

INTERVIEW: SANDY PRAEGER (REVISED)

- Q: This is March 6, 1992, and I am interviewing Sandy Praeger. I don't know whether I explained this to you very well, but what we're doing is collecting oral histories from all the women that are in the legislature and have been in the legislature. We're transcribing and the transcriptions will be kept forever in the Kansas State Historical Society. This is sort of like a body of information for scholars and other people that are interested because you've been very much neglected. We thought we could do part of the legislature and we just said, well, the women would be a doable size, so that's what we're doing here. We're asking the same questions of everyone and part of the questions are about your service and part are personal. So you can answer as many for as long as you want. To start out, let's talk about your service in the House and what years you've been here.
- A: I started in 1990 or '91, with the '91 session. Was elected in November of '90, so this is my second year.
- Q: Second year, first term. And you are a Republican in the House. We are asking everyone when you first became a Republican or Democrat.
- A: I guess I was born Republican.
- Q: So you didn't just register to vote as a Republican the first time you voted. Why are you a Republican?
- A: I grew up a Republican. My grandparents were Republican, staunch Republicans, I might add. It's just never occurred to me to be anything else.
- Q: Everyone has kind of a different experience with that. Can you describe your first election to office? Why did you run? What kind of campaign did you have?
- A: I had been encouraged to run in '88 and would have had to run against an incumbent, Jessie Branson, who is a close friend and, although I was interested in eventually seeking state office, I was not interested in that. So when I heard--in fact, was called out of a meeting and told that she had just announced that she was not running and that particular day, I first was called by several close friends in Lawrence and then Governor Hayden called, and Nancy Kassebaum called that night. So the heat was on and I really had decided I was not going to do it. But it was, I think, March or April that year, so I had to make a fast decision then.
- Q: When did you file?

A: That was on a Wednesday and I announced on Friday. I knew that if I was going to do it, I'd better announce quickly because it caught everyone by surprise that Jessie was not going to run again, including her own employees. She really hadn't told anyone, so I knew that if I was going to do it, I needed to jump in quickly.

Q: Did you have opposition in the primary?

A: Yes. I did not in the primary, but in the general I did. I had an easy time in the primary, but pretended like I had opposition. I went ahead and put up signs and went through all the motions as if I had an opponent. I had a very...it was an aggressive campaign against another very qualified candidate, a woman who works at the university. Very attractive black woman about my age. She had been elected to the school board the same year I was elected to the city commission. We had done many of the same things, had been on many of the same boards, and we share many of the same friends and live in the same neighborhood, vote in the same precinct. So it was a close race. Two-hundred and eighty-six out of about eight or nine thousand.

Q: Well, you named a few people who encouraged you to run. Who else? Who would you say persuaded you the most?

A: I think some of my business associates and friends that I had served with on other boards. I had been on the city commission in Lawrence for four years and went off in '89.

Q: You served one whole term then?

A: Yes, a full four-year term and spent a year as mayor, so I'd had that service at the local level. There were quite a few people that encouraged me. It wasn't just Republicans. It was Democrats as well. I tried to generate good bipartisan support.

Q: What about funding your first campaign? Was that difficult raising money?

A: No, I was able to raise as much as I needed and was able to even run the campaign without spending it all. Had a little left to hold over for the next one.

Q: What kind of a campaign did you conduct? Did you use the media a lot? Use door-to-door?

A: I went door-to-door throughout the district. Used the newspaper quite a bit and radio some. No TV.

Q: Is that what your opponent pretty much did?

A: Yes. We very much followed each other and we were both very courteous to each other. She never said anything bad about me and I never said anything bad about her. We campaigned for the office and not against each other, which was nice. And I think you can do that when it's an open seat. I think this time probably I'm anticipating it won't be quite as nice because I have a record now. Of course, I had a record then, too.

Q: I was going to say if you'd been mayor, you should have had a prior record.

A: Right. It did not become an issue though.

Q: Did the same people who encouraged you also campaign for you?

A: Yes.

Q: These were people from...?

A: Oh, the Chamber of Commerce and business groups and some neighborhood groups. And then just friends.

Q: Were there any organizations that you belonged to that helped you?

A: No.

Q: Family?

A: Very little. My children are both college students and were then and just really are not interested. My son is a little bit more than my daughter. My daughter is really not very interested at all.

Q: Are they around here at school?

A: Well, they were both at KU. My daughter has since graduated and is in Chicago and my son is gone this year. He's in Copenhagen, studying architecture just for this one year, so he's had a great year. In fact, my daughter was in England when I announced. She was home then for the summer.

Q: So she was there while you were campaigning?

A: Yes.

Q: Well, is there anyone in your family or your husband's family or anyone near you who was in the legislature?

A: No, no.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about the district you represent?

A: I have a lot of university faculty that live in my district....

Q: What part of Lawrence is it?

A: It's primarily west Lawrence. So I have the most affluent neighborhoods in Lawrence in my district and then I had two of the lower income neighborhoods. The district lines have been redrawn and I think I'm losing those, so it's going to be really more of a middle income, upper-middle income district now.

Q: Did the Lawrence newspaper endorse you?

A: No, they don't endorse candidates as a rule.

Q: Did you have any endorsement from anyone?

A: No.

Q: Let's get back to questions about your district. What issues do you think were important to your election?

A: They're very interested in funding for the university because their livelihood depends on that. Abortion was not an issue because both of us were pro-choice candidates. It would have been and I think my district is pretty staunchly pro-choice and that was an issue in Barbara's--my opponent--primary because a right-to-life candidate did run against her. In fact, the right-to-life candidate was a Republican, wanted to run against me, didn't look as though I was going to have opposition, she filed at the last minute, so he changed his party affiliation and filed as a Democrat, thinking he would be opposing me in the general election and ended up getting beat out by her in the primary. It was very interesting. But that was another issue. Property taxes to some extent. People were just learning about the effects of the reappraisal process and the impact that was having on business, so there was a real concern about the tax mix. We talked a lot about the tax mix and how we need to get to a more equal distribution between sales, income and property tax.

Q: You say we talked about that. You mean in the campaign?

A: Yes, in the campaign.

Q: Are any other issues now coming up that are interesting besides those you campaigned on? I mean from your district constituents?

A: Well, of course, now with the judge forcing us to look at school finance, that has become a real issue, and actually that was an issue in the campaign, too, because we're a fourth enrollment category school district so we have been

under traditionally the fourth enrollment category school funding. Not adequately funded, I don't think I can say we're under-funded.

Q: And you have one of the largest high schools....

A: I think we're the largest. So education is a real priority at all levels and will always be. The community was founded based on a desire to have a major college. It was founded by a group from New England who came out and--the New England Immigrant Aid Society. They wanted to found a community in the midwest that was based on education and the university was established nine years after the town. It's always been, historically, a real part of the town.

Q: Are there any other issues? Since you were running against another woman this may not be an important question, but do you think your voters identify certain issues as women's issues and expect you to take certain positions on them?

A: I think they do to a certain extent because the district had been represented by a woman for ten years. So people wanted to see the same issues being represented as effectively as Jessie had represented them. So health issues were discussed a lot, the elderly, low income housing, and I think it's interesting that people have just become used to the representative from the 44th district being involved in those issues because Jessie Branson was so involved in them.

Q: We've found in our study that up to 1974 there was never more than four women in the Kansas House and Senate together at one time. Most of the time there were very few--one or none. Something happened in '74. After that there has been a growing number, first in the House and after 1980, a growing number in the Senate. Every election has resulted in more women. We're trying to figure out what happened in '74. What is there about your district that is encouraging them to run women? Other districts aren't doing that and other states aren't doing nearly as much as Kansas.

A: That's interesting. Lawrence is a very liberal community and women in Lawrence...we elected our first woman to the city commission in 1974 which is an interesting coincidence and she became, then, the first woman mayor in '76, I think.

Q: So you weren't the first woman mayor?

A: No, I was the fourth. There had been three before me.

Q: Now how long do you serve? One year as mayor?

A: Yes.

Q: So it hadn't been consistently a woman between those years?

A: No. There'd been men in the interim.

Q: I don't think Topeka's ever had a woman mayor, so that's a lot of women.

A: We just had our first woman chamber president a few years ago and a group of the more active women in the community and in the chamber really pushed for that. It wouldn't have happened I don't think if we hadn't.

Q: I realize since you haven't lived somewhere else, it's hard to compare, but can you speculate about why it's different here? Are there more businesswomen?

A: There are more women, I think, involved. Because of the university, some studies have shown we have the highest per capita education of any community in the country. Lawrence. And my district, probably, in particular.

Q: Could there be a correlation, do you think?

A: There might be because professors who come to the university oftentimes have professional spouses and if it's the man who came to the university and their spouse came with them and there perhaps isn't a job for them at the university, then they look in the community. We do have some very talented women. The first woman mayor was married to a KU professor. The second woman mayor was married to a KU professor. The third woman mayor...in fact, all my three predecessors. I hadn't thought about that, but all three were married to KU professors.

Q: Now Jessie's husband wasn't with...?

A: No, he's a doctor and my husband's a doctor.

Q: So either university professors or doctors' wives.

A: Which never came up. My husband thought it would. He thought when I ran for city commission that the community would not elect a doctor's wife and I was never referred to as 'my husband's wife.' I think he just is keenly aware of the negative image physicians have and is defensive about that and just thought that would spill over. You know, they just go to the country club and it's not that way, but Mark is sensitive to that kind of thing. But I think I had proven myself on my own in lots of community activities.

Q: You worked too?

A: Yes.

Q: So you had business contacts as well.

A: That's right. So Lawrence...my husband and I've lived a lot of different places before Lawrence and it's one of the most accepting communities for who a person is intellectually and personality-wise. There doesn't seem to be a social stigma attached to who a person is. It's hard to explain but others have sensed that too. People really are very accepting of all walks of life and that's one of the things we enjoy. We have friends from all walks of life in Lawrence that we enjoy associating with. You don't just get pigeonholed in one little social group.

Q: I don't like to put labels on people but we're just doing this for sort of an experiment. If you could put a label on yourself and your stance on the issues, what would you label yourself--conservative, liberal, somewhere in between?

A: Well, if you asked my Republican colleagues in the House, they would tell you I'm extremely liberal. They'd label me very liberal. I don't see myself as a liberal. They think I am. For a Republican, I probably am. As a Democrat, I'd be moderate.

Q: As a freshman legislator, did you have a mentor or someone you knew real well that sort of helped you get started, suggested committees to be on?

A: No, not really. I chose to be on a couple of the committees that Jessie had been on or requested those because I felt the district was used to having those particular issues be well represented. They also happen to be two areas I have some interest and background in--Education and Public Health and Welfare. So I just knew that I wanted those and the third one I just didn't care. I was assigned to Elections.

Q: Of course, you don't have any leadership positions yet. Have you introduced any bills?

A: Yes, last session I sponsored a bill that I didn't get it in in time not knowing all the ins and outs. But it was to create pilot projects for teenage pregnancy prevention and two of them were funded. One of them's here in Topeka and the other in Winfield, Kansas. I'm not even sure there were any other new programs funded last year. This may be one of the few that actually made it through. It's been recommended this year for an additional \$100,000 for two more pilot projects. So I was excited about that. This year I've worked on seatbelt legislation, handicapped parking, foster care. The one I'm working on right now is a program to establish statewide foster care review boards, citizen review boards. We have a citizen review board in Lawrence, or have had since 1986, and these are ordinary citizens who are trained, but they're volunteers who actually take a foster care case and review it and make recommendations to the court as to the disposition of that case. We want the authority to

establish them statewide so that we can establish guidelines and a reporting mechanism because they gather pretty valuable information and it would be good to have a mechanism, a way of getting that information at the state level. It would help policymakers in determining how to change the foster care system. We rank very high in out-of-home placement nationally. Kansas, I think, ranks seventh, in numbers and so we're real concerned about it. I think we have over 7,000 kids in out-of-home placement and the numbers just keep going up and Oklahoma, I think, has less than a thousand. And there may be reasons. We may be doing a better job of intervening in bad situations, but we don't know what the reasons are and having these review boards will enable us to gather some of that information. The courts don't have time to do it. The SRS workers don't have time. These are volunteers who do have the time and interest. So it's been through the House. It's passed the House and it's now in the Senate. It had a hearing Thursday and will be worked on.

Q: Well, my next question was going to be do you have any memories of great defeats, great victories, or just embarrassing moments or anything like that?

A: Well, great victories last year was when the Senate Appropriations bill came over for the regents' schools and a group of us put together an amendment. We had three amendments. We had our first, second, and third and we were just going to keep at it until we got one of them on. Two added additional money into regents' budget and we got our first one on and most people didn't think we'd do it and to do it, I think we got nine Republicans to vote for it and it took a lot of negotiating and it was a real good experience in how the process works, all the behind-the-scenes. Watching who was voting for spending measures and so that was....

Q: Something you'll remember. I was going to ask you how many women there are, but there are forty-five this year. I think there were forty-four last year in the House and Senate.

A: Is that right? I'm not even sure.

Q: Now, I'd like to ask you some questions just about you. Are you a native Kansan? You said you'd moved around a lot.

A: No, I can't call myself a native Kansan because I was born at Fort Bragg, North Carolina while my dad was stationed there during World War II, but I moved back to Kansas as a four-month-old and so I did grow up in Kansas. I grew up in Paola, Kansas, went to the University here, and graduated from there and then my husband and I have traveled. He was in the army for ten years, so that was the moving around.

Q: What did you get your degree in?

A: Education.

Q: And did you ever teach?

A: I taught for two years in Kansas City while he was still in medical school.

Q: What did you teach?

A: Sixth grade. In fact, I started in third grade and then switched to sixth.

Q: You work for a bank now, I understand.

A: Yes, public relations.

Q: What else have you done besides being mayor, etc.?

A: When we were in Denver, I worked at Samsonite Corporation, their world headquarters and I worked for the vice-president of finance as an administrative assistant, and then he didn't really need a secretary and the audit department needed help, so I eventually became a staff auditor. I just sort of did on-the-job training. This was during real aggressive affirmative action time and it looked good on their reports to promote women, so I was fortunate. When we first moved back to Lawrence I worked at the Spencer Art Museum and coordinated their volunteer-docent program, which is a lot of fun. I did that for five years. Two years I worked out at Haskell Indian Junior College, helping them establish a foundation...I'm not done. I have jumped around a lot. Then I worked to help Brandenwood Retirement Community establish their place in our community. It was a new group that moved to Lawrence to build this continuing care retirement community and I directed the marketing of it. And then went to work at the bank and I've been at the bank for three or four years. They've all kind of been related because most of it's been public relations and development.

Q: But that isn't what you went to school to study.

A: No, it isn't.

Q: I teach in that area so I'm real interested in how people get into it in the first place and a lot of times it's just like you did.

A: A lot of times, especially for women because when we went to school you either became a teacher or nurse or secretary and that was about it. And teaching is a good background. I mean, you learn public speaking skills. You can argue with anybody if you can argue with a group of sixth graders, so I think teaching's good background.

Q: You were on the city council while you were working, then? And while you were mayor?

A: Right. I worked full-time and it was intense because this retirement community was just getting up and running and the marketing job was very full-time.

Q: You were on the city council from '86 to...?

A: '85 to '89. I was mayor in '86-'87, from the spring of '86 to the spring of '87.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about growing up? You said your father was in the service?

A: In World War II, but as soon as the war was over he and my mother moved to Paola where my grandmother had established a little furniture store as kind of a hobby. My grandmother was quite a woman. She didn't like housework, didn't like to cook, but couldn't justify having someone else do that unless she worked outside the home. That was what she always said, so she started at the age of 60, started this little used furniture store because people after the war couldn't find furniture and she would refinish it herself. My dad and his brother both came back from the war and they went into the store with her. They both had business degrees from KU, but there were no jobs. So she said...well, my grandfather had worked in the oil fields as an inspector and he was essentially at this point retired and he was in his mid-sixties. So my grandmother said, well, I'll buy you both houses and she bought houses for each of them--little bungalows and they started working with her and eventually built it into a really nice home furnishing store with appliances and carpet and drapes and that's what they did for forty years. They both now have retired and no one was there to take over the store and Levitts kind of put them out of business, so they sold it. But I grew up in that environment. Very much a nuclear family.

Q: Did your mother work?

A: My mother taught. She taught high school English and Journalism for twenty-three years.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters growing up?

A: I had a sister who is three and a half years younger. She is in Lawrence now and works at the University as Development Director for the concert series.

Q: What kind of things did you do when you were growing up? Were you involved in school activities?

A: Everything. When you're in a small town, you do everything.

Q: Did you live right in town?

A: We lived in town.

Q: How big a high school was it?

A: There were about a hundred in my graduating class, about four hundred altogether.

Q: Did you go out for sports, debate, etc.?

A: We didn't have sports for women. I played golf and that was all. I since have played tennis and learned to ski and other things, but I didn't do any of that. There were no opportunities. We did not have debate, so I did not do debate, but I played in the band and was the drum major for the band for two years and that was really fun. And other school activities--drama.

Q: Can you think of any school activities that helped prepare you for your job as a legislator or encouraged you or got you interested in politics?

A: My grandmother got me interested in politics. We lived for most of my gradeschool years, until I was in junior high, we lived in the house that she had provided which was about a half block away. I used to go over after school and we'd sit and talk and she'd...I mean, from my earliest remembrances of her, she talked politics. In fact, I learned to read sitting on my grandmother's lap reading the newspaper. Reading the headlines first and then we'd get to the subheads and then we'd get to where we could read the first paragraph. She was a big influence and she always encouraged me to take an interest in politics.

Q: She's no longer with you?

A: No. She lived to ninety-two. She would love what I'm doing now. She would love it. She was a great person. I had several friends that were real interested in politics, too, and we got involved in campaigns. We worked for candidates as high school students.

Q: You mean state candidates?

A: State candidates, yes.

Q: Were there any organizations you belonged to after you got out of school that maybe helped prepare you or helped you run or anything like that?

A: Well, I think, social organizations, the Chamber of Commerce. I was on the Chamber of Commerce board and chaired a couple of committees. So those opportunities to chair committees.

Q: Were there any women's organizations?

A: None...I mean, I belonged to women's organizations, but I don't feel they contributed as much as the ones that were more community-wide.

Q: What ones do you belong to or have you belonged to?

A: I've been a member of PEO. I'm no longer, and a couple of church clubs.

Q: We're just kind of looking at that.

A: What are you finding?

Q: Well, in some areas there are things like Junior League....

A: We don't have Junior League. I think that is a good progression.

Q: There seem to be a few of those, but we don't know how far back....

A: We have a Leadership Lawrence program and I was real involved in that. That's men and women and then Leadership Kansas. I've been real involved and been on the board of Leadership Kansas. Those two organizations probably did as much, but the women's organizations haven't done as much as those that are more broadly based.

Q: Well, your children were in college when you first ran for the legislature. How old were they?

A: Gretchen was nineteen and J.D. was twenty.

Q: How old were you when you were first elected?

A: Forty-five or six.

Q: There's sort of a trend in there that many women are waiting until their children are grown.

A: Oh yes, we see that at the local level, too. And I saw that with...I've been on selection committees for Leadership Lawrence and Leadership Kansas and we find that the women that we select are older than the men because they're entering this whole process later in life.

Q: There's probably a lot to be said there, but just to prove it's happening is one thing.

A: And it will be interesting to see if it continues because

Q: There doesn't seem to be as...with the new ones, there's more of a mixture.

A: Yes, some are fairly young. I think it would be tough, though. I couldn't have done it. I worked--many of those jobs I worked at early when we moved back to Lawrence were part-time.

Q: Well, when you ran for city council, how old were your children?

A: They were still in junior high. But it wasn't that big a problem and our meetings were at night.

Q: How do you think your being in the legislature has affected your family in any way?

A: So far, it hasn't. I think if it got to the point where it did, I'm not sure I'd stay.

Q: How does your husband feel about it?

A: He's tolerant. He's a physician and very busy. In fact, he's decided to take his turn as chief of staff at the hospital because it was something he'd been kind of encouraged to do and had tried to not do it. I said, why don't you just do it and get it over with since I'm going to be real busy. So he's very busy and it has worked out.

Q: Do you drive back and forth?

A: Yes.

Q: So you're not really 'away from home.'

A: Right. I'm not sure he'd like it if I.... It's easier to be in the legislature and live in Lawrence. He did not want me to run for city commission when I ran and he did not want me to run for the legislature, so he...and I think part of it is he's just seen what happens to people who're are in public office and he didn't want that to happen to me.

Q: Well, how does he feel now about it?

A: Oh, I think it's alright. He sees that I enjoy it.

Q: Well, it would be hard for him to campaign and be as actively involved as some.

A: Oh, yes, and he doesn't at all. He hardly ever goes with me to any event.

Q: He doesn't come down here at all?

A: No.

Q: Do you feel like you've made any sacrifices to be here?

A: Yes. I enjoy being a housewife and I miss the ability to be a homemaker. I don't have that and I like to cook and I like all those things and I miss them. In fact, there are many evenings I'll get home at 7:00 or 7:30 and I'll still fix dinner just because I find it therapeutic.

Q: Even when it's not in session, I imagine you have other obligations.

A: That's right and I do like...really, I'm kind of a private person and I like my privacy.

Q: Do you think it's changed you?

A: Well, it's given me more confidence. My public speaking, I think has improved. My debate skills are improving. I mean, I still have a long way to go and a lot to learn but it's been a good educational experience.

Q: And you're going to run again and you'll have more to tell us later.

A: Yes. I hope. I hope I get re-elected.

Q: Do you think that since you're kind of an average age, do you think the expectations over your lifetime for women has changed? And why have they changed? What has caused the change?

A: Well, I think there are more opportunities for us. Part of it I think is economic. Families are wanting the additional income and women being able to contribute. Gosh, I don't know why else.

Q: Were you living in Lawrence when that first woman mayor was elected?

A: I wasn't. We moved there the year after she...no, let me think. We were in Lawrence. We were not in Lawrence when she was elected to the commission, but we were in Lawrence when she became mayor. And she was a very competent woman and it really wasn't a big issue. It was a bigger issue when she was elected to the commission, but it was just understood that she would eventually be mayor.

Q: Is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like to include in this interview?

A: No, I can't think of anything. Have you asked women about just their acceptance by their colleagues?

Q: Yes, we have and particularly the ones who have been here and have that seem to have changed as more women are entering. Tell me what you think about your acceptance.

A: It varies. I think it's harder for women to be accepted as Rochelle Cronister on Appropriations, to be in that kind of a role. I think it's easy for us to have credibility as long as we stay with the traditional women's issues. I think there's still a tendency to....

Q: You've observed that?

A: Yes. But I think you have to work a little harder to get that general acceptance.

Q: Do you think women are effective legislators?

A: I think we're very effective. In fact, I think...I don't want to downgrade my counterparts because I think there are very fine legislators, but I think the women on the whole work harder and take it more seriously.

Q: Well, this is what we're trying to pluck at. If that's true and I don't think we can prove any of it....

A: And I think the public...I think one reason why more women are being elected is that the public tends to trust women. Women have not been in these roles for a long time and we're not 'good ole boys' and I think women are perceived by the general public as more trustworthy.

Q: We'll all see if that's true this November.

A: We sure will. It's going to be very interesting.

Q: From what I hear, there are going to be a record number of women running.

A: Is that right? In fact, it's interesting because my daughter, now that she's away from all of this, is very interested in a woman in Illinois, so now that she's away from it and can do it on her own, she's calling me and gosh, mom, what do you think of this? I can't think of her name, but she was the County Clerk of Deeds in Cook County.

Q: It's an interesting time, to say the least. I don't know whether it's situations, or it's possible that just seeing all those men up there in front of the camera at the Thomas hearing.... However you felt about what was going on, just seeing all men there, does something.

A: I know, it does. So it will be real interesting to see how women do.

Q: Well, I've really enjoyed this and meeting you.