Mark Tallman: My name is Mark Tallman, and I've worked for the Kansas Association of School Boards on education issues since 1990, primarily as a lobbyist, also as a writer and researcher, and I'm conducting this interview with Sue Peterson on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators and significant leaders in state government, particularly those who served in the 1960s through 2010. The interviews will be accessible to researchers, educators, and the public through the KOHP website, ksoralhistory.org and also the Kansas Historical Society and the State Library. Transcriptions are made possible by generous donors. David Heinemann today is our videographer.

And I want to introduce and welcome to our conversation, Sue Peterson. I've done a few of these. This is the first time I've sat in a room named after the person that we're—Sue, those of you who may not know, quite a legend here at Kansas State, but our unique thing I think we can talk about today, during most of her time, what we're really going to focus on is her time as a government relations advocate, lobbyist, pick the name you want, for Kansas State University, but through that, she has had the opportunity to observe all kinds of trends in education across the whole state and really as a big part of that, the broader political trends that education has to operate in. By way of saying when I started as a lobbyist many years ago, she was already doing it. I always kind of looked up to her, tried to learn from her. So, I think we have the ability to keep doing that. So, thank you and thank you for the help you've given me. To dig in, Sue, why don't we just talk a little bit about your background—where you were born, where you grew up, early educational experiences, and what began to move you into your interest in public service?

Sue Peterson: Well, thank you, Mark. I can't think of a better person to have this conversation with because we were really, really young when we got started.

MT: We were really, really young.

SP: Really, really young, and your role at ASK [Associated Students of Kansas] a long time ago.

MT: That's right.

SP: It was a lot of fun working with you over the years and learning from you. I grew up in Abilene, Kansas. My father was a dairy farmer. I went to Abilene High School. I'm very proud of that fact. And I came to K-State. Full disclosure, I wanted to go to KU because I felt like they had a better political science program, but if you talked to somebody that we all know, that's when they were burning down the union at KU and other things, David remembers these items probably, my parents went, "We think maybe you might get in trouble. So, maybe you should just go where your older cousin is already at K-State, and you just go to K-State with him."

MT: Someone to keep an eye on you.

SP: Yes.

MT: And I'm sure that happened.

SP: A little bit. A little bit. So, I came to Kansas State. I wanted to major in political science. I knew I was interested in government. I knew I was interested in politics. So, I came here, and I got my degree in 1976. I tried to get a teaching certificate, but at that time, the civics teachers—do you remember the civics courses when we were in high school in the sixties and seventies were the football coach or the track coach, the basketball coach. They were men. It was really hard. There was a building right across the way from where we're sitting today, Dickens Hall is where you went to look to see if you could get a job at a school district in Kansas, and I couldn't find anything for history or political science, civics that didn't require me to teach football, and I don't know how to teach football. I don't do that at all.

So, I went to work. My first job I tried with Governor Bennett's staff at that time to try to get a job in state government. They sent me to see a man at the Kansas Republican Party headquarters. His name was George Van Riper. He came from New York. At that time, Governor Bennett was governor, but the House had flipped to Democrat. The goal of the Republican party was to re-elect Governor Bennett. That was not my role or my job. That was Tish Rogers and Pat Storey, and my job was to help legislators.

So, I had a little campaign committee that I worked with. I did that job, and the House did go back to the Republicans after that election. Governor Bennett did lose to then Speaker Carlin, then Governor Carlin. Then I did that, and then someone we all know, a man named Keith Henley worked for the Minority Leader of the House, Wendell Lady who was also from Abilene, Kansas.

MT: I did not know that.

SP: A K-State grad.

MT: Representing Johnson County.

SP: Representing Johnson County, that's right.

MT: The first Speaker I remember.

SP: The first Speaker you remember is Speaker Lady. Then he was going to become Speaker. Bob Frey from Liberal was the candidate to be Majority Leader. He was elected, and Keith encouraged me to come and interview with Bob, and I got the job—we were called AAs, administrative assistants for the leadership. Keith worked for Speaker Lady, and I worked for Majority Leader Frey who was married to a woman from Solomon, Kansas. The world's real small.

MT: So, it's a little bit of who you know. I'm just interested in whether there was anything in particular. You were obviously interested in politics.

SP: I liked it.

 

MT: Political science. May be willing to teach, but instead it looked like—it sounds like you quickly moved into a role of really grassroots election stuff and working with the party, working with election machinery. Was that a little bit of a surprise? Any surprises as you kind of move from maybe teaching about it to actually—what do they say, to seeing how the sausage is really is made?

SP: I just told someone this story the other day. This was 1977. I'm getting out of Kansas State. Inflation is 17 percent. There weren't very many jobs for college graduates then, let alone somebody with a political science history degree. So, my parents were like, "You need to get a job." And this job was available and came along, and it was in the political space, if you will, in government. I was hired, and I did the job.

Then I, as we say, went over from the party after a year into the legislative process and found my home.

MT: And in that process, so you had that experience, which frankly I always envied, eventually becoming a lobbyist, you were actually back behind the scenes supporting the internal work of how the legislature actually has to operate in a very procedural sense.

SP: In my view, that was my wonderful teaching. And to this day, you need to know the process. The process has never really changed because most of it's dictated in the constitution. Most of it's dictated in the rules that the legislature adopts, and those haven't changed significantly over the years. So, I feel like that was a fabulous grounding for me that I know that. So, when you go over to the other side, if you will, where you're not behind the scenes, you don't have access to the House and the Senate floor, then that is a very helpful tool to have and know.

MT: But you didn't go directly from the legislative work to lobbying.

SP: I had a little intervening thing on the second floor of the State Capitol called Governor Hayden. I went from Majority Leader staff to the Speaker staff, and Governor Hayden came in after Wendell retired from the legislature and spent four years there, ran the campaign in '86, fascinating.

There was not a fax machine in 1986. A little digression. Our campaign commercials were typed up, put in this big envelope called Zap, I think it was called, and flown from New York to Kansas City to the airport, and then somebody went over to the Kansas City Airport and drove them back to the campaign headquarters so we could read them.

MT: I've often reflected just even in my—less than you—all how changes in technology have just dictated what's possible or not possible. I'm sure you remember—still remembering when I was taught the little lobbyist center and the little cubbyholes so if your office wanted to call you, they called that switchboard, and you got a little message. You didn't have a cellphone or anything like that or any of those activities, but we probably shouldn't get exactly into those weeds, interesting as it is.

 

So, what moved you again—you spent time on the executive side of things. Then you came to Kansas State University. Is that right?

SP: That is correct.

MT: So, talk to us a little bit about your interest in doing that. You had a role both from the political side but working for an educational institution. So, talk a little bit about that transition.

SP: Of course, I was an alum. I lived an hour away. My family attended football games for years. I did that, of course, when I was a student. I had two brothers that came here after me. So, I'm very fond of the institution. I clearly still am.

They had a position where they had someone who represented them in the legislature, a former state representative who I knew from Abilene. The world is pretty small. He decided he wanted to run for the Senate. He chose—the Senate district he lived in just happened to be the recently moved out of the job president of the Kansas Senate, a very powerful man who you know, Ross Doyen.

You can't do these jobs and be political. We were talking earlier—we have opinions. We register for a party. We vote, but I don't talk about my politics or my views in the Capitol ever, even as a staffer. You had to represent your boss as a staffer.

So, he files for election. The university says you can't do this. They got a lot of calls from Topeka to move him into another role at the university, which they did. So, they didn't have anybody. And we had a little problem at K-State, a budget issue. There was a hiccup in a number. The decimal point was in the wrong place.

So, then President Wefald and some of his key staffers, Vice President Krause and his Chief of Staff Dr. Reagan, came to visit us in Topeka. We had meetings with the Governor who I worked for and with the budget director, the guy that we all know, Michael O'Keefe, the toughest budget director I think probably ever after Jim Bibb. And I started working with them, and we strategized and tried to figure out how to solve their budget problem. We finally did after lots of shenanigans, and I mean shenanigans in the House floor, almost a fist fight between the Majority Leader and the Minority Leader, and finally the money was appropriated to the university.

They approached me and said, "Hey, you know your stuff. You've got an executive, legislative background. You're a K-Stater. Would you think about coming over here and working this job?" So, I talked to them and I interviewed, a small search committee, and they offered me the position, and I came in August of 1989.

MT: We talked a little bit before this about both of us have spent most of our working lives as lobbyists. You didn't have to register, right, though because working for a state agency?

SP: No.

 

MT: Some of us are a little bitter over that. Your job would be a state public job. So, you're really representing an agency, and that's not really considered lobbying in the same way as associations or business groups or things like that. Through my work, of course, with the Kansas Association of School Boards, would always do that. You never know how people will react when you say, "I'm a lobbyist." I guess that's why I always start saying, "I'm an advocate."

But maybe just reflecting back on a career of doing that, you're in politics which not everyone thinks is a great necessarily profession either. But a lobbyist which often raises this sort of shady—what did you really do for Kansas State? What would typically be the role of your colleagues at other institutions or other people who advocate for education at all levels.

SP: So, you kind of gave a little list of different job titles when we started this discussion, and we also had a job title called legislative liaison. You have a good background in state government. So, there's a statute at every state university that says that the president or the chancellor if you're at KU can have two assistants. So, I always retained a title of Assistant to the President because that was sort of my ace in the hole to be a legislative liaison. But if for some reason, the legislature said, "We're going to get rid of all you people. We don't want to pay"—state government doesn't want to pay people to come and tell us what to do for them, which we've had those discussions many, many times. So, I kept that job.

So, my role was to advocate and to educate, and I told people at the institution many times to defend. In some cases, you needed to say what was happening and why it was happening. I mean, there's tons of clearly current examples about stuff like that. But just to say, "We are here. We're Kansas State University." Kids that come from Kansas, 85 percent, still kind of in that range at Kansas State in the mix of their enrollment, "and these are your kids. These are the kids from your towns, your children, your grandchildren, your nieces and nephews that are coming here. This is your role to take care of them."

So, that is what I would do, but I would also provide information. K-State is a wonderful institution, but as you know, has a land grant mission. So, we knew a lot about, clearly a lot about water, about cropping systems, about the agricultural base of the state, and some of those issues—each one of the institutions in Kansas, the state universities had some niche like that where they had a role to play.

So, you get a lot of questions, and you get random questions, and you want to get the question before you get it in the committee meeting where they said, "You know, I asked K-State, and no one called me back." So, I always said, "Do not call Professor X. You call me. I'll call Professor X." This was phone calls. Now it's more emails. "I'll call Professor X, and I'll put the two of you together because Professor X doesn't know who you are, and they're not going to maybe respond to somebody," even though you're a state representative and you should be responding to them because they're ultimately kind of the boss, if you will. They're not going to do that. So, I always felt like I was the front door of Kansas State with elected officials in the state of Kansas.

MT: Was that pretty similar to how the other state universities structured that position or that role? Or was there some difference across the system? We all have associations of associations. I

 

know you have been really cited as a leader of the advocacy people in those institutions. Were there some difference in how universities approached that?

SP: Well, in Kansas, not so much. Everybody had somebody. When I started, there were five men—I think KU had two people. So, there were six and me. And we all did sort of the same thing. In fact, somebody who we both know well who did the university budgets for years for the legislature, David Monical said, "I didn't know if you were going to make it, Sue, because you didn't know anything about the budget." I said, "You might be right about that, David, but I knew the process of the budget," and when you're in the legislature, that's the part you have to know. I got a whole team of people in the Budget Office, Vice President for Finance who can explain that part of it to me. I just need to know how it's working through the process. He said, "That's a good point."

So, we did those kinds of things. Now, nationally, when I came to Kansas State right before the nineties, it was a pretty young profession for higher ed because higher ed is either the elite privates generally or the publics in the state. I was real active in an organization called the Association of Public [and] Land-grant Universities. The University of Kansas and Wichita State are both members of the organization. We had people like me all over the country. We had state people, and we had federal people. Some universities had federal people in DC.

I think our profession, that was a lot of former legislators, former members of Congress—

MT: Hiring people that know—like you say, you have to know the process.

SP: You have to know the process, and you have to know people and know people that are making the decisions.

MT: Right.

SP: That's how it really got started. And I'd like to know who the first person was that kind of started that. Now, there were lobbyists. As you mentioned, there were lobbyists, state and federally for years and years and years. But higher ed was kind of new to the game. In fact, when we started out, we didn't have our own group. We met together with the communicators. My long time ago predecessor, a woman named Carolyn Cross at the University of Kansas was instrumental in starting the group and starting a professional organization of public land grant university advocates, if you will. So, that has just grown up over time and multiple generations now have cycled through because those of us from the beginning have all retired because you just can't do this for the rest of your life. Your feet start to give out on you. There's all those marble floors in state capitols and the Congress.

MT: Yes. Those imposing buildings.

SP: It's a profession that I like to say that I feel like I've kind of grown up through, and it's been a real good opportunity to learn to do that.

 

MT: I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I think part of what you're stressing is so this is a role that needs someone who has the technical knowledge of the process, the people involved, those sorts of things, but you seem to stress that the message that you have to share really needs to come back and reflect on the institution you're trying to represent. And I'm guessing that would be true if you were a university or if you were a school district or whatever you might be.

SP: Right.

MT: I guess one of the things in some of these conversations we've noted is that sometimes we are so close to the process, we may assume that everyone knows everything they should know about a given issue, but they may not. So a big part of what a lobbyist often tends to do is sort of that translator between the institution and—probably anything like that to put it in terms that a legislature made up of people from all walks of life, most of whom don't have a lot of expertise in your area, how do they understand it? How does it affect their constituents, their community?

SP: And it goes both ways. So while you have to take the message of the institution to the policymakers, to the legislatures, and you've got to—when I started working on pursuing my PhD, I had to write a dissertation. Well, I said, "I can't write a sentence." My major professor who is a dear friend looked at me and she said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I've been writing bullet points for fifteen to twenty years. Because that's how you communicate. What's your elevator speech walking with a legislator down the hall before they go into a committee room?" We had a lot of fun with that. I had to finally write a lot of sentences. I got through that.

So, I communicate the university's needs to the legislature. On the other hand, you've got to translate back the legislature decisions back to the university. When I first started—it's only an hour to Topeka, but I stayed in Topeka and did that for about a year, not quite, one session and part of another session. I finally realized that there's an entire vocabulary inside the State Capitol, and we all speak that vocabulary when we're in that building. When you leave that building, nobody know what that vocabulary is. So, I could come back, and I could speak the vocabulary of the Capitol, but that was not the university's vocabulary.

MT: Yes.

SP: They wanted to know what was going on to them, but they didn't want to hear—don't defend the legislature, you tell it like it is. You need to give them the speech that they understand. So, I finally decided that that fifty-seven miles between Topeka and Manhattan was a good transition point for me. I could come home and translate and/or translate back to Topeka.

MT: I like the way you put that. In some ways, that's how I've described a lot of what I've had to try to do. I always used that term "translating." How do you take the things around from education at whatever level or whatever it might be, I'm sure it's the same, but the somewhat unique thing about education is that compared to the many other important interests in the state, it covers so many people. I mean, virtually everyone is as close to K-12 education, but increasingly, if you look at all of our post-secondary from technical colleges all the way through the major institutions, a significant number of people are going to be exposed to that either as

 

students or if you have children or relatives there or are affected by the things that are going on at those institutions.

I'd like you to maybe talk a little bit about in the time you've been here and we can kind of do it either way, but I'm interested in maybe some of the big issues that you worked on that perhaps you think are what you're maybe most proud of or most challenging, specifically for you and K State, but maybe as a part of that or after that, I'm also interested is how if at all those may fit into some bigger themes or some bigger trends in Kansas, even around the country.

I'll give you an example of what I mean. A lot of the conversations that I've had with educational leaders is how they stress the trend toward greater access, which kind of goes back to what I said over the past many decades, but certainly in the time that we've been involved, everyone's trying to figure out ways to allow more people to access the benefits of education, to acquire higher levels of skills through our institutions. So, what are some of the things that you worked on both that I think would just be important to get on the record, but if you could maybe reflect a little bit on how they fit into perhaps bigger themes or trends that were important for the state?

SP: Well, to talk about that, access issue specifically. I can see that because I have two examples which are almost opposite. You know because of your work in the Hayden administration, there was a push to change the admission standards. So, if you graduated from a Kansas high school, you could go to any Kansas university. You were automatically in. It wasn't that way around the country, but it was that way here.

There was the big debate about qualified admissions, it was called, and it went on for several years, contentious debates on the House floor. It did not pass. It finally did pass in the legislature after Hayden had left the Governor's office. It finally got through the process. Then I looked at something today, and I noted that, which I kind of had forgotten this step, in the mid-2000s, the Board of Regents set the standards. So, they moved that responsibility to the universities.

So, here we are. We're saying, "Okay, we want to be the university"—Kansas State has a tagline, "the university for Kansans." That's exactly what they should say. But having said that, you had to have an ACT score of something. You had to have college prep courses or whatever. You had to have all of these things to get in.

I always fought for that, but something I think, "Did we do a disservice to Kansas people by saying that four people in this room, three can get in, and one can't?" Sometimes I think that maybe doesn't sell to the legislature.

MT: I think what you're really talking about there is this again, if you want to talk about a theme, what is the balance between access and openness?

SP: Right.

MT: But also standards or quality, and I suppose some might also say efficiency, right? When I was a much younger lobbyist getting to know you, I always reflected on the fact that Kansas then

 

and now tends to rank above average just in terms of educational participation, generally speaking accomplishment. We've always tended to value education. I thought—when I started, it was interesting. We had open admissions. We had lots of institutions. I mean, we had six to eight universities—

SP: We still have over thirty.

MT: Exactly. But in other words, that meant people didn't have to go very far to find an institution, and we had relatively low tuition. Each of those has been a point of contention. Each of those has kind of been fought over to some extent because there's sort of double sides to all of that. We're open admission, but does that mean maybe kids don't have to reach standards? We want low tuition—

SP: Are you going to succeed?

MT: That's right. Are you going to be able to actually succeed? We want to keep costs low, but how do we fund that? We want there to be geographic access, but is there duplication? So, all of those things have been kind of fought over. That's one I'm sure you also were a part of—what doesn't necessarily touch us most directly, but the shift in governance has come up in several of these interviews between the move from moving our community and technical colleges from being under the State Board of Education to under the Board of Regents, another pretty controversial step that took several years to be effectuated.

SP: And that happened in 1999. I looked that up today. I think in one of your interviews, I want to back up before that, one of the items that happened—so, you had open admissions. Then you went to qualified admission. You have low tuition. You also have low aid. Those things, as it turned out, and Dr. Hammond in his interview did a great job of explaining the math of all of that, the budgeting process of all that.

So, we had a system in Kansas where we collected the tuition, and then we sent it to the state government in Topeka. Then we finally came up with a strategy to retain the tuition. Then that was going to be your base funding. So your tuition now belonged to you. So you could maybe get some state aid on top of that, but you had to figure out how to pay for everything, and then you had to also figure out how to give aid to students. That is to this day a bugaboo.

So, what do you have? You have qualified admission. So, you're letting people in that might succeed. You're trying to get enough money to help them go to school and keep their tuition low, keep their retention, keep them here, keep them inside the institutions, get them a degree hopefully in four years. Now they're five years, six years. We have the retention rate for those years and graduation rates for those years.

But those are all in my mind public, political messages as well. It's part of what the institution should do, but it's also part of how you tell the legislature that you are efficient. You're effective and you're doing the state's work and what they need in terms of—the whole buzzword today is workforce, talent and workforce, as you know.

 

So, you've got to do all of those things. In the same time, you've got to have a research portfolio. You've got to figure out a lot of wheat varieties if you're in Kansas State. You've got to have medical advances. You've got to teach doctors at the University of Kansas. You've got to teach veterinarians at K-State. You've got to teach physical therapists and nurses at all the other institutions, and you've got to teach teachers. That's something that's important to us.

MT: Absolutely.

SP: Teach teachers. We have six teachers' colleges at the state universities. We have three engineering schools. We have multiple things, but what is difficult to explain is that some degrees matter to somebody else.

I talked to somebody yesterday who pursued a pharmacy degree. She went to the University of Kansas. For two years, she had to take what they told her to take to get a pharmacy degree. Her husband was going to be a doctor. He got to take whatever he wanted because he was going to learn all that stuff—they said, "You'll learn all that when you get to medical school." So, he had a great liberal arts education at the University of Kansas, and she had her prescriptive thing.

MT: Right.

SP: But that's how it works. You've got to take a history class, and you've got to take a language class. You've got to take a physics class. You've got to take something like that. You've got to have all of those things to bring the person up to go on to either an advanced degree or a bachelor's degree and go out in the workforce and be productive.

MT: Do you think, as you kind of look back on it, we often get into these debates especially when we, no offense, get to be our age.

SP: Yes.

MT: On how things really work and how things really were in the past. Do you think there's more of a focus on workforce development and the jobs needs than maybe there was a time when there was more of a sense of just a good liberal arts education and then decide what you want? I don't know necessarily how I feel about it. Certainly it's an emphasis now. Maybe it was always there. It just wasn't talked about so openly.

SP: Well, another full disclosure. I have represented for the last two years in the legislature the Kansas Association of Community Colleges. I didn't really know a lot about them. I had to do a lot of research. We talked about changing the governance and then changing the budget. It's still being discussed and still a point of contention.

But the fact that we have everything. Do we need everything? Yes, I think you do need everything because it's a consumer business. We're in the consumer business just like people who sell the bottled water. Do you drink the water that came from Pepsi, or do you drink the water that came from Coke? Or do you drink the water that came from some island? I think

 

you've got to be those things to people. And I think the universities—I don't like it, but you have to be that way to kind of sell, "Please, come here. See what you get."

I walked around this campus a little bit this afternoon. You all did as well. There's all kinds of students here. I've seen men and women. I've seen different races. I'm sure—some of them look really young. I didn't see very many older people. It's finals week. So, professors are not out and about. But I think that's important, and I think I rambled on your question.

MT: No. So, let's talk about a couple of things that I know or I think because the background I read on you is you're kind of proud of that might be just some examples of maybe tell us a little bit about what happened. Again, we mentioned that we're sitting in a room named after you in a library that wasn't named after you, but I know you were very involved in this role of reconstructing I guess—you can tell the story. Talk about the library a little bit. Let's talk about the Bio-Ag. You can explain all of that. Then I think finally I know you were involved in some of the issues with K-State Salina, kind of the technical—which has also been a little part of the story.

Talk a little bit about those three things. Again, certainly the issues were important, but if there's anything you want to share about, so, as an advocate, how were those brought about? What did you need to do to make that happen?

SP: This was a really nice library when I was an undergraduate here. The interesting thing about the library, it was built in three different stages, ultimately four, and if you want to count the fact that it almost burned down, five. The students wanted more study space, and if you walked around this library today—and you've seen this out here—they're here studying. That's what they wanted.

MT: Yes. I did notice that.

SP: And they advocated for that. They had sit-ins here. They passed a fee. In fact, we're going to hang it in this room. I have the original big check that the students presented to the Budget Building Committee. I don't know if you were on the Building Committee when the check came over, David.

Well, you can edit that part out. So, the students wrote a big check. We went to the Building Committee. We took a copy of the check, the student body president at the time. She was about the third president in on this effort. They're one year at a time. We took ice cream from Call Hall, which, you know, is the signature thing from Kansas State.

MT: Extremely popular. For those—you should maybe just briefly explain. This is a great lobbying strategy. What does that mean every year in the Capitol when the ice cream shows up?

SP: It starts on the first day of the session. When I worked at Kansas State, "Okay, Sue, what day is the ice cream coming?" We always tried—and they still do, I think, around K-State's birthday, which is February 16th. That's in the middle of the session. It's a busy time.

 

We would always bring K-State ice cream. We used to serve it out of three-gallon tubs. It was lots of fun, setting up on the first floor of the Capitol. We had ice cream for everybody. I did not say, "You're a page. You can't have ice cream. You're the School Board lobbyist."

MT: That's where I tasted it.

SP: Everybody could have ice cream. A little-known fact though, they're closing it Saturday for a year and a half because it's going to be part of a new building.

MT: The Call Hall place where this was done?

SP: No ice cream is going to be made, no place to purchase it. So, if you want ice cream, you've got to go over there before you leave town. Anyhow, that was a big deal, and you're right. K-State is known for something—it's known for being purple, and it's known for having ice cream and good ice cream, and the legislators all look forward to that. I've met more people through ice cream in the Capitol than ever.

So, we've got to get back to the question. So, the library. The students wanted a library. We came over. We brought the check. And the state had this thing. They had 140 million dollars, which was a lot of money back then that then Representative Helgerson had discovered that we had a refund coming from the federal government. The library at KU had burned. We wanted a new library, and they wanted some other things with Emporia and Wichita State.

So then Budget Director Timmer said, "We can spend the 140 million dollars but on one-time things. Because we don't want to build it into the budget."

MT: Right.

SP: "You're a school guy, so you know."

MT: That's right. If you spend one-time money on ongoing things, you're going to have a problem.

SP: Yes, and you don't want anybody to do that because you want ongoing money. I get that. So, she said, "Well, we'll give this money to KU for the Hoch Auditorium, and we'll give the money to K-State for the library, but that was the governor's position, Governor Finney.

Well, the legislature said, "We just need to put the money in the bank." That's always what they want to do is put the money in the bank. "We want to spend it. We don't want to spend it the way the Governor wants to spend it."

But I used the students effectively. KU had a burned building. That was a pretty good message. And they finally approved after a lot of angst, approved the funding. In fact, the chairman of Senate Ways and Means told me he wasn't going to give us the money in the committee, but "Don't worry. We're going to put it in on the Senate floor." He said, "But don't tell your Senator because he didn't want the Senator to worry."

 

That was a tough story. In fact, I don't think I've ever told that story. I might have to do that. So, I left the building. I said, "I've got to get out of here so I don't lie to anybody. I'll just wait until they go to the floor."

So, we go to the floor, and they had it all keyed up. But Senator Phil Martin from Pittsburg, he said, "I want some money for Pittsburg," and he jumped the gun. He had an amendment to put all the money in for everybody, all the projects that they wanted, but he was a Democrat senator.

MT: Wrong party in that session.

SP: He was a Democrat senator. So, they defeated his, and then the Republicans got up with the amendment, and it was still close. Until this day, I remember this, and it's fascinating because you're a student of the process and know it well. It was tied, but they were on emergency final action. They weren't on general orders. President Burke was in the chair up on the dais of the Senate, and he stood up and voted to break the tie. To this day, between the Budget Director and Governor [Joan]Finney and the President of the Senate [Bud Burke], we have a library.

Back to the conversation we had in the beginning, there were those phone booths on the third floor outside the senate chamber. I went out to a phone booth and called President Wefald at his house. He said, "I know, Sue. I already saw it on the news." I said, "No, that was the amendment that got on, Mr. President. Now the bill has passed."

So, that process you've got to know because you can get all the amendments you want, but if the bill doesn't pass, your amendment doesn't matter. That's why it was for the students. That's why I've been so proud of this library. I used it as an undergraduate. I've used it as a graduate student. I'm now the current president of the Friends of the Library.

MT: All right. Great story, a great example of again just having to have that technical knowledge of the process, but also being able to justify in a broader sense whoever benefits from it.

SP: I'm sorry KU had a calamity that got us all something that good out of the process.

MT: That's right, getting some good out of something. Let's talk about another long-term issue. I think that would be the—again, you're going to have to give me the official term.

SP: It sounds like you can't speak property, NBAF.

MT: That's correct. I wouldn't even try.

SP: National Bio and Agro-Defense Facility. So, there is a federal government asset called Plum Island. It's on an island, Plum Island. It's right off the coast between New York and Connecticut, and it is for animal disease research. It is on an island because seventy-one years ago—it's the same age I am, I'll just say that—it was built by the federal government on an island so you couldn't carry any diseases back to the mainland.

 

MT: Good old-fashioned quarantine.

SP: Good old-fashioned quarantine. It didn't matter the deers and birds and everything were going back and forth. That was the strategy.

In the post 9/11 in Washington, DC, it was decided that the newly-created Department of Homeland Security should take this over as a national security asset for the country, but it was old and decrepit and needed help. They decided, "We're going to build a new one. We're going to put a nationwide RFP [request for proposal] out."

We didn't start the process at Kansas State. The KC [Kansas City] area life sciences group decided that it would be a good thing to do. They contacted Kansas State because of the Veterinary School because of agriculture. There were two sites submitted by Kansas, the Kansas State, the site north of campus in Manhattan, and Leavenworth which there was a lot of conversation next to a very valuable Army base might be a good national security kind of a place.

The down select came down to ten. Kansas was still in, very controversial in the state because of a disease called foot and mouth. It's completely fatal and very virulent—is that the right word?—to cattle. So, we had public meetings here.

I laugh because I know you parked at the K-State parking garage. The year we were building the parking garage is the year we were going to have the public meeting on campus. Someone said, "Sue, you can't have it on campus. No one can get there." I said, "Oh, no, we can have it in the Student Union." "Oh, no. You have to move it. You're going to have to have it somewhere else." I said, "Oh, no. We're going to have it in the Student Union." The people I want to come to the meeting, they will have a place to park. The people who want to come to the meeting I don't know or care if they come to the meeting, they're going to have to figure out how to get to the Student Union. That's a strategy. You're going to do it right.

We went through the whole process, down select down to five, had another series of meetings. Finally, the Homeland Security director, Admiral Cohen was his name, selected Kansas, selected the Manhattan site. Win, big win. I remember the day when Mike Seyfert from Senator Robert's office called me in my office and told me, "They told us Manhattan's been selected."

We thought we were done. Then the fight ensued. It's called getting 1.2 billion dollars out of Congress. I'm not sure if you're aware, but the state of Kansas actually put in 25 percent of the cost to build the laboratory.

MT: I knew there was some kind of match involved.

SP: Right. There were two different pieces of bonding and funding. So, the lab finally gets built. The actual ribbon cutting was two years ago this month. It's been transitioned back from Homeland Security to the Department of Agriculture. So it's now under the Department of Agriculture. Huge advocates, the entire Kansas delegation over the years, and we started with Governor Sebelius, went through Governor Brownback.

 

MT: That's what I think was so—really illustrated—that was an initiative, major impact, major funding, major—I think most people would agree or they wouldn't have supported it, ultimate benefit back to the state, but something that took many years had to be bipartisan at the state level, and you had to be just as effective working at the federal level and everything that was going on there and understanding that process to make something like that happen.

SP: The federal government operates clearly differently. They don't necessarily have to pass a budget. They can have their continuing resolution process, but the federal government had provided the funding for the central utility plant, which they were going to build first. That was going to be the plant to support all the utilities to support the facility. They funded that, and they funded that a few years before, and we had a Friday conference call, all the delegation, staff, the Kansas Bioscience Authority. Tom Thornton ran that, and he was basically the lead of the effort; so it was bipartisan state and federal legislators.

We were having a conference call, and I happened to say, "In Kansas, if you don't spend your money in one year, it's gone. It's lapsed. What's the federal government process?" Alex Richard was legislative director for Senator Moran and he said, "You know, that's a good question. I'm going to ask." It was about to run out. So, he and Senator Moran went to the appropriators in DC and made sure that the money stayed in and that the Homeland Security then started the construction. Or for that, they would have said, "We didn't build the central utility plant. Now we don't need to build the lab."

MT: Yes.

SP: It was sort of in stages as you know how the government works.

MT: Right, absolutely.

SP: "You built that part. You've got to build the rest of it."

MT: Yes. "You're committed now." That's a good part of that. And then kind of a third issue that I know you were involved in was, again, I'll look to you for the details, but I guess we refer to it as K-State Salina, if I remember correctly, Kansas had had Kansas Technical Institute long, long ago was what it was called in Salina.

SP: Right.

MT: I assume this was part of that sort of overall restructuring and sort of enhancement of our technical education programs.

SP: There's still seven technical colleges in Kansas. But that was KTI, Kansas Technical Institute, and then, you know, Senator Ben Vidrickson was from Salina. He had a lot of power, and he said, "I want to change the name to Kansas College of Technology." KCOT, what a horrible name. I know this happened when Governor Hayden was governor because we all went to Salina and signed the bill renaming the college.

 

Well, it was sitting next to another institution, Salina Technical Institution. It was in a town where there was—at that time, Marymount College was still operational, a Catholic college, and Kansas Wesleyan, which is still there. So, there was this higher education grouping, and they didn't really have a niche.

So, the Regents decide they need to merge with somebody. The Regents said, "You're going to merge with Kansas State," and President Wefald said okay because they're the bosses. Wichita State really wanted to merge with them, but the Regents—I don't really know the whole political machinations of that, but they said, "No, you're going to go with Kansas State."

Then the legislature has to approve this. Well, the legislature—Wichita has got a lot of legislators, Manhattan and Salina not that many legislators. So, the legislature just was not hearing it. They were not going to have any of it. They wanted it to go to Wichita. They had to introduce a bill.

This was in 1992. I hadn't been here very long. I was still learning. I worked with—Ted Ayres who was doing the government relations on behalf of the Board of Regents. I think Dr. Koplick might have still been the head of the Board of Regents.

MT: He probably would have been, yes.

SP: If not, it was Steve Jordan. I think it was Dr. Koplick. Well, we worked it through the process. We finally got the bill passed, set it up to be—we moved an engineering program from the main campus, engineering and technology, which they still have a very robust program, the flight program.

So, that's another tale of we wanted planes. Senator Dole got us appropriation for planes, seven million dollars. Well, the same thing happened. The appropriation couldn't get the Defense Department to send us a check. I remember one Friday night in the office trying to write some justification to send to Senator Dole's staff. Dan Stanley was his staffer. We were going back and forth. We finally got the Defense Department to give us the money. And it's so bad at the United States Defense Department that they sent us the check twice. We got one check, and then we got another check. We said, "Can we keep both checks?"

MT: I was going to say, "Cash both of those right away."

SP: I called Stanley. "Can I keep both checks?" "Sue, you know better. You're sending the second one back. You can only keep one check."

It's a great school. It's in the higher ed community, if I might say that, and it's really trying to find its niche. It's got supporters. Senator Moran has always been a real loyal supporter of them. While they have an aviation program, it's pilot training more so than it's the research that they do at Wichita State. I think they're really kind of growing up. They've been around since the early sixties as you know on the Schilling Air Force Base.

 

MT: That sounds familiar.

SP: You're a Kansan. Several of those buildings were still some of the early college buildings have really kind of put those to rest and demolished and restored and built new spaces. They have that long runway that's really famous because of the runway being so long there, a lot of traffic for that. They're next door to the Smoky Hill Bombing Range that's run by the National Guard. It's a great location. You went to Fort Hays.

MT: Yes.

SP: Other than the community colleges in western Kansas, it's Hays and Salina. Then you go to Manhattan and go east.

MT: Yes. Again, you mentioned my first round of lobbying, not with the School Board Association, but university students, Associated Students of Kansas. We had the student governments of all of the state institutions and Washburn except Kansas Technical Institute at the time. They weren't part of it, but they did have a student government. They were so small. But we actually had a couple of meetings there just to kind of get to know some of the kids who were there.

SP: That's interesting because they were unlike other technical students under the Kansas Board of Regents.

MT: Exactly.

SP: To this day, they still—all the student body presidents, I can't remember the name of the council.

MT: The Student Advisory Council.

SP: At the Board of Regents. When we wrote the legislation, Salina kept that, and to this day, their president still serves with that.

MT: I don't think—again, as we're really dating ourselves—I was Student Body President at Fort Hays State University. So, I served briefly on that. I don't think at that time—that would have been like late seventies, early eighties.

SP: That they had somebody who was going to the meetings?

MT: I don't think they were at that point. That may have actually been part of what we were sort of talking about. And student solidarity was that they should have a representative there because actually the other thing—technically, at the time, I know it's transferred at the time, the University of Kansas Medical Center was also a separate institution to a point.

SP: Correct.

 

MT: And it had a Student Government Association.

SP: I did not know that.

MT: Or student representation. A friend of mine was a medical student there.

SP: They're still separate, but I don't know if their students are part of it.

MT: How they might have spun all of that out, I don't know, and again, no need to go into this now. This is fascinating. We probably need to wrap up in a minute. Before we end, I want to let you say anything you think I might have missed. But I might ask you to reflect for just a minute if you have any thoughts. One of the themes with some of these interviews I've been doing is, "Has the world really changed that much?" I guess I'm sort of interested. You have worked with governors and legislators and political parties and a process for many decades now. You talked about some of the things that have always been important to be an effective advocate. I'm just curious whether you think—what has changed if anything? Some of it is simple technology, cellphones rather than payphones and that sort of thing. Are there any other things that maybe looking back strike you that whether the job is different, whether kind of the way politics works is much different that you can think over your time?

SP: I think the job is not significantly different. You need to know, for lack of a better word, your client. If you don't know the university, then you can't talk about them, and you really need to know that. Then you really need to know who you're talking to. Half the time you might be talking to somebody about no issue but about their kids, about a sports team, or something happening in their community. You just have to be able to sit down like you and I are doing and have a conversation.

And you also have to approach people. I think that's a skill. I think people who can approach people and ask to speak to them—I've had people walk away from me. I've had people say no. I've had people say, "Come to my office." I've had everything. So, you can't be afraid. You have to put it out there.

The entire time I worked at the university, I always felt like I had the best client, something that everybody valued. They valued K-State. They valued higher education. They valued all the pieces and parts of the university from football to wheat varieties to you name it. I think that was always helpful. I never, ever thought I had to do anything—I guess it's time to go home—I never had to change my values or what I did because I worked at the university because I had some place that I had to do that. I didn't ever have to change.

MT: Right.

SP: People know you're authentic. You've got to be authentic. I think that's a key. I've watched some of your interviews. I'll watch some more of them. The leaders that you have spoken to in higher education, the presidents, the Board of Regents members, the Board of Regents executive director, legislators with education as their kind of legacy all have that same thing.

 

MT: Yes.

SP: They authentically care about education and promoting it from whatever chair they're sitting in.

MT: Of course, some of my best friends are what we call contract lobbyists, and you've done—you've retired.

SP: Right.

MT: But you work for the community colleges. You do other governmental relations work for other clients. I always considered myself lucky because I've always worked for an association that I could really believe in.

SP: Right.

MT: Again, I think you could make the same case in government relations as you can in the legal process. Everyone deserves someone to be able to make their case, and some people are really good at understanding the process and doing that. I've felt very lucky that in my career, I could work for a cause I really believed in, and it's pretty clear that you've done that as well, just looking back on what you've done and talking to you today.

So I'll give you one final chance here. We have lights back on. Anything I've missed that you think is important to share?

SP: The only thing I guess I would say is that everybody should kind of do two things: follow your passion and get really good at it. I never had—people laugh and say, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Well, I'm not going to do that. I never really had that passion, but I sort of fell into a place. When I was leaving the governor's office, Governor Hayden said, "Okay, Sue, I think you're going to be okay, but you know you really like politics."

Let me just say that the politics are everywhere. Everybody's got politics. You know that from your work at the School Board. You had all kinds of school districts and all kinds of superintendents. So, follow your passion. Get really good at it. Find something you want to do, some place you want to do it, and just keep trying and keep working hard.

MT: I could not add anything better to that. Sue, thank you so much and thank you to our viewers. We appreciate you tuning into this. As we've alluded to, there is a growing body of education interviews. I'd advise you to check them out. So, thanks to you, and thank you again, Sue.

SP: Thank you.

[End of File]

 