of an African-American Secretary, then it doesn’t look good if you get rid of both of them at the same time.

Dr. Harder came in. I was given more responsibilities. One of those was to make sure that we did a Governor’s Child Health Fair, the first time ever. [Displays poster.] Again, not understanding, and I’m sorry it’s not in great shape, but he wanted to make sure that people understood that health for children was very important. Dr. Young had started that, I’m going to say.

ES: Right.

PJB: And under her, we did a program, Be Wise, Immunize because what we hoped to do policy-wise was to increase the immunization rate for children in Kansas. We worked with the World Health Organization.

ES: Say that again please?

PJB: To increase the immunization rate. It's just the same. We've come full circle, haven't we?

ES: Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. Proceed, yes.

PJB: So we did that. The Governor's Child Health Fair was an extension of that. We were able to put pamphlets and information out. We were trying to make sure that parents understood how important immunizations were. We were fortunate because at that time there wasn't this pushback that you see now in terms of immunizations. Public health really was public health back in those days. We understood what was best for our population and were able to follow science and make the right decisions. I don't know if we would be able to do "Be Wise Immunize" right now. Certainly that was the beginning of a good thing in policy.

What else did you ask me? I'm sorry.

ES: No, it's fine. Again, following up on that is the notion of the policies that you were engaged in and the role that you played as an African American cabinet or senior level person, how did that—again, you were talking about the role that during the Finney administration-- how did that evolve to other times that you were serving other administrations?

PJB: If I follow your line of questioning, I think what is different or what I was able to bring to the table in terms of understanding, I brought a different perspective, quite honestly. At the time when we did immunization, what I understood is that if you're working with a disenfranchised population, some of our messages are going to have to be different, and certainly Dr. Young understood that, too.

But I can't say that the majority of the agency was concerned about that. So when you have to bring people along, sometimes that's not a popular position to be in. I can tell you, there's little micro aggressions that occur that you have to continue to work around. I remember Dr. Young and I coming out of a meeting, and I heard a gentleman that was a report of hers say, "Oh, here comes the Black bookends, those two bookends."

I said to Dr. Young as we got down the hall, "Did you hear that?" She said, "I did." Even though you hear that and you understand that people aren't on your team, you recognize that you are on the Governor's team, and you have a job to do whether or not you're hearing little side conversations.

Does it affect you? I think personally, yes, it does, but it also for me was I think strengthening. It made me more resolved that we were going to implement policy and do the Governor's bidding despite what was going on there.

I think in terms of, when I was in the Sebelius administration, I actually had moved up to become the head of the agency, being able to impact policy there, one of the things that I was able to do was to bring in a geriatrician. His name was Bill Thomas. And we brought the first greenhouse concept in greenhouses to Kansas.

And if people aren't familiar with that, the greenhouse concept was that we understood that seniors didn't want to live in nursing facilities. So greenhouse was a microcosm, if you will, of a family. They were little houses that had five bedrooms. You had a communal place that you could eat your meals. But each bedroom had a doorbell in there. So people had to knock before they went in. We allowed seniors to be more in control of what was occurring in their lives. I read just a couple of months ago that this concept is still in force across the nation, and in fact has been credited with significantly reducing COVID infection or hospitalization for seniors. So we did a good thing back there.

ES: That's awesome.

PJB: That, too, was interesting because I think from my perspective as the Secretary of the Kansas Department on Aging, I'd go out and talk to people, and I'd go to different homes, and I ran into seniors that were seniors of color. They said, "We don't like this food. We, of course, don't want to be here." Historically, African Americans haven't wanted to be placed in nursing facilities.

So hearing that, we were able to come back and start talking about how do you make a facility not just homelike but their home. When we've got seniors of color that aren't served dishes that they're familiar with, that doesn't feel like home. So being able to use that bully pulpit to increase awareness and hopefully raise standards of quality.

ES: In that regard, having that different perspective in that role, did you find that there were—again, you talked about those micro aggressions and things, even in that role when you are the—my daddy taught me that you're the It person.

PJB: Oh, yes.

ES: When you're the It person. But still you had folks—I think our listeners would really engage in kind of how do you kind of work through that without dropping what I used to tell some of my staff "the velvet hammer" on somebody because you want them to come along because being right is better than doing right. How did you work through that?

PJB: Fortunately for me, probably my second year into being a special assistant at Kansas Department of Health, I had the pleasure of meeting the first African American Surgeon General, Joycelyn Elders. I had met her, and then when I became Secretary of Aging, we were at a conference together in Washington, and she said, "Secretary, come to my room tonight. Let's talk."

So I went in. She kicked off her shoes and sat on the couch. She said to me, “You know, as an African American leader, you’ve got to be ready every morning when you wake up to fight that bear.” And I thought, “Fight the bear. Literally that’s exactly what we do.”

You can’t be what you can’t see. So she was the role model for me that began to help me understand that we have a different role to play in some of these agencies. So when I would go out to visit nursing facilities across the state, oftentimes I would take Marty [Kennedy] who was the budget guy, but he would ride with me. We’d go out and inevitably, we’d walk in, and there hadn’t been a nursing facility director that had ever seen me, and they would lean over to shake the hand of my budget director and say, “Secretary,” and he would say, “No. She is.” So then we all had to go through that awkward moment and act like that didn’t happen.

So a lot of it you ignore. You learn to choose your battles when that’s important. And you get a little sharper witted. I would say that I was asked to go to Hays State and speak one evening. I walked in, and there was a senator from there and a lot of people standing around. They greeted me, of course. The senator’s wife turned to me, and she said, “Oh. Are you the entertainment for the evening?”

ES: Oh, my.

PJB: There was this pregnant pause. Everyone’s looking. I said, “Don’t sing, don’t dance,” and walked away. One of the ones later, if I see him to this day, he says, “Don’t sing, don’t dance.” He had called me that Monday when we got back and he said, “That was brilliant.” He said, “I can’t even imagine how you handled that and came up with that so quickly.”

I thought, “You know, you have to consider the source.” Probably in Hays at that time, they hadn’t seen that many African Americans. There probably was somebody that had been called to sing or to—but ignorance is not bliss in those situations. Does it do damage? They certainly can. But you have to determine your own destiny. And you’re not going to let others’ ignorance be something that reflects on you.

And worse. I’ve been in bigger crowds as the Secretary of Aging. You always greet the little seniors, the little old ladies that can’t—they’re just so sweet. You put your hand out. In front of this crowd, one of the ladies said to me, actually she turned to the person next to her and said, “I’m not shaking that nigger’s hand.”

And so again, you put on that mask. You continue what you were to do there. My duty that day was to help with the open house, a new facility, and I did that. I think I did it with grace, aplomb and dignity. But do I remember that story twenty years later? Absolutely. It stands out in my mind.

So those things don’t ever go away, but they help again shape you into being strong. I hesitate to use that word because I think that throughout history, our nation has considered African American women strong, to be strong, or to be angry, or to be whatever.

ES: Yes.

PJB: So I don't want to perpetuate that myth because while we can do the job, and I have felt many times that I have to do it with less support, through more aggression than most employees do. But the strength is what helps you get through to the next piece of it and again, knowing yourself, which Mother had taught me to do early on. So it's all part of the job. You understand that.

ES: Absolutely. Let me ask you because again I'll reflect to my experience and my father's experience because he experienced some of the same things in different ways, but can you think of—I'd like for you to share one time where you saw someone have that epiphany that wasn't that older individual in your policy role that goes, you need to step back, and you go, "There's a reason why I'm doing this because of that experience."

PJB: I'm not sure. Help me again.

ES: That you had the older lady that chose not to shake your hand. Had you ever had an experience where you go, "This is why," the exact opposite of that experience that you didn't expect to happen that you go, "This is why I do what I do."

PJB: I did. Did you see that aha moment?

ES: Did that help?

PJB: It does. I hope this story that I'm about to tell actually fits, and it was that I had—my very best girlfriend's dad was in a nursing facility. He didn't hardly know anybody. I was the hands-on kind of a Secretary. I wanted to get out there. I wanted to go to facilities. I sometimes would get up early in the morning and go on a survey inspection with some of my staff because I wanted to know what they did. So often you heard as the Secretary from legislators that many of them that own nursing facilities would say that surveyors are too hard. They're too nitpicky. They do this. They do that.

Well, my position was, having come from a regulatory background, having done child care licensing, that I know oftentimes people complain because they just don't want to do a particular thing, and I wanted to be able to be that Secretary that said, "Oh, no, I study and I watch them. I observe. I personally know that we're going by the books." CMS requires us to do certain things, and whether we like it or not, we do it.

So I went on this survey, and as I was walking through the facility, my—I didn't know he was there. I really didn't. I'm walking through, and I'm like, "There's Mr. Lovejoy." He had dementia. He didn't know. Somehow he recognized, he couldn't call my name, but he was just so pleased and thrilled that I was there. So that for me was heartwarming, but more importantly, I had no idea what was going on.

About two weeks later, my girlfriend, she lives in Texas so we hadn't been in communication. She called and she said, "Oh, my gosh, I want to thank you," and I said, "For what?" And she said, "You visited Dad's facility." She said, "It's so much better now." She said, "I think Dad

knew you. He started talking about you. He couldn't possibly have known you." I said, "I did see some recognition."

So that to me is even though I may be seen as a negative to some, I was able to do good on the other hand.

ES: That's a great story. Let me ask you this, looking back on all of your years and great service to our state, what are you most proud of?

PJB: I think there are a couple, and I kind of talked about it. To be able to have initiated the Governor's Child Health Fair, which was a statewide event that helped young moms and dads understand the importance of immunizations was one of the, I would say, bellringers for me.

And then more recently in the Sebelius administration, when I first got that job, I don't know if you'll even remember, but at the time, the surveyors that did nursing facility inspections were housed with the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

ES: Correct.

PJB: When I came on board, we were merging. So that meant that thirty employees from Health and Environment were going to come over.

ES: Because you were working on a restructuring for that agency as I remember.

PJB: Absolutely. Absolutely did. And one of my tasks the second week I was there was to let twenty employees go. You can imagine, that was not a popular decision. First of all, people weren't really happy to see me come because they loved their old Secretary. She was a friend to many, so I was already facing that mountain.

ES: Right.

PJB: I then knew that I had to go in and tell employees that they weren't going to have positions. And I am most proud that I was able to do that. I remember Secretary [Janet] Schalansky who was head of SRS [Social and Rehabilitation Services] at the time called me and she said, "How on earth did you do that without hitting the paper?" And it was like, you know, I did what I would want done to me. I treated these individuals with dignity. I said to them, "This is something that has to happen, but for every one of you that really want a job, I'm going to work and do my absolute best to see if we can't find you one."

So we had sessions. There were like three naysayers, "Oh, I've heard this before. This administration stinks. You guys are just all out for yourself." But every one of them that hung in there with me, we were able to place them in jobs. So that's one of the things that I'm most proud of.

ES: That is so cool. That is good. Now let me ask, in all of your experiences, and again I love the way you put this in the beginning, from cradle to grave, what across all of those experiences, what were two things that were universal in your service in all of those experiences?

PJB: I think the passion for what I was doing, whether it was children or whether it was seniors, the advocacy stance that I took in each one. I think the ability to go out and engage with whatever population it was, whether it was foster parents for children, whether it was nursing home facility residence, and my emphasis was always on that little guy because what I found in public service is the big guys, they get it. They know how to navigate a system for their best interests, but oftentimes the disenfranchised, whether it be elderly or again children that are living in foster care through no circumstance of their own, living with a foster parent that didn't know how to do black hair care. So they're going to school looking horrible. Or seniors that were saying to me, "I don't want to eat this kind of food. I don't want to be here." Being able to understand, listen with that third ear and then to try to work through the system to find ways to modify or enhance so that the segment that felt disenfranchised was pulled in and felt a part of and seen, heard, and recognized.

ES: That's awesome, good. Following up on that, when you now run into folks today, what do you tell them if they show an interest in pursuing public service?

PJB: It's one of the best decisions I probably made in terms of being able to understand systems. So I honestly don't encourage people one way or the other. If they ask, I would say, "Here are some of the pluses." And the pluses are, at least when I was part of it is, steady employment, more likely than not, there is opportunity for promotion. Some agencies, there are great people. Some agencies, there are not, but the holistic look of it is it's kind of a good thing because you're able to identify someplace in state government that you want to move to.

I don't know. It's hard. I am not one that gives advice. If they ask, I would say that. I think public service, and it doesn't have to be state government, but public service from my perspective, it's the rent that we pay for living on this earth, somebody said that. It truly is. That we're able to make something a little bit better than we found it, that if you really get involved and understand systems, you can address policies that can make for change, not always, but even if you're not able to move big mountains, most times you're able to do little things within an agency, even if it's no more than hair care, which for some people, that was a big deal.

So I would say public service truly is a calling, not for everybody. But if you get involved in it, you're going to be satisfied. You can find a way to be gratified by doing public service.

ES: Thank you for sharing. Again, I'd like to kind of wrap us up in a more philosophical question of in sort of the same vein of this notion of having seen the world of politics today and what's going on today as compared to all the way back to when you were twelve years old and that defining moment for you, what would you say to folks that would be another clarion call for where we need to be looking forward to as we go forward in that context of your life?

PJB: I would say that now is the time that we have to be even more diligent than we were before, that when I look out and see the climate of our country and our state, I'm worried, and that if we

don't raise voices and get ourselves engaged and involved, we're going to live in a country, a world, and work in an environment that none of us are happy with.

Some of the decisions that are being made today just seem absolutely bizarre, opposed to everything that I understood about life in terms of human dignity and respect. We've lost civility. When I look at what's happening with Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, the treatment that's been allowed to happen to this brilliant woman, it is cause for concern. And I wonder at what point we wake up and realize that the movement that seems to be occurring in our nation right now is not one that is based on what I think our nation was meant to be. In terms of being able to have some kind of voice, that's very good, but being able to ramshod, walk over somebody just because you can is not okay. And I hope that at some point we continue to pull our forces together, and we're able to then bring back decency and civility in a nation that I love very much and a state that I love very much.

ES: I think that's a great place for us to wrap up. Thank you so much.

PJB: Thank you.

ES: For giving us your wisdom and time. We so appreciate it.

PJB: It was fun. Thank you.

[End of File]