

Interview with Senator Sandy Praeger by Joan Wagnon, October 18, 2019  
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Joan Wagnon: Good afternoon. Today is October 18, 2019, at 1:00 p.m., and we're in the Senate chambers of the Kansas State House in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Joan Wagnon, former legislator and board member for the Kansas Oral History Project. I'm going to be interviewing Senator Sandy Praeger about her service in the legislature. Mrs. Praeger served one term in the House, three terms in the Senate. She was also mayor of Lawrence and insurance commissioner from 2003 to 2015. You managed to serve thirty years for the public.

Sandy Praeger: No, I never anticipated. In fact, my husband was told when I ran for the City Commission, was talked into running, not to worry that I was going to have a career in politics because when you're on the City Commission, every vote makes at least a fourth of the people mad, and by four votes, you've made them all mad, and you couldn't get elected dog catcher.

JW: Interesting political philosophy.

SP: Yes, interesting. No, I never anticipated, but it was such an honor, every one of the positions, to be able to serve the people of my community and the state.

JW: Well, I think the state benefited tremendously from your leadership. We're going to talk a lot about that, about the policy. First, I need to do a commercial for the Kansas Oral History Project, which is a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and making the interviews accessible to researchers and educators through the Historical Society. Transcriptions are funded by a grant from Humanities Kansas. David Heinemann, a former member of the House and board member of the Oral History Project, is your videographer.

In the early 1990s, two historians from Washburn interviewed almost all of the women legislators. There was a bunch of them at that time, and you were one of those new legislators that was interviewed in '92; I gave you a copy of your interview, and it's a pretty interesting description of how you decided to run. You were rather definite about how you were going to take on that seat. You waited for Jessie.

SP: Jessie Branson, bless her heart. I was encouraged. She was a Democrat from Lawrence and married to a physician as well. I was encouraged to think about running against her. Even though I was a Republican and she was a Democrat, she was a friend, and I thought, "No, I'm not going to do that."

So when she decided not to run again, I was called immediately by then Governor [Mike] Hayden who said I needed to think about it, then late in the day, by [U.S.] Senator [Nancy] Kassebaum. I thought, "Okay. Now who suited you up to do this? You didn't just do this on your own."

JW: Mike.

SP: Mike, yes. Mike did. That was pretty awesome to have that kind of support early on.

JW: But you came in at such a great time in the House. You were one of four or five legislators that constantly crossed back and forth on party lines and voted on what you thought were good policy, and I admired you for that more than you can imagine.

SP: Well, at any given time, we could have as many as eight. I think back to—it was a great group of people to work with. I remember election night, “Good news, bad news,” [Senator] Wint Winter said to me and I said, “Really? What's the bad news?” He said, “Well, first the good news, you've won. The bad news is you're going to be in the minority party.” It was only one of three times at that point that Democrats had controlled [the House of Representatives], and [Speaker] Marvin Barkis was an old high school friend. So we were good buddies, and we did work across party lines to just do the right thing. Those of us who were committed to higher education were part of that group. Those of us that were committed to good social policy were part of that group. So we were supporting the mental health issues and a lot of the Medicaid issues. We had a common theology, I guess you could call it.

JW: Theology is a pretty good word. Tell me a little bit about your district. When you first ran, what was it like?

SP: Lawrence, the House district was—it was pretty heterogeneous, an ethnic mix, liberal-conservative. So it was easy to run more on policy issues than any kind of a political ideology. You know, really, Joan back then, I don't think the party labels were nearly as pervasive in terms of dictating as they are today, which I think is unfortunate. We ran first and foremost to represent the people who were putting us in office. Unfortunately, today that's kind of a novel notion. We've kind of lost that. But in a college town, for sure, higher education was first and foremost. You had to be supportive of the university.

JW: You moved into the Senate rather quickly. Did you get tired of the minority?

SP: You know, those who stayed in the House after having worked so closely with Marvin suffered some consequences.

JW: And Marvin lost.

SP: And Marvin lost.

JW: And the House went back to Republican control.

SP: Yes, and my parents who lived in Miami County still and were friends of the Barkises told me—my mother told me she thought Marvin was going to lose, and I said, “Oh, he's not going to lose. He's the speaker. He's going to be fine.” Well, he did lose.

But Wint Winter came to me. He was our senator and said he wanted to run for attorney general two years hence and suggested that I should run for the Senate. I remember [Senator] Bud Burke stopping and encouraging me, when I was being essentially initiated into being House member, he said, "We're going to get you over to the Senate." I thought, "Really? That's nice."

JW: You ran against a young man who hadn't been there very long in the Senate, did you not? Who did you run against for the Senate seat?

SP: Because Wint left, it was an open seat.

JW: But later, you defeated—

SP: I never had an election against an incumbent.

JW: Really.

SP: Yes, which is kind of unusual. When I ran for the House, Jessie was retiring. When I ran for the Senate, Wint was leaving office to run eventually for attorney general. When I ran for insurance commissioner, it was open.

JW: Because Kathleen [Sebelius] had left.

SP: Because Kathleen had left and was moving on to run for governor, which was nice because, for me, it meant I was always running for the office to talk about what I thought I could do for the office rather than running against somebody to point out the flaws that I thought they might have, which you kind of have to do when you're running against an incumbent. I never had to do that.

JW: Kansas was in a process of great change during those years. We had the rise of the social conservatives. We had changes in districts brought on by reapportionment. We had lots and lots of issues that were out there. How did you experience that change? how did it affect you?

SP: Well, fortunately in Lawrence, the social conservatives weren't as numerous and didn't have as much of a voice as they did in other parts of the state. It still being in office, especially in the Senate, as they began their ascendancy, it made things a little bit more difficult. I never had to—my political beliefs didn't change because of their rising voice because I was from a community like Lawrence, which remained pretty open to liberal ideas and made it much easier.

JW: Did you get any pushback from your constituents because you were a Republican? They'd been used to voting for Democrats for years.

SP: Absolutely. I was the only kind of Republican they were going to vote for, somebody who shared their ideas and ideals. I did get pushback as the Republican conservatives became more a part of the Lawrence landscape. I got pushback from them because I wasn't conservative enough. I never felt the pushback from the voters of Lawrence.

JW: I want to talk about your committees. One of the things that always amazes me is how many committees people in the Senate serve on. So when you went that first time, you were on Public Health and Welfare, Children and Families, Federal and State that first time, and then you added Financial Institutions and Insurance in 1997 through 2000. Were you thinking then that you had your eye on that insurance commissioner spot?

SP: No.

JW: Or did you just wander into Insurance and Financial Institutions?

SP: It was the insurance side of it. [Senator] Don Steffes, when he was the chair of it—[Senator] Dick Bond was the chair before Don, and I think they felt that my chairing the Health Committee would be helpful because so many of the issues in Health related to Health Insurance. With Don especially, he said, "I want you to take care of—you'll take care of managing all the insurance bills that come here, and I'll do the financial institutions, the banking side." I think it was the background in Health and being on the health committee that pushed me in that direction.

JW: Interesting. Okay. At some point, they put you on the Tax Committee, so you got to work with Senator [Audrey] Langworthy.

SP: I did. She was a great chair of the Tax Committee.

JW: She was a good chair.

SP: I remember Star Bonds. That was one of the issues that dealt with. And the big issue was finding a way to use those to develop the racetrack and all of the [Legends Shopping Center]—which now is the #1 tax revenue generator for the State of Kansas. I think at the time it was in a—Wyandotte County was struggling financially. People and businesses were moving away from Wyandotte County, with Johnson County just to the south. When we did a survey of the uninsured in Kansas, there were two areas that had the highest uninsured rates—far southwest Kansas, Liberal, Garden City, that area, and Wyandotte County was second.

The most insured place in the state was Johnson County, just to the south. There were a lot of inequities in Wyandotte County. I think, with Audrey's leadership, there were a lot of good things that happened.

JW: How did you get started in health policy? Did they put you on that committee because you were a doctor's wife or because you asked for it or because you wanted to learn more about health policy? How did that happen?

SP: You know, I remember talking to the leadership and saying, "Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I naturally gravitate to health issues. So could I be on Ways and Means?" They said, "Well, actually you'll get to a chair a committee your very first year in the Senate. It will be the Health Committee." And part of it I think was being a woman and being married to a physician, like somehow I was going to be able to practice medicine without a license. But I loved it. It's the best thing. It was really good.

JW: It was certainly kind of the lynchpin of your career as you moved forward.

SP: It was. That's what I focused on even as insurance commissioner. Of course, that was at a time, we had Barack Obama as president, and I say with a wistful sigh, he was going to get something done on health insurance. He needed insurance regulators around the country to help with that. So it was a great opportunity to be involved in a really important national debate.

JW: Then you distinguished yourself. I'm going to go into that a little bit later. You served one or two terms as a commissioner for the—

SP: National Association of Insurance Commissioners. We like to say we were a national system of state-based regulation because insurance is regulated at the state level, but we worked together collaboratively to do things to try to create uniformity where we could. I was an officer for NAIC for four years, and on the executive committee for really most of my tenure after the first couple of years. I was president of the NAIC in 2008.

JW: That's what I'm remembering, yes.

SP: Which was the big year. AIG was always referenced. They were taken over by the superintendent of insurance in the State of New York. It was always "AIG, the world's largest insurance company." We had to frequently tell people, "No, they're not." A third of their business was insurance. That part was safe because of state regulation, but the rest of it was really struggling, to say the least, because of mortgage-backed securities. It was a mess.

JW: And the whole economy went to hell in a handbasket that year anyway.

SP: I know. It was scary. It was through good leadership at the federal level that we didn't go into a Depression, not just a recession. The federal government bailed out the auto industry. Had they not, I think we would have been in a Depression.

JW: I want to go back to those early years. You worked with two governors while you were in the legislature, Joan Finney and Bill Graves. Some of the legislative sessions stood out because

of their productivity. '91 through '94 come to mind because that was school finance, tax reform, children's initiatives, and there was the death penalty somewhere in the middle of that.

SP: There was. I still remember that discussion, that debate. I was planning to speak on the floor of the Senate, when [Senator] Sherman Jones, a wonderful man, a Democrat from Wyandotte County, an African American, spoke up and made just an eloquent statement about how the death penalty is disproportionately imposed on people of color. I thought, "I can't add anything to that discussion." That was a very poignant moment. We lost on a 20-20 vote, as I recall.

JW: We interviewed Janis Lee and Lana Oleen earlier this week. They recalled that same debate and Sherman Jones's speech on the floor as standing out.

SP: It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it. I have another wonderful memory of Sherman. He was the ranking minority on the Health Committee, and I remember asking—I don't remember the bill, but it was something he had closely watched and been a part of the conversation. So I asked if he would like to carry the bill on the floor of the Senate, which didn't happen very often for a Democrat. It was reserved for the chairs, and we were all Republican. He did, and he did a great job. Again, I wish we had more of that bipartisanship.

JW: It certainly would make things work better. Do you want to comment at all on the interaction of the governor's office, with Finney or Graves on any of those issues?

SP: I remember the school finance issue and talking with Governor Finney. Eventually I think we got some good things done. It was sometimes hard to bridge that gap because the governor's office and—she tried I think very hard to be a part of the discussion, but we had to work pretty hard to get our viewpoints across.

JW: She had some definite ideas, but she wasn't necessarily a policy-oriented person.

SP: Right. The school finance issue was important. I remember that debate as much as any of them. The Children's Initiative Committee, you and I served together.

JW: Yes, we worked on that.

SP: I think that fund still exists, the Children's Fund. It started, we put the tobacco settlement money into that fund, but it was a way of pulling kids' initiatives out of various funding bills and putting it into one location.

JW: We had a blueprint for how we needed to take better care of kids, and when I hear the foster care debates that we're having now, I see that somewhere along the way, we lost the blueprint.

SP: Yes, we lost our way. I still remember you coming into our meetings. You'd been up half the night, typing up the notes and recommendations. I was so impressed with your work ethic. I didn't know how you did it. You did explain that sometimes it was a labor of love.

JW: That's what it was.

SP: Sitting there.

JW: Yes, and a bit of compulsion. By 1995, politics and issues shifted substantially in part due to the election of the social conservatives. Tim Shallenburger was speaker of the House, and Bud Burke had become president of the Senate. The press reported many issues were debated, but few were passed. That's a marked change from those years before. Abortion, the extension of the State Lottery, tax relief, and particularly car taxes were central but unresolved issues. Governor Graves created a Tax Reform Taskforce to sort all of that out and by the end of '96, they finally started passing a few bills including reauthorizing the thirty-five mill levy for schools. Do you remember that session? Was it particularly difficult?

SP: I don't remember much about it being difficult. I do remember lots of discussion, lots of debate, and some rancor among various—not always Republican-Democrat as much as urban-rural, which made it tough to deal with.

JW: Were there any of those issues that you got involved in? Were you still focusing in on health?

SP: I was really more focused on health. The Children's Health Insurance Plan had passed in Congress, and states then were having to figure ways to implement in our states. I devoted a lot of time to that issue, both in Kansas and being part of a couple of committees at the national level.

JW: In 1998, Senator Dick Bond, who's now president of the Senate, says, "Abortion politics tied the legislature in knots." We interviewed him. He was a great interview.

SP: I'm sure.

JW: But the legislature also passed a record tax cut of 247 million by dropping the state mill levy down to twenty mills. By 1999, they're again calling the session "historic." You got the Transportation Plan, two-year funding of schools including more state-based aid, and a governance structure for higher education. Did you play on any of those issues?

SP: Certainly I wasn't on any of the conference committees. Education in general was so important in Lawrence in my district, I certainly weighed in when I could. Senator Bond did a great job of shepherding those issues through the legislature, and Audrey on the Tax Committee. They were very contentious. This was not easy. It required a lot of strong leadership at the top.

JW: Did you get involved in any of the financing? I'm looking at the renovation of this chamber and how magnificent that was. That's probably Dick Bond's greatest contribution.

SP: And Governor Graves. He took a lot of heat and ended up spending more than anticipated partly because of the structure. Had we not done the renovation, this building was on crumbling foundations. I think of what we have today. It was worth every dollar spent, but it required just being very focused and not letting the opposition detract from the important goal. Our leadership set a goal that this was something that was important. It's the people's House for the State of Kansas, and it was going to live into perpetuity. We have a great deal to thank them for sticking by their guns because it was not easy.

JW: Did you ever think about running for a leadership position?

SP: I did have the opportunity to serve as the vice president of the Senate.

JW: I'm sorry. I didn't pick that up.

SP: [Senator] Janice Hardenburger was going to run. We became very good friends. I drove out to see her several times in Haddam, where she was from. She encouraged me. She knew she was probably not going to make it. She had a very invasive cancer, and she decided she was not going to go through chemo and radiation. She wanted to enjoy her family as much as she could without having to suffer through all of those treatments, and they told her probably they wouldn't be successful anyway.

She encouraged me to step in and run for the position of Senate vice president. It was really an honor to get to preside over the Senate. Dave Kerr was the Senate president then. I think then—I don't recall even having any opposition. I think folks decided if Janice wanted me to do it, that was good enough for them. They were just not going to say anything.

That was really a great honor. I enjoyed the protocol and the Robert's Rules of Order and the traditions involved in that.

JW: So here comes 2003, and you are out the door, on your way to that wonderful office building for the insurance office.

SP: A beautiful historic building.

JW: Do you want to tell me a little bit about that campaign?

SP: Well, that was very interesting because Kathleen was running for governor.

JW: Sebelius.



SP: Sebelius, and [House minority leader] Jim Garner was running for insurance commissioner.

JW: I'd forgotten that.

SP: Yes. He relied heavily on Kathleen's, the way Kathleen had run the department, and I inherited a lawsuit—it wasn't a lawsuit. It was a decision that the department had made about whether Blue Cross was going to get sold to Anthem, and it didn't get resolved until I took office.

So Jim, I still remember some of the ads he ran with the funeral dirge in the background saying that if I took office, it would be the kiss of death, that I'd allow this to happen. I had been told if I said anything publicly about what opinion might be, then I would lose the ability to preside over that opinion because I would have already prejudged, and it would have been challenged, and I agreed with that. So I inherited that case, as it were, and we prevailed, and Kathleen's position prevailed. I agreed with her. I wanted to be able to say that publicly.

I felt like when I was running for the office, I had two opponents. I had Jim Garner, but I also had Kathleen because of Jim using her position especially on the Blue Cross issue. It was fine. It all worked out. While she was governor, we had a great working relationship. She left the department in really good shape. She computerized the department—it had not been—and modernized things. I took over a department that had been well run and then worked with her. She knew what the job was, obviously. She'd had it for eight years, and she was very supportive, and we worked well together.

JW: And it was a really good career for you. You served three terms.

SP: Right.

JW: Why did you quit?

SP: Age, as much as anything.

JW: It does catch up with us, doesn't it?

SP: It does. Well, my husband had retired. He'd been retired for a year by the time my term came up. I miss it. I will tell you that. I miss it. It was a fabulous, fabulous job. I joke that to call it a job has never seemed quite adequate because it was more than that. We had so many great opportunities to help the people of Kansas to lead in terms of policy change that we thought was important, and of course, then to be there during the whole debate around the Affordable Care Act and all of that folderol.

JW: And you loved every minute of it.

SP: I did. I loved every minute of it. It was wonderful and great people. We had such a great department. Before I came here today, I had lunch with Karen Ripple who was my former assistant and Linda Sheppard who was head of Accident and Health Licensing Division. I used to introduce her at events as “better than a clone.” A clone just replaces you, and she's better than me. She was a lawyer, and she was great. They're still good friends. We get together about once a month. I've been out of office now four or five years. We made good friends. We were all dedicated. I said, “Our first and foremost responsibility is to the citizens of the State of Kansas, people who buy insurance, and it's not working for them.” So we're there to be the consumer advocate for insurance. We're there also to do the right thing. We don't do any voter ID checks when somebody comes in the door with a problem. We're there to help everybody equally and make sure that their insurance policy is living up to the promise to pay, which is what it is. You buy insurance, and they promise to pay you, if you meet all of the qualifications of the contract. So it was a great opportunity to serve.

JW: I want you just to look backward. As you think about your time in the legislature and in state government, what are you most proud of? I like to think of it as I left some footprints through the statute books, things that we passed that I'm proud of. What about you?

SP: I think most of my taking pride in things that we passed would be related to health and health insurance issue, mental-health parity, for example. In 2001, we were able to change our laws on mental health. People are shocked when I tell them that we had a lifetime limit of \$7,500 for people to get outpatient services for mental health. They just find that amazing. So we got rid of the dollar limits, and we increased the day limits for inpatient. It was very close. The vote was very close, but it was way overdue in terms of the importance.

So being able to focus on things like all of the health-related issues, the Children's Health Insurance Initiative, finding a way to bundle the financing for children's services and to focus on doing what's best for our kids in the state. That was really important. But I loved my twelve years as insurance commissioner and being able to be part of a discussion about a national plan for everyone.

JW: You and I both have had experience of running an agency of state government and being in a policy role inside the legislature. Which is more rewarding?

SP: Well, they're different. Although I think I had an opportunity as insurance commissioner to also help direct policy, and maybe it's because I knew how rewarding that work had been in the Senate, and so if we saw areas in insurance regulation that were lacking, we could come to the legislature and ask for improvements in our laws. To me, that was an important part of the function of the department. I think we're there to regulate, but we're also there to make sure the laws that we're using to regulate are appropriate and do enough. Or if they do too much, to change them to make the marketplace for insurance better. I always said we wanted to find a balance between good regulation and a good marketplace. It's not good for our consumers if we're so restricted from a regulatory standpoint that companies don't want to do business in Kansas.

The policy side of it, I think, both in the Senate and as an insurance commissioner, that's what I enjoyed, helping find that good policy to make things better.

JW: And a little bit, probably I keep hearing you say, about seeing the effect that it has on people.

SP: Yes. I loved traveling around the state. We went around the state a lot with the Affordable Care Act to educate people because I felt like that was part of our responsibility. I can remember, we'd get into meetings, and there was so much misinformation out there. We'd get into meetings, and we'd have—half the group would be people on Medicare. “Well, how is this going to affect my Medicare? I'm really nervous.” “Let me just start the meeting by saying you all can go home. There's nothing in the Affordable Care Act that affects Medicare. Nothing in Medicare changes,” in spite of the fact that, oh, my goodness, there were all kinds of—

JW: There always are when you have a major public policy change.

SP: So being able to travel around the state and help knowledge—

JW: Two more questions. One of the things we've been looking at in comparing these interviews that you did, I know it's not a good summary, but throughout the five that I've read that we're going to interview, women came into those roles not thinking of themselves as really being feminists. They were just women.

SP: Yes, yes.

JW: But that began to change as they saw the importance of what they as women were able to bring to the discussion. I guess one of my questions is, do you feel that your gender had in some way helped you through this thirty years of legislation?

SP: I think it did help. I do remember a discussion at one point about whether or not we should have a Women's Caucus, and we resisted. We said, “No, we're part of a group of legislators, and we don't want to be divided, men and women,” but I do think—I said, “You know, moms referee schoolyard battles. There's not a lot of difference between schoolyard battles and some of the battles we could get into in the Senate.”

JW: So you're basically saying women do bring a kind of a culture or an approach that's beneficial to the process. Is that correct?

SP: I would agree with that, and I do think, too, not to look everyone into this bucket, but women, I don't think care as much about who takes credit if the job is done and done appropriately. I'm not sure our male counterparts always thought that way. I think if there is a difference, I think it would be that. I think women brought to the process a desire to be good collaborators and not necessarily wanting to—maybe we didn't want our male counterparts to

be threatened by our expertise and ability. But I do think, I think our ability to build coalitions was part of being a woman, being a mom.

JW: What advice do you have for other women who are planning to go into politics and serve in the legislature? This is your final shot at bringing truth and enlightenment to some young woman who's out there.

SP: I have one really important doctrine that I think is important for someone running for office. If you're afraid to lose, you shouldn't get into the battle in the first place.

JW: Agreed.

SP: If you're afraid to lose, you will compromise your values. I want people to want to run because they're committed to doing what's best for their community or for their state. When it becomes more important to them that they be elected than it is that they do the right thing, I think that's unfortunate. So that would be my #1 caution to anyone wanting to get into public office is to do it for the right reasons, that you want to serve. You have a philosophy about how you want to serve that you want to share with the general public, and if they agree with you, then they'll vote for you, and you'll become an elected part of the process.

I think it's unfortunate when people change that philosophy because the people that vote you in in the first place voted you in because of that persona that you portrayed yourself as having. If you change, then what are they supposed to do? They don't know who they've voted for. So it's important to, first of all, know why you're running, and don't be afraid to lose because if you're afraid to lose, I think you'll make the wrong decisions.

JW: We've seen plenty of politicians who are too glad to be here.

SP: I know, and not nearly focused enough on doing the right thing for the people of Kansas.

JW: And on that, Senator Praeger, Insurance Commissioner Praeger, Mayor Praeger—you have so many titles—thank you for giving your time to the Kansas Oral History Project this afternoon. I'm Joan Wagnon in the Senate Chambers with Senator Sandy Praeger.

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