

Interview with JENE VICKREY by Alan Conroy, September 11, 2020  
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Alan Conroy: Good afternoon. The date is September 11, 2020 at 1:30 in the afternoon, and we're in the House Chambers of the Kansas State House here in Topeka, Kansas. I'm Alan Conroy, a forty-year-plus state employee with the majority of that state service working with the Kansas Legislative Research Department, the central nonpartisan research and budget staff for the legislature.

Today I'll be interviewing Representative Jene Vickrey who has served twenty-eight years in the legislature. He was Speaker Pro Tem in 2011 and 2012, and then he was Majority Leader in 2013 through 2016. Representative Vickrey decided not to run for re-election and resigned his seat earlier this summer. I'll be conducting this interview on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, Incorporated, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing legislators. The interviews will be made accessible to researchers and educators, and these interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Humanities Kansas. Our audio and video equipment is being operated by former Representative David Heinemann.

Representative Vickrey is from Louisburg, Kansas. He's a small business owner. He's married to Teresa and has four children. I don't if any grandchildren yet?

Jene Vickrey: Five granddaughters.

AC: Five granddaughters. Representative Vickrey was elected to the House in 1992 and has continuously served in that chamber then over the last twenty-eight sessions. He currently has represented District 6, which covers part of Miami County.

JV: About two-thirds.

AC: Two thirds of it in northeast Kansas. While in the House, he served on numerous committees over those twenty-eight years. Just a few, Agriculture, Economic Development, Federal and State Affairs, Taxation, Financial Institutions, Insurance, Redistricting, Transportation, and Education. Quite an illustrious career over almost three decades, lots of public service, and that's what we'd like to talk with you about today. Let's just start out with maybe having you tell us something about your life before entering the legislature, and I believe you were born in Kansas City, Missouri.

JV: Yes.

AC: But I guess you consider yourself a native Kansan?

JV: I do. I was just born there. I came, I don't know exactly, but came home, grew up on a farm north of Louisburg. I guess I spent a day or two in Missouri first.

AC: We won't hold that against you. Had you or your family ever been involved in politics before you ran for the House?

JV: No, how I got involved was the pro-life issue was really the catalyst. A group of us wanted to find someone, a legislator, Marvin Barkis, was pretty much on the other side of the issue. We started out looking to recruit someone to run, and everyone that I spoke to, a couple of us were looking, didn't want to run, said that's impossible. Several have said, "If someone wants to run, you should run, if you want someone to run."

I thought that it would be almost impossible, but that was the year that Bill Clinton was elected. It was kind of a year where incumbents had a tough re-election. Sometimes you catch the wave at the right time. I would say that after I was elected, I found out that the solutions weren't near as easy as they looked on that side, outside the legislature. You find out—I think many would say you find out that you agree with—Marvin and I agreed on a lot of things. We just disagreed on what the solutions might be.

AC: Was he Speaker at the time?

JV: He was at the time.

AC: So you defeated a current sitting Speaker.

JV: Yes.

AC: Clearly it must have been an uphill challenge or a battle. I don't know if "battle" is the right word, but a challenge. How does a novice to the political process upset an election, a sitting Speaker?

JV: A lot of knocking doors on a low budget. I believe that that may have helped Marvin not take our campaign as seriously because we were so underfunded. No one's going to give money to a challenger, especially of the Speaker, someone in leadership. A lot of shoe leather, and Marvin, Speaker Barkis at the time being busy helping colleagues get elected across the state. When you're a Democrat in Kansas in the majority party, that's a tough challenge to get your colleagues re-elected. Between that combination—it was 370 and some votes I won by. It was a narrow margin.

AC: Three hundred and seventy-four, I believe.

JV: Someone gave me the advice to go door to door and find people that weren't registered and get them registered. I registered probably close to 500 or 600 people, new voters, going door to door. I don't know how many people went and voted, but that might have been the difference.

AC: Was that political campaign, that very first one, anything like you thought it was going to be? Did you just know it was going to take a lot of hard work?

JV: Anyone that's ran, I think you believe that you can put a few ads in the paper, talk to some friends, and put some signs up. When you find up that it's almost a full-time job to run a serious campaign, that is a shock.

AC: A lot of miles on the vehicle that year? Maybe it was mainly door to door?

JV: I didn't even keep track of it then. Rural districts. I didn't campaign this way after, but in that campaign—now I believe it was not the best advice, but I was told to just knock on every door and not regard whether anyone was registered or not. So I started in the corner of the county and just started knocking on doors and tried to get to—I think I did almost get to every door.

The second time I ran, I found out that two-thirds of the doors I knocked on weren't registered and didn't vote. Many times when you knock on someone's door that doesn't vote, they're very interested and they talk to you a long time.

AC: Lots of thoughts to share.

JV: But they don't even vote.

AC: That's amazing. I guess I've heard just being here in the State House that when it comes to campaigning, you were always sort of like the energizer bunny, that once you started, whether it was running for a leadership post, which we'll talk about, or even in your own district, you were just all in and didn't stop until it was time to stop.

JV: Fundamentally, not many of us would say—most people don't enjoy door to door. I always did. It's very interesting, especially the first time you meet somebody at their door, it's very interesting to meet people on their porch and talk to them. You have to move pretty quickly, but you get a little glimpse of who they are. I think that's what made me a good campaigner. I can say that it's been such an honor to get to know the people that I've worked with and the people in my district, the people who I would have never known. The best people that you can meet are in the legislature. It's a people job.

AC: It sure is. That's right. As you got involved in politics, did you have a mentor, particularly when you started out, somebody that you kind of looked up to in that political sense, not necessarily in a partisan sense, but just in terms of the politics and the institution of running for the legislature?

JV: Several through the years. The first two were Melvin Neufeld and Tim Shallenburger. Tim and I, he needed a roommate. He was Speaker Pro Tem at the time. We roomed together. Tim really gave me a great perspective on the job, the service. He would always remind me that lobbyists are your friends, but they also buy you lunch for a reason. I remember one day, we had been out to lunch with Ed Schwab. He lobbied for Kansas City Power and Light. Driving back, he had a bill he was asking us to vote for. It was, I don't know how to say it, it was a real turkey. We got back here, and I told Tim, I think it was my first or second year, "That bill is so

bad. I can't vote for it." If you know Tim, he said, "If you can't go eat lunch with a lobbyist, then vote against their bill, you shouldn't be here," which is true.

AC: You said there were maybe three or four, but you mentioned two of them. Were there a couple of others?

JV: Tim and Melvin. There was Representative Smith who was from just north of here. There was Gayle Mollenkamp. Gayle gave me good advice when I first started. He said, "Always tell the truth, even when it hurts and stay away from what they call the political spin." When I started, I didn't even really probably know what that was, but that was good advice. He told me, "That will help you get re-elected because that's what people are hungry for. If you don't, you have a clear conscience." Good advice.

AC: Was there ever any times through your career that telling the truth or not putting the spin on things was a challenge for you?

JV: Oh, there always is, even now. You kind of get in those spots where you know that it's going to have some bite, but it's better to do what's right and stand by it. My district was always in favor of the casino expansion, and I voted against it for years. That was always a hot point issue. Every election, it seemed I'd have an opponent who was in favor of expanding, and I would have to explain why I was going against what—most polling showed that two-thirds of my constituents or more, even friends that I went to church with thought it was okay. I would have to educate friends at home. I guess that's a good thing of the election process. It gives you a chance to re-educate every two years on some issues.

AC: And being re-elected then fourteen times, you must have been pretty good at it by then.

JV: I had some challenges. That was probably the issue that was the biggest issue other than some years, you also—when times are good, it's easier for incumbents to get elected. When budgets are tight and you have to raise taxes and cut budgets, those are tough years to get re-elected.

I remember one year, I voted for a tax increase, which as a conservative, I have a good conservative rating through the years, but we cut budgets and raised taxes. Those are tough.

AC: Was there a lot of explaining or educating back in the district over that vote.

JV: Oh, yes. Sometimes you make a call where you make the people who don't like you upset and the people who like you upset. I remember Tim Shallenburger, he always used to say, "In politics, friends come and go, and you make enemies along the way. When you get to 51 percent, you're retired."

AC: You mentioned some local people in terms of mentors in the political world that you admired and respect particularly. Any national figures?

JV: When I first started, Bob Dole used to call all of the House members in Kansas that got elected and congratulated them, just a short call. I got to meet Bob a few times through the years. The last time I saw him was in Miami County. He was amazing how he remembered people, just like Governor Finney was the same way, just a remarkable ability to care about people. I think that's why Bob still—I saw a commercial where he's campaigning for somebody. He has real appeal, just like Governor Finney did. When you're genuine and you sincerely care for people, like people, it shows.

AC: Yes. When you first entered politics, you mentioned it was maybe around the abortion issue, the pro-life issue.

JV: Yes.

AC: That's probably what really motivated you then to take that plunge then and start campaigning and file. Then you must have had a lot of grassroots support or local support to help you in that campaign and I guess the subsequent campaigns—fourteen of them.

JV: Yes, I did.

AC: Clearly, you must have been doing something right.

JV: Once you find out, once you're elected, you have that issue or maybe a couple of issues that you come here, and you want to make a difference, and you find out that there's property tax. There's just so many other issues. My district had a couple of highways that needed to be expanded that were critical. We still have a state hospital that does important, very needed work that's always underfunded, just all of the many issues that are so vitally important. As soon as you're here, of course, it's like drinking from a fire hose. You just find so much that you don't know that you need to learn.

My first year, I remember on Ag Committee, we discussed ratite farming or ratites, which are ostriches and emus, off-farm sale of goat milk, and corporate farming. I was on the Ag Committee. I found out that each one of these committees, there are so many complex issues that you have to discuss. Then after you're here a while, you find out that those are issues that tend to kind of recycle, too. They come back, and you have to work on them again and try to get it better, get it right, and prove it.

AC: Here we're sitting in the House Chambers. Do you remember the first time that you came down to the podium or down to the well to carry a bill once they got done hazing you the first time, if they did it back then?

JV: I don't remember the hazing at that time. I'm sure they did. I do remember one of the first times I came down and spoke at the mic. I had gotten attacked over the state hospital, some vote I had made. It was actually Kathleen Sebelius who was carrying a bill. I came down and

debated her a little bit on that issue, kind of just to hold my ground on it. Kathleen and I have been friends since. But Tim, again, he was my mentor, probably put me up to it, maybe to see if I could survive it and get me in a little trouble. Afterwards, I did okay. He said, "You took on—she's kind of tough." He said, "If you can take her on, you can stand your ground with anyone."

AC: That's good. Clearly you served on some very key committees through the years, a lot of them but Education, Transportation, Energy, Federal and State Affairs, Tax, Economic Development, and, of course, the list goes on, lots of different areas. Just like you were saying that legislature touches on so many different aspects of life in Kansas. We'll talk about that.

I also noticed that serving that long, you served under several Speakers. I was thinking if I had them right, Robert H. Miller, of course, Shallenburger, Robin Jennison, Doug Mays, Melvin Neufeld, Mike O'Neal, and then Ray Merrick, and then Ron Ryckman.

JV: And Kent Glasscock. Kent was the nicest guy in a job at an impossible time. Every one of the Speakers that I served with have strengths. Really I think it's like our president. We have the right person at the right time. Sometimes you don't think it at the time. The Citizen's Legislature works very well. I go back to mentors and people, also my colleagues. I've always had a lot of good friends on both sides of the aisle.

When I first started out, one of the first things that happened, probably one of the third or fourth legislators, colleagues that I met, was Ed McKechnie at a State Employees Forum down in Pittsburg that I was invited to. A question came up about COLA to me from the audience. It was kind of a panel discussion. Ed was so kind to me. I was so green. I didn't know what a COLA was. I looked like a deer in the headlights, and Ed was kind enough to say, "Of course, Jene has state employees. He's going to be in favor of a cost-of-living adjustment, aren't you, Jene?" I'd go thank you. I probably would have answered that I don't drink diet Coke. I drink regular Coke. Ed and I were friends since then. I found out from the start that even though we kind of draw lines at election time and shoot fire at each other, after that, the way it should work is we get along, and we work on 99 percent of the issues together.

AC: So all those Speakers that you worked with and under and particularly I guess Ray Merrick when you were Majority Leader, I guess your relationships or maybe some of the sort of management styles, if that's the right word, if anybody really manages the House Chamber, any thoughts or observations there, kind of comparing and contrasting some of those Speakers through the years?

JV: It's better when your leadership gets along with each other. Some Speakers want to run things without much assistance, and some, Shallenburger was great at delegating and letting everyone else do the work. It's like a family here. It's really healthy when leadership gets along and works well together in both the minority and majority party. Right now, Ron and Dan and I know Tom Sawyer work well together, which is a good thing.

AC: In terms of it working well, like Speaker Shallenburger, being able to delegate or sort of let things go and have the confidence that the committee process is going to work? Clearly as the Majority Leader, in terms of that faith in the committee process?

JV: I shared with Tim the same philosophy that this process, when allowed to work, works well. If you let the issues come through the committees and have support in the body, they should come to the floor and be worked. Tim was good at that with a great example. It may come to the floor and crash and burn, but if it's come out of committee and have support, it ought to be heard.

AC: I did, with the help of the state library, look over your twenty-eight-year career that you sponsored—your name was either on a bill or a resolution 436 times. Your name is on a lot of legislation. As we know, sometimes they pass. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it gets dumped in other things, and the subject matter advances but maybe not that particular bill.

One way I thought it was particularly interesting, the resolutions, in terms of people that you were on the list to honor. I noticed former legislators like Wanda Fuller and Theo Cribbs, and Ambrose Dempsey, and some of those that you were honored. Then, of course, a fair number of resolutions back in your district, maybe somebody who had accomplished something or maybe somebody who had passed away. I noticed a couple of times, the Payola Panther Robotics Team must have been very successful.

JV: They are.

AC: You recognized them several times.

JV: They did a great job. Every year, they compete. What's cool about our Payola Panther Robotics Team, I think it's 4101. They are not funded by a big corporation. They go up against teams that have deep pockets, a lot of funding, and they've had some years where they didn't do as well, but they've had years where they were in the top 1 or 2, which is amazing for just local educators and volunteers and students that roll up their sleeves and work hard together.

Resolutions, there's probably one in there for Norma Stephens. She was our superintendent at the state hospital. I just talk about her. People like her, I got to know by being a legislator. She was such a dynamic, wonderful superintendent for our hospital. She had started there as a high school student, working an entry-level job. She worked her way up all the way through a college education, administration, and was just amazing. It was people like her that you get to meet by being in the legislature, in the colleagues that you have here or just a blessing.

Wanda Fuller, she was the first person that I had—when I started, I was thirty-three. When you're thirty-three, you think that you know something. She was the first colleague that I had that we were in committee together, and I talked to her the day before she had a headache and then ended up having brain cancer and passed away pretty quickly. She was a wonderful, kind, good lady, a good legislator, worked hard. Through the years, there had been so many—Rocky

Fund, I can't even think of how many legislators that we've lost. We are kind of a slice of the Kansas population. So just as we lose friends and relatives, we lose friends here, and those are tough.

AC: In those resolutions, probably to your constituents back home or back in your district, it probably really meant a lot to them through the years, I'm sure.

JV: That's one of the fun parts of this job is getting to give awards, give resolutions, give people recognition for the good things they do. Through the years, even 9/11, every seven years, you've got to have that up and down of the budgets, I've always been an optimist. I know that there's so much good that's going on in our state, even in the tough time that we're in right now with the pandemic and all of the things that are going on with Black Lives Matter. There are some tough things going on. But at the end of the day, we need the good to outweigh those challenges.

AC: I noticed back in 1993, the first name that you were on a bill, I think there may have been multi-sponsors, but it was a bill relating to the crime of carjacking. Does that ring a bell? That's going way back. I don't know if there was any specific thing in your district or maybe it was just a general thing.

JV: I remember that was early. That was kind of a new phenomenon that was going on. We toughened the sentence. It's such a dangerous thing. There's been several times where someone will have children in a car, and how dangerous that is. We stiffened that penalty.

AC: You mentioned that was an issue of its time, but in terms of the legislature as an institution being able to set that public policy to respond to those kinds of issues that kind of percolate up, I guess you think that as an institution, the legislature is positioned to be able to do that and address issues?

JV: We try to be proactive and maybe look down the road to see. That's why NCSL and ALEC and some of those organizations that brings legislatures together are so valuable because sometimes you can catch something that's happening in another state that you can be aware of and be preventative before it starts becoming a problem here.

Many times we have to try to fix something after it's apparent that there's a problem. The easy fixes have been done. I remember on one of my first bills that I really sponsored myself was a—we still have this problem even now. The 68 Highway in my district, people passing school buses that have their stop sign out.

I had a bill that I thought, "This will help fix it," and Herman Dillon was on the Transportation Committee with me at the time, and Gary Hayzlett was at the time the chair. They were both good friends. Herman told me, he said, "If you had come and asked me, I've been here quite a while. I could have told you what would make that better."



We sponsored a bill together to increase the fine and put the labeling on the buses. I think we got it passed. Either we got it passed or we got the ball rolling and it passed a year or two later. Around here, you know how it is. Sometimes a good idea gets hijacked in the Senate. That happens often. They hold it hostage.

AC: It never happens the other way, that the House may hijack?

JV: We always play fair with the Senate. It's those senators over there. I'm sure we do once in a while.

AC: Looking over the years in your bills that your name was on, you sponsored, as I looked down through some of the topics, in '95, there was one, life imprisonment for certain crimes; '96, women's right to know on abortions; '99, sales tax concerning the rate imposed on food sales; common-law marriages in 2001; of course, 2002, school district financing; 2005, Senator Clark's pregnancy maintenance initiative program; 2007, payday loans; 2011, late-term and partial-birth abortions; 2011, taxation, income tax for corporations; 2017, prohibiting the privatization of certain state hospitals, like the Osawatomie; 2018, adoption, protection placement for children in foster care adoption in terms of religious freedom; in 2019, religious freedom, free speech in schools. I mean, 436, lots of bills, lots of subjects, but one of the themes in terms of I guess sort of priority areas for you, I think about education, school funding. I think about taxation. I think abortion or pro-life issues and the care of children. Would that list sort of be your list, or would there be some other things?

JV: Those would be priorities. Foster care systems have always been a tough challenge. Teresa and I were foster parents for years. It was so rewarding, so good for our family. Through the years, you try to discern what needs to be done, and you try to make a difference.

AC: As you think back again over these twenty-eight sessions, I guess I was wondering if there was one that might sort of stand out as perhaps the most difficult or challenging session? I saw lots of clippings, maybe as you pause to think, but certainly in terms of Governor Brownback at the time, the tax vote, and then in terms of I guess trying to adjust things subsequently to that as the economy slowed down. I don't know if that was one or some of the school finance ones certainly, probably.

JV: There have been more tough years since 2001 than years—in fact, there's only been a few years since 2001 that it wasn't really tough. I don't know if it was maybe before 2001, I wasn't—the longer you're here, the more responsibility you have. I came home from dinner one night. Lisa Benlon was here at maybe 9:30 or 10:00 working in her office. Representative Benlon and I, I stopped in and said hi to her. She said, "This isn't all just fun and games around here. Someday, you're going to find out when you're a chair"—at the time, she was Vice Chair. She was there working. She said, "There is a whole lot of work here."

Maybe the reason it seemed tougher since 2001, I had more to do. But, you know, school finance was always tough, getting the right balance for a state that has western rural schools

and then big school districts like Shawnee County and here in Topeka and Sedgwick County, getting that right is I'd almost say almost impossible. It's tough.

AC: Do you think, given the institution or setting public policy, for example, in education for those wide variety of school districts that the institution, the legislature was able to craft something that serves perhaps as good as it can, certain needs as most, it's possible?

JV: It is the legislature's responsibility, and because we're elected by that diverse group of constituents at home that hold your feet to the fire to do what's right for your school district, it makes school finance very difficult to work on, but it's also the right place to do it. I don't think we should have—I know it shouldn't be given to someone else. It needs to be in the legislature. We're responsive to our constituents. It's never going to be perfect, but we keep working on it, or I should say the legislature. I'm not there anymore. The legislature keeps working on it.

AC: You mentioned just in terms of should a legislator vote their conscience or vote their district, and you mentioned one topic, gambling. Did that difficult focal point ever rear its head much, or maybe you were in alignment pretty much with your district?

JV: That was the only one that I remembered that I really went through the years, knowing the challenge that gambling is for business, for families, just knowing the facts, I always felt compelled to do what I thought was right and not expand gambling. The reality is that it's all around our state. I can understand why my constituents always said, "We can drive to Kansas City, Missouri," which from our district is about an hour or less away. "Why don't we just do it here?"

But not very often. Most of the time, my district, and that's what you find. Most legislators reflect who their district is, and if they don't, they're not here very long.

AC: You mentioned gambling. You mentioned school finance. I guess just in some of those big debates, who were some of—besides the legislators and maybe your direct constituents, but were there other interests or groups that were trying to interact with you to share their viewpoints, just besides your constituents?

JV: Well, on the gambling issue, there were many interests that saw a financial profit in getting an expansion done. For years, that was one of the reasons that gambling wasn't expanded. The proponents always had different interests between the horse and greyhound tracks, those that favored more slots, and those that wanted—then you kind of weave into that the Legions and bingo. It's so complex in how to expand and make something that all the interests are happy with. For years, the proponents were as difficult to get it passed working with each other as those of us that didn't want to see it expand.

AC: Did you think in terms of your colleagues, most of them, I guess, I mean you had your position. They respected your position and understood it. They might have disagreed with you, but they understood and respected that?

JV: This body in most cases, you try to persuade—go back to the pro-life issue. I try to persuade friends that aren't voting with us on some pro-life issues, like the big one this year on the Constitutional amendment to come our way, but I think most of us don't take offense at someone that has a belief or a value that's different. It's our job to work as a legislator to advocate our position. If you can persuade someone to come your way, that's—I've never really been offended on most issues by colleagues or vice versa.

AC: You mentioned one lobbyist on maybe the gambling, school finance, whatever, just in terms of the role that the lobbyists have played then in maybe helping the legislature set that public policy on whatever topic it is.

JV: The public belief about what a lobbyist is and what they do, at least at the state level, is much different than reality. Here, a good lobbyist shares the facts, the truth, and information that you need to know about an issue and would never mislead or tell someone something that isn't verified fact. They don't necessarily tell you the flip side of the coin. The gambling folks, when they were lobbying, they'd tell you all the benefits. It isn't necessarily their job to tell you some of the problems that come with expansion. Lobbyists do a good job of giving information and trying to persuade from that factual information to get votes to pass what they want or stop what they don't want passed.

AC: Another institution, another branch of government, of course, is the executive branch. Through these twenty-eight years as a member of the legislature, you've had the opportunity to interact with lots of governors and their staffs. Again, any that come to mind in terms of having an effective relationship and again sort of politics inside, but in terms of helping to craft public policy by maybe the legislature and the executive branch working together on whatever topic it might be?

JV: Most case, the governor will work well with the legislature, especially when times are tough. You have to figure out what solutions are that work. That was the case with Governor Brownback and Kathleen, tough budgets through the years. Eventually you through the process have to figure out how to pay for the budget that the state needs.

Governor Finney was the first governor that I worked with. She was just remarkable how she was thoughtful for everyone she met. Governor Graves was just a likable guy. He was here during mostly good times. That made his re-election pretty easy. His goal through, I believe, his second election was to get a transportation plan passed, which we did. Kathleen came in, and things were pretty tough. Probably almost all of her eight years, things were better, and then Sam, the Sam Experiment, which should have been 2012—it should have really been fixed the next year, and then it would have been policy that would have worked better. I don't know that it would have failed if it would have been maybe changed just a little bit. It was just too expensive.

AC: Any thoughts on that public policy decision of why it took a while to modify that 2012 action?

JV: If the economy would have recovered sooner, I think it would have worked better, but the economy for that entire time that Sam was governor, the economy was a really slow turnaround. Our growth was just not, as you know, every time we'd get a consensus revenue reports, we would hope that they'd be better, and they weren't for years.

AC: Particularly your time as Majority Leader, the biggest challenge? Maybe that's part of it here, was there any particular policy area during those things where you were the Majority Leader and certainly a gatekeeper of things in this chamber?

JV: Those were the two big issues that probably will be really big issues this year, and that's the budget, how to pay for the budget, and school finance is always a constant issue that you have to work on.

AC: As you look back over twenty-eight years, again, almost three decades, are there any particular pieces of legislation that you participated in or feel very proud of in terms of an accomplishment that you think sort of left its mark on public policy in Kansas?

JV: The pro-life bills that we passed, I'm very thankful for. Those are so important. Going back to one of the first was a woman's right to know. Good information, good facts that someone in a tough, a very tough situation should know. Those were all where my heart was at the very beginning and still is.

Then through the years, we've had so many challenges. Our state has always done a good job of meeting challenges. We've had various drug problems, epidemics that we've had to find solutions for, and our state has done a good job. When I first started, it was meth. We started having to address people who were creating the drug and how to stop that, and even now with pain medications that are being abused and finding effective ways to address those.

AC: So that was on the success side. On the disappointment side, now that you have resigned your seat, is there any subject or public policy area that you wish you could have maybe gotten across the finish line or helped to get across the finish line?

JV: Well, this year, the Constitutional amendment for Kansans to make a decision on—really the legislature for the voters to be able to decide if the legislature is who should make those laws concerning the pro-life or pro-choice issue and how those laws should be put in place for our—it's not only about making those less or more accessible, but it's also about public safety and health. The legislature should be who's making those decisions, and it is just giving the public the ability to vote on a Constitutional amendment.

AC: We talked about this question about personal identity. I'm going to read you a little question here, and it's a question we're asking all the participants in the oral history project. Personal identity is loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, marital status. Did you experience times during your time in the legislature where you believed

your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, work with fellow legislators, or provide constituent services? Then the second question is, were you ever given committee assignments or tasks that you believe were a function of your personal identity rather than maybe your ability?

JV: I guess maybe that's a reality that's different for someone—my colleague Barbara Ballard and I were always very good friends. We came in together. It might be a different reality for Barbara, being a lady than me. I guess I'd never had a sense of that. There were times where we all here look at, "Well, he's a conservative, or she's a more moderate." We have all of these labels that we think about each other.

I was always considered as someone—I believe I am pretty conservative. My mom and dad were Depression-era parents. I was raised to squeeze coins hard, to be very careful, all those issues. For me, that was more of an issue of being very conservative. At times maybe that gave me the ability of being on some committees when leadership was more conservative or not when they weren't as conservative. That might be more of an issue than the other for who I am.

AC: Thank you for that. What prompted you to decide not to run again for the legislature? You left on your own terms and the thinking behind that?

JV: Well, twenty-eight years. I just thought it was time for someone new. I still enjoyed the work, enjoyed—don't get as many constituent calls now that I've retired but still get a few, and I always enjoyed those. Part of the job besides being here and working on legislation is when someone from your district calls and has whatever—it can even be a federal issue that they need help with, but being able to help them find who it is that can be the next step in finding a solution.

AC: And maybe just thinking back, so twenty-eight years in the legislature, how the institution, the legislature as an institution has changed over those twenty-eight years. I guess has it changed for the better, about the same, worse?

JV: I believe it's much better in many ways. When I first came, the process was kind of ran more by leadership than by the body. I came in with a fairly large class. At the time when we were elected, the standard was that freshmen didn't come down to the mic and ask questions or have opinions. We had some members of our freshman class that that just wasn't going to be the way it was, Barbara Ballard being one of them, Representative Ballard, and Phil Kline, if you remember Phil. So those two weren't going to just say, "Well, we're new. We're not going to say anything," along with several others of our class. That was a good thing.

When I first started, we would get committee reports, conference committee reports that we didn't even go and caucus on, didn't discuss, didn't have an ability to see—sometimes we'd just have the legal description saying on page 4, line 12, this language was changed. It was really a process controlled by leadership, and that has changed.

Also budgets, when I first started, each budget was ran individually, and Robin Jennison, before he was Speaker, he and Shallenburger came up with the idea of running all the budgets together, which was a huge improvement.

The other issues that I believe we made good steps of progress is just openness, transparency. Our Speaker now, Ron Ryckman, agreeing that bills should not be sponsored without someone being able to see who the fingerprints are of who asked for that. That was a good change.

We've become, I think, a more open legislature and also effective in that it's something that the members now drive more than leadership.

AC: So the public policy process has probably improved then over those twenty-eight years?

JV: It has. I hope that we get back to the place where it's less partisan. It seems like the last few years, our body has been more split on Republican/Democrat. When I first started, it didn't seem like it was that way as much as it is right now. Hopefully, that kind of corrects.

AC: Has that impacted that ability for the body to do effective public policy, do you think?

JV: Some. It's better when the legislature has a challenge that it's working together.

AC: Here's an easy one. Twenty-eight years of service, do you think you've had a positive impact in terms of public policy in Kansas, that you've moved that needle some? Do you feel good about it?

JV: I do. I believe that I've always worked hard to study issues, understand what we needed to do and do the right thing.

AC: I suppose you can't serve up here without having a supportive spouse.

JV: Oh, yes.

AC: So Teresa is probably on track for sainthood after twenty-eight years of you being up here and her probably a lot of the time being back in the district with the kids.

JV: Yes, she's always been great. We started this together. One of the last days that I was here, I think I sent her a picture as I was leaving the chamber saying this is, and it was the last time I left as a legislator although then we came back, and I did it again. So there were two last times. She sent me a text that I still have on my phone that was great. She said, "You've done a good job. We've done this together. I'm proud of the way that we have done," and that I had always worked hard to represent our district and well.

AC: I guess clearly somebody is going to take your place. But anybody that might come up to you and say, "I'm thinking about running for the legislature," what advice would you give that person about trying to become a member of this chamber?

JV: I think the motives are so important, that you come here either to serve or for a personal reason. If you're coming to serve, that's the right reason. We need good, hard-working Kansans here, and that's what we have. It's a good citizens' legislature. It is difficult for young families to have someone that's very young to come here and figure out how to balance career and finances and a young family and stay here.

AC: In terms of the strength of the institution, having that cross-section of Kansans really adds to it?

JV: It's what makes this work. Through the years, I've had colleagues here that are very independently wealthy. Herman Dillon was a truckdriver. I'm a flooring guy. We have Dr. Eplee. Through the years, we've had a lot of attorneys that come.

AC: Do they add to the strength of the institution, those attorneys? You don't have to answer that.

JV: They do, even though we like to kid around with our attorney friends. I think through the years, we've had Darlene who was a housewife that got upset because her legislator didn't—she didn't agree with whoever that was and ran. She was a housewife, a stay-at-home mom. It is a strength.

AC: Any thoughts you'd like to share or anything I haven't touched on or any questions? Anything for the record that is important?

JV: I thought as I was here in this chamber, it is 9/11. It's a very historic day in this historic chamber. It's just amazing to be part of the history of this state and rewarding, and it's been a great honor to be in the legislature for twenty-eight years. I hope that I have done a good job for our state. Sitting here, the history of this chamber, the names are around this chamber, one of them is John Brown from my district that made such a difference in the history. Sometimes we don't know the difference we made until someone writes those history books when we're gone.

AC: That's right. Thank you so much for the time and for sharing your thoughts. Clearly, twenty-eight years, you've had an impact on public policy in Kansas. I certainly thank you for your public service and all the sacrifices you and Teresa have made and your family. Thank you and I really appreciate you participating in the Kansas Oral History Project.

JV: Thank you.

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