

INTERVIEW: SUSAN WAGLE

Q: I am Sara Tucker and I am interviewing Susan Wagle for the Legislative Women's Oral History Project. You are a representative, Republican, for the 99th District, which is Wichita or part of Wichita...

[Beginning of tape unintelligible. The above was reconstructed from the standard opening. The following is verbatim tape]

Q: So, what kind of people do you have in your district? All kinds?

A: I have--up near the Kline, I have a lot of farmers and then just east of Wichita, I have a lot of wealthy business type people and then I've got the city of Andover, which is kind of mixed. I have a real mixed clientele.

Q: Okay. How did you first get involved in politics? Was this your first experience, running for the House in 1990?

A: It was my first experience in running for an elected position. However, I'll tell you how I got involved in politics. I got involved in politics by lobbying for a bill for our business back in 1984. My husband and I own a lot of real estate, commercial and residential, which Tommy owns small businesses and one of the businesses we own is three bingo halls. And back in 1984 the legislature... We used to have one bingo game a night, seven nights a week, and a different non-profit organization would come in each night and rent the space and operate bingo--like a church or an Optimist Club and so forth. In 1984, the legislature in their wisdom cut us down to three days a week.

Q: Considering your business, it could be a real problem.

A: Oh yes, it cut us down to less than fifty percent of the time that we had been open in the past. It was real funny because I came up in support of a bill, it was a tax bill, that took...bingo people pay sales tax on the proceeds and in addition to that they pay a three percent gambling tax. Well, we came up in support of this three percent additional tax to regulate the bingo industry and the bill went to the Senate and then it went to the House where they changed the language and they cut the operations down to three days a week. So, I was told that wouldn't happen and I was told when it got back to the Senate, they would clean it up, and I was told we could correct it the next year, and I was told a lot of stories and none of them ever came true. And I watched the legislative process for years and then it just happened to be in 1990 that we lived in a newly districted seat. So I did have experience lobbying before I ran for an office, which is a common experience.

Q: So you were in a primary election with quite a few other people. And you did real well. You were 2 1/2 times or something like that ahead of...well, forty-five percent against the closest followers' twenty-one percent. What did you do right that got you all these votes?

A: Well, I was an aggressive campaigner. I walked door-to-door, but in addition to that, I was a person, I think, who was rather apolitical. Or I was strong in my value system and I think people looked at me like a person that wouldn't change my mind on issues because I had a rather strong personality and I thought these people either want me up there or they don't. I'm not going to disguise who I am to get elected or be politically expedient to get elected. I just felt like, you know, I'm a conservative and they knew that through my literature.

Q: Okay, you're Republican. You just called yourself a conservative. I usually say why are you a Democrat or why are you a Republican? Why are you a Republican and why are you a conservative?

A: I'm concerned. I'm a fiscal conservative. I'm very concerned about the direction of this nation. You know in Kansas we operate on a cash basis law but right now federally we are four trillion dollars in debt and I think that we don't have much to leave for our children, with this debt that we're passing on and we aren't dealing with it. We're not solving the real problems. When I ran for the seat I presented myself as a person who was willing to cut, even on a state level, even though we don't have near the fiscal problem we have federally. But, you know, it all adds up and as a business person, I pay a lot of taxes and I don't think that a lot of times government watches the bottom lines like a private business would. I think the government abuses tax dollars and so anything that I could do to bring accountability into that system, I want to do.

Q: So you went on to do very well in the general election. It was an open seat but still you got sixty-two percent of the vote, which is a good strong win. Were there any other issues or dynamics that came up in the election that you think were important?

A: I think it was a good election, because none of us were incumbents. None of us had anything over the other individual and I think it was an issues-oriented race and I sent out a statement saying where I was on all the major issues and I guess I did something right.

Q: Looks like it. Now, who helped you? How did you know how to do this? Who else or what other forces helped you win this election?

A: My husband. We're business owners and my sister, she works for a corporation and her degree is in marketing and she was probably the best person as far as cleaning up our mail-out materials and making them look professional and less wordy and to the point. So I had a marketing person, my husband, and we kind of did it ourselves.

Q: That's amazing. Were you able to go to the local Republican committee?

A: No, they weren't much help. It was a five-way primary and so they to stay out of the primary and then, really, we don't have a strong Sedgwick County Republican Party. They send you money, but they aren't really a strong organization that helps get people elected.

Q: Did you have anybody go with you door-to-door, except your husband maybe?

A: No, I did it myself. Senator Eric Yost gave me advice. He was a friend. But it's still up to the candidate to put those long hours in. It's nothing but a lot of work.

Q: I have heard that before. You win and a good, solid win and you come up here to Topeka. Did you have an image of what your job was going to be here and how you were going to do it?

A: I did from my experience of lobbying. I knew the committee system and I knew, by the time I'd worked with the legislature, I pretty well knew the process. I came in as a much more experienced freshman than most.

Q: You're a member of the Commercial and Financial Institution Committee, a member of Labor and Industry, Public Health and Welfare. Were these the committees that you asked for?

A: Yes. All three of them.

Q: Why did you want them?

A: I felt like that's where my talents were. I used to work for... I'm a former teacher but before that, when I was going through college, I worked for Child Protective Services, SRS in Wichita, and I had some ideas about SRS. So I asked for Public Health. Banking, I had a lot of people interested in banking in my district and Labor and Industry, I'm a businesswoman. That's just right down my alley.

Q: Have you had any mentors or support groups here that you feel have really helped you do your job?

A: I don't think the support system's that strong. I think the support systems are where we go out and form our own friendships and talk in the evenings. Oh, they have a mentor system and I have a mentor in my office, but really the support comes from your own friendships and your own coalitions that you develop on your own. You have to go out and seek that and make it or else it could be a lonely place.

Q: Are there any role models that you particularly patterned yourself after? Certain style or certain person who seems to you to get the job done you want to get done?

A: I don't really have any. As a new person in the legislature, I get a little disgruntled with people falling in line on those voting boards and kind of going with the crowd. I really feel like, for a group of what you would think would be very independent type people, there's a lot of following the leader around here.

Q: Very interesting. It's only been a little more than a year. Are there any issues or battles or bills or even losses that have come up so far that seem to you very memorable?

A: I think the issue that was the issue when I was elected, it was the issue when we lost the Republican governorship, I think the issue out there is probably tax relief. And I--especially for commercial businesses--I don't think that everybody grasps what we are doing to business in the

state of Kansas right now. They say in 1992 that out of the total tax pie we're going to get 47% of that income from property tax and the most healthy mix in any state is like 33% property, 33% income, and 33% sales. So we're very over-reliant on tax and it's the one thing I seem to get the most calls about and the one thing that seems to be hurting business which is forcing them to lay off a lot of people. We're losing jobs over it, so I think that's going to have to be resolved this year or there will be a greater turnover in the legislature.

Q: I've heard that too. This is a project interviewing women, so it may not surprise you if I ask in all of what you've done so far, deciding to run, running, getting elected, operating here, is there anything that has seemed to you to be different because you're a woman?

A: I think there's more opportunity. There's more opportunity for a woman because there's fewer of us and I think that they respect us, most of us, and I think that as long as you are a friendly and outgoing, congenial type person, I think there's all kinds of opportunities here. Besides the edge you have when you get elected. I read an article that being just female and running for office you get ten percent more votes. So I think there's far more opportunity here for women than men.

Q: Well, I'm also interested in the personal life without intruding. So first of all, let me ask about your early family. You were born in 1953. Where were you born, to what kind of family?

A: I was born in Pennsylvania and moved to Kansas when I was three. Second born of six children. Really spent my entire school life in Wichita. Graduated from WSU.

Q: So, in your family, you probably had a mother and father. Were they traditional? Did your mother function as a housewife?

A: Right. A traditional family. My mother was a housewife. Dad worked on computers and they were both pretty politically astute people. They were registered Republicans and we talked issues, I'd say, at dinner and they were involved. They were real interested in every one of their children having a college education because they didn't have that and that's something they wished they'd gotten. I'd say a typical family for that time period.

Q: Again, you're doing something that's still somewhat unusual for women. When you were growing up, what kind of roles did you think you would have as a woman?

A: I never felt limited because I was female in anything. I know women think they have been. I've never felt discriminated against. I ran all our businesses. I've worked in a lot of jobs and I've always felt like the sky's the limit or however far we push ourselves is how far we're going to go. I think we really determine our own destinies. I haven't ever felt that me being female has been in the way of anything.

Q: Okay. If I have this right you graduated from WSU, Wichita State University in 1979. So, if I'm dividing right, you were twenty-five to twenty-six when you graduated. Did you work for a while and then go back to school? Get married?

A: I was married and divorced. When I was first married I was helping my husband get through school and then after I got divorced, I decided, well, it's my turn. So I put myself through school after that, so that's why it was later.

Q: And you are married to it sounds like a real good husband...

A: Yes.

Q: ...and you have now three children--you now have four children. It the fourth one that was born last year?

A: I was one of the pregnant ladies in the legislature last year.

Q: I did know that, but I was thinking it was number three. That makes it all the more vital that I ask you, how do you do this? How do you manage a family of four children, not to mention pregnancy? How do you arrange your private life?

A: Well, Tom and I have always owned our own businesses and I could always work for our income and if I didn't want to work one day, I didn't work. I've always had the flexibility and, I feel like, the best of both worlds being mom if I wanted to stay home with the kids one day and if I wanted to get out I could work. So, I've never seen work as a conflict with home as long as home is managed properly. I have a housekeeper because the few hours that I'm home I don't want to be keeping house and I have a nanny and so things that a lot of women would do at home to keep the house organized, I'm not real involved with and instead when I'm at home I do more interacting with the kids so that I don't lose that. It is very difficult, though. We talked about moving the kids up here, but my kids are so happy. We go to Andover schools. It's a small school system. We have a neighborhood full of kids and my kids are very happy in their environment and if they came up with me it would be three months with a different set of people. So when we ran for office we thought it would be better for us for them to stay at home and me do commuting. The other thing we do is I've talked to their teachers and they'll come up and the kids will sit on the floor with me. They'll bring their homework up. We'll do a lot of their coming up to see me for a day. If I felt like it was hurting our family life, I would not run again because I wouldn't want my daughters at some point to say Mom, you didn't have time for me. But so far, they've been supportive and I think it's because I've involved them and brought them up here and had them try to be a part of it. But that's tricky.

Q: I bet. Now, how old were they when you were running? Obviously, the one who wasn't born wasn't anything.

A: John was three, Andrea was seven and Julie was nine. So they were young.

Q: You come up here during the week and go home every weekend?

A: Oh yes. I don't come up until Monday morning and, if possible, sometimes I try to sneak home on Thursday night. Or if they're doing a play or something, I'll go home for that and drive up the next day. I don't sleep a lot. We aren't the type of family that...if I go home, I'm up at 4:00

the next morning to come up here and we get everything done that has to be done, but it's usually late to bed and early to rise. I'm getting used to that.

Q: You look okay, so it can't be killing you.

A: I feel like as long as I have that energy, I might as well use it.

Q: Again, this is a question that's a little bit prying, but for some people the cost is devastating. You are not paid a lot. How do you handle the cost of being a legislator in terms of your family finances?

A: I feel like I'm here for a cause. I'm here to create a better tomorrow for my children and just my involvement in the legislature, I know that what we're doing today totally affects their future and what kind of environment they're going to have and how healthy the state's going to be twenty years from now is totally dependent on these decisions today. So it is a total sacrifice, but it's like to me . . . it's just very important to me that we're very careful about the decisions we make up here and that we have family represented and that we have conservatives and business people represented who don't necessarily think that the best answer to everything is another law and government taking it over. I try to push things away from that to make the family stronger.

Q: I'm assuming that your husband keeps on running the business and just sort of gets along without you and you take up the slack when you get home?

A: Right. Like I'll go home this weekend and I'll do books and stuff for January. He'll run the business himself and then when I'm at work maybe two days a week and we'll take time off in the summer vacations and stuff. We have to make time to do things as a family or else it slips by.

Q: I take it you probably are thinking of running again?

A: Yes. In fact, I have announced for a Senate seat.

Q: Now, is this an open Senate seat?

A: Eric Yost is my Senator. He's going to run for Congress and he's the vice-president of the Senate and he kind of would like me to run so he's real supportive of that.

Q: And that's going to be an even bigger campaign?

A: Yes. But on the other hand, family life is a lot easier in the Senate. A lot of them won't be here on Fridays. There's only forty people over there to argue and they get through things in half the time or less than we do and so the time, although there's more letter writing and more phone calls because of a bigger constituent base, the time on the floor is less. I think it would be helpful towards the family situation because I know they go home a lot on Thursdays and we aren't allowed to do that in the House.

Q: That's fascinating. I haven't heard that perspective before but it makes sense.

A: Plus it's a four-year seat. You don't have to worry about running again. So I've announced contingent on everything working out with my family and we really felt like we needed to go through this a second year and see what kind of impact it has.

Q: How was it being pregnant and being up here? Was there any problem with that?

A: I didn't have any problems but then I didn't have any physical problems either. I imagine if you had a complicated pregnancy it would be more difficult because it would be too strenuous.

Q: Well, my mother worked until the day I was born so I come from stock that did that. Is there something you thought I'd ask you that I haven't? Is there something you'd like to say? You said you were a teacher. What were you a teacher of?

A: Oh, I taught regular classroom--grade school. And then I also taught emotionally disturbed kids, so I taught special ed. That teaches you a lot about SRS and government and healthy families and families that aren't healthy.

Q: So this is all kind of a continuation of what you've been doing?

A: Oh yes. I think I've had a good social background and a good business background and I think I can balance the two up here when it comes to tax issues and government involvement issues. So it's kind of fun.

Q: You look like it's fun. It sounds like all I've got left to say is thank you very much for giving me the time.