

H. EDWARD “ED” FLENTJE: This oral history interview of Joan Wagnon, former member of the Kansas House of Representatives, is being conducted under the sponsorship of the Kansas Oral History Project, Inc., a nonprofit corporation created for the purpose of establishing an archive of oral histories of Kansas state legislators who served prior to the year 2000. These interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council.

Professor [H. Edward] “Ed” Flentje of Wichita State University is conducting this interview at the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka, Kansas, on May 11th, 2018. Audio and video services are being provided by the Chapman Center for Rural Studies at Kansas State University under the direction of Tom Parish.

Ms. Wagnon, from Topeka, Kansas, has [had] a broad-ranging career in politics and government and in the private sector. She graduated from Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas, —

JOAN WAGNON: That’s right.

EF: —with an undergraduate degree in biology in 1962 and a graduate degree in counseling and guidance from the University of Missouri in 1968.

She was first elected to the Kansas House of Representatives in 1982 and reelected to five additional terms, serving from 1983 through 1994. She served on the tax committees of the House for eleven legislative sessions: as the ranking minority member of the House Tax Committee in the 1989 and 1990 legislative sessions, then as chair of the committee in the ’91 and ’92 legislative sessions, and again as ranking minority member of the committee in the ’93 and ’94 legislative sessions.

That’s kind of an intro. Does that sound accurate?

JW: It’s exactly accurate.

EF: It’s exact- —that’s good. Well, we got a lot of ground to cover.

JW: Okay!

EF: So, let’s get going. You first started in an elective position in ’82. How did that happen?

JW: Well, there’s a funny story behind that. I’ve always been interested in politics and never really had thought about running, myself, but helping others who ran. And I was down in Arkansas visiting my folks with my kids, and the person who held the seat in the 55th District was Loren Hohman II, and he ran into some personal difficulties that forced him to resign his position just right after the primary, just days after the primary. I was down in Arkansas, and my husband called and said, “This is it. You need to run for this seat.” And I said, “Well, we can talk when I get back.” And by the time I got back, there was a story in [*The Topeka*] *Capital-Journal* saying, “The husband of Joan Wagnon says she’s running for the 55th District.” And it was one of those circumstances where the precinct committee people make the

choice since there was no primary, so I had to find thirty-eight people and talk to each of them and managed to get myself elected on the second ballot. And I've been running ever since.

EF: You have been. Now, you're telling me it just started then. There must have been something back—were you raised in a political family?

JW: I was raised in a—no, the answer in short. I was raised in a family that listened to the news a lot. My father and mother were both Democrats. They were strong—strongly believed that FDR [President Franklin D. Roosevelt] could do no wrong, and they liked [President] Harry [S.] Truman, so they talked a lot about politics. But my mother was just horrified that I would think about a career in politics, so I didn't tell her for a long time. So, no, I wasn't raised in a political family.

EF: College?

JW: I was the first one to go to college in my family. In fact, it took a group of ladies from the Methodist Church to come over and convince my father to let me go to Hendrix College, because he thought I could just go to the local junior college and that's all the education girls needed, so—

EF: Now, I don't think of a biology major as prep for politics.

JW: Well, it wasn't where I was going. I had spent summers working at the local hospital lab, and a friend of mine, who went on to medical school—and I kept thinking, *Well, we want careers in medicine and science.* And so, I trained for that, and I was really tired of school. I got as far as taking the medical college admission test and just decided, I ain't gonna do that. So, I got a job at the hospital in Little Rock, where I worked for a couple of years, and then, when Bill and I moved to Missouri, he was still working on his doctorate at the university in Missouri. I worked in another research lab in the University of Missouri, so I spent a lot of time in the medical field.

When I moved to Topeka, there was nothing that I could do except go work in a hospital laboratory and draw blood and carry urine samples, and I thought, "I'm tired of that." So, I had gotten a degree so I could teach school, and I actually taught science at Northern Hills Junior High [School]. Taught eighth grade physics and earth science and then went to Boston after that and worked as a science consultant in an elementary school. So, this whole politics thing was not where I was going.

EF: Now, when did you arrive in Topeka?

JW: We moved here in 1968, in the summer. Bill got a job at Washburn [University], and, like I said, I went to teach at Northern Hills Junior High and then decided to get pregnant and have a family, so I stayed at home for a while, being a stay-at-home-mom with little kids. And talked a lot about politics

with friends. Bill's very interested in political things. I would have thought *he* would have been the first one to run for office and not me, but he thought it was a good idea, and so we did it.

EF: Now, at some point you were involved with the Y.

JW: I went to work in 1976 for the YWCA of Topeka, and they had just opened a brand-new building. I had worked with a group of women there as a volunteer and wrote a grant for them, interestingly enough, for the Kansas Humanities Council and was very interested in women's issues. And so, they offered me a part-time job, which later, they offered me the job as the executive director. So, I spent sixteen years as the CEO of the YWCA, and I was very active on women's issues. And I think that's how I really got interested in politics.

EF: So, your work with the Y overlapped your legislative service.

JW: It did. I remained employed at the YWCA the entire time that I served in the legislature.

EF: Okay. And most of that as the director?

JW: All of it as the director.

EF: All of it as a director?

JW: Yeah. And part of what I did through the YWCA was build an advocacy program. We started a shelter for battered women and a whole community coalition on domestic violence and sexual assault, and that took me over to the legislature. I can remember sitting in the all-male, white Senate Judiciary Committee, the first time they held a hearing on the Protection from Abuse Act, testifying before them and Jack Steineger, who just took me apart. And I felt like such an idiot because I didn't know very much about process or anything. And a local legislator, Ruth [W.] Wilkin, took me aside and says, "Let me show you how this works." So, I had some help from people. And because I—and that's really what blossomed in terms of my interest in public policy.

EF: You were always a Democrat.

JW: Always are—have been and still am.

EF: Okay. You get to the legislature, and if you have fingerprints around, it's on taxes.

JW: That's right.

EF: You—I think I said eleven legislative sessions—

JW: Yes.

EF: —on taxes, out of twelve, which means you have been put on the Tax Committee in the middle of a legislative term, which I found a little unusual.

JW: That's right. Well, there was a reason for that. There was a reason for almost everything that happens around here. Marvin [W.] Barkis was running for minority leader at that point. Marvin had the seat on the Tax Committee that I took, and Fred [L.] Weaver had been the minority leader for a long time, and all of a sudden John Carlin appointed him to the Board of Tax Appeals, and a lot of us were musing about whether or not that had something to do with reappraisal and that it might be coming. But anyway, Fred left, and Marvin ran for minority leader. Asked me if I would support him, and I said of course I would, and he said, "What would you like?" I said, "I'd like your seat on the Tax Committee."

And, again, that's Ruth Wilkin's influence. There were three Democrats during the 20th century that ever chaired a tax committee. Ruth Wilkin was one, and I was one, and we have no idea who the other one was. But it was, you know, way back. But Ruth told me—she said, "Lots of people want to go get on Ways and Means or Appropriations." She said, "You get on Tax. That's where the important decisions are made."

EF: Yeah.

JW: Yeah. And so, she gave me that guidance, and that's why I went after Marvin's seat. And I voted for Marvin. I got his seat, and I'm pretty good at it.

EF: Had you had interest before Wilkins? I mean, you really attribute her the—

JW: My father was a small businessman, and he did his own taxes, and so by the time I was twelve, he was showing me how to do his business taxes, and I did my own taxes. I *still* do my own taxes. I was probably the only one on the Tax Committee that knew what a 1040 Form looked like. So, I just find it of interest. And I learned a lot in—in those first few sessions. Robin [D.] Leach was the ranking minority member, and Robin helped me a lot to understand what was going on, and I—I listened. I sat on that committee and listened hard and learned and figured out what a balanced tax system looks like.

EF: When you look back at twelve years in the legislature, what do you point with pride to?

JW: The tax plan in '92 that put a statewide mil levy in place and lowered property taxes across the state for the vast majority of people. I look at the work we did on classification and appraisal. I worked all of those bills, and the system that we got in place now is so far advanced over where it was, before classification and reappraisal were enacted, because nobody kept them up. But we designed a system so that appraisals would be updated regularly. We looked at how the county appraisers' offices work. So, I really got into the details of all of that and did a lot of work on that.

I did a lot of things that weren't tax related. We got the Protection from Abuse Act passed. I carried a lot of legislation in this House chamber on what you would call women's issues, things about

domestic violence. The first time I spoke in this chamber was on a bill [that] prevented spousal rape. So, lots of that. I got appointed [by the Chief Justice of the Kansas Supreme Court] to the Child Support Commission. And I worked a lot on child support, so back in the mid-'80s, when the federal law on child support changed, we had to redo the laws here.

The other piece of advice that I got from someone that I thought was a mentor was Linda Terrill, who was the administrative assistant for Fred Weaver that first year. And Linda, who is a great tax attorney, said, "You need to get on the Judiciary Committee." She said, "Right now there are just all these lawyers on it, but they need a woman, and they need someone who can look at issues from something other than a nitpicky legal perspective." So, she helped me get on the Judiciary Committee, where I stayed a number of years. And it was one of the best things I did because those are fundamental fairness and justice issues that come before that Judiciary Committee.

EF: And you got on that right away.

JW: Right away.

EF: And so, you would have asked Weaver to appoint you to that committee?

JW: I didn't ask Fred Weaver very many things. I asked him for a contribution of a hundred dollars after I got nominated from that Nominating Commission, and he turned me down flat. He looked at me and said, "I don't think you can win." I thought, "I'll show you." So, I never talked to him, but I talked a lot to Linda Terrill, and Linda was the one that recommended that I should take that seat.

EF: Even before Tax?

JW: Even before Tax. I was on—yeah, I came off of Pensions [Committee], I guess. I'm kind of interested in those things, too, but Tax was more fun.

EF: Well, I want to go over some of these areas you've mentioned, but if we go chronologically, you mentioned classification and reappraisal. Now, you would have been brand new.

JW: Well, no, I'd been there four years.

EF: Well, okay.

JW: I came in on the wave of John Carlin's second term, and that wave was the severance tax. And then it was not until 1987 that we started doing classification and reappraisal. [To clarify, although the Classification amendment to the Kansas Constitution passed and was subsequently adopted by a public vote in 1986, the real work was done after that to pass a myriad of laws defining how the appraisal system would work under the new amendment. The amendment didn't even go into effect until 1989 to allow for all the changes that were necessary to develop a new appraisal and classification system

under the amendment.] And by then I was the ranking Democrat, and Robin Leach I think was beaten in '86 and left the legislature. And Robin was smart as a whip. Knew all that tax stuff. And he had coached me a lot, and so Marvin let me go ahead and move up to the ranking tax member, which meant I sat on all the conference committees, and I worked with someone who became a very good friend of mine, Ed Rolfs. Ed was chairing the Tax Committee. And then, later, with Keith Roe.

And so, tax, oddly enough, was never a partisan issue. Tax was just kind of an academic—you know, you figure out what the system ought to look like, you look at the pros and cons of anything that you're assessing (it's very analytical), and then you vote for it. So, we didn't have a lot of Democrat versus Republican fights over that. We had a lot of rural and urban fights, a *lot* of rural and urban fights, but—so I worked really well with him and then with [James D.] "Jim" Braden when he was the chair. So, all of us worked together on—on those issues, to try to come up with a responsible solution that would make property appraisal and classification in this state work.

EF: Now, I consider that kind of surprising: Taxes is not partisan?

JW: Well, it's not. I mean, it—yeah, obviously you can have floor fights that are, but the work that went on inside the Tax Committee was a very congenial working back and forth between Republicans and Democrats. Now, we sure had our differences in—in philosophy, but it was more urban versus rural. You know, some of the conservatives didn't want to do anything. But for putting together something like classification and reappraisal, it was coming. It was going to come one way or the other, so who is it that you're going to help and protect? Well, we thought the homeowner needs to be the person that we look out after this. And we need to make sure we have a good business climate. So that's what we did.

EF: Now, Carlin would have added farmers to that, too.

JW: Yeah. I was less sympathetic to farmers. I was less sympathetic to the myriad of exemptions that came about.

EF: Yeah. Well, that—I find that interesting that you would—I mean, Ed Rolfs and Keith Roe.

JW: Yeah!

EF: —and all those folks. It was a different era, I guess, in general.

JW: It was.

EF: But I never think of taxes as completely nonpartisan, for some reason.

JW: It's the high-profile stuff, yeah. But the nuts and bolts of putting together things that work for counties, for cities—you know, what kind of taxing authority? Should we be allowed to raise the sales tax for this reservoir? Just seldom was it a partisan fight. It was—there were always disagreements.

Don't get me wrong. But it wasn't always that the Democrats and the Republicans were in a fight. It was just people wanting to get the job done.

EF: When do you remember coming down to the podium on taxes? Do you recall your first experience doing that?

JW: I don't remember my first one. I remember several that were—that stand out in my mind. I carried a bill to repeal sales tax exemptions. Joan Finney was really big on repealing sales tax exemptions, so we kicked one out of committee. At this point, I was the chair, and I carried that bill for more than eight hours while everybody in the chamber, friend, and foe alike, came down to add more exemptions when I was trying to take them off. And I learned an interesting lesson that day. That was the worst experience I had.

EF: You were talking about '91, probably.

JW: Yeah. Sorry, I'm out of your chronology here.

EF: Well, let—you mentioned school finance.

JW: Yes.

EF: And how do you remember that time?

JW: It was exhilarating. It was exhausting. It was a huge, big challenge and a puzzle, and at the end of it, I felt like we had done something really, really good. In '91, I believe, we had passed a tax bill. Fred Kerr and I had worked on that. He was majority leader in the Senate, and he kind of stayed close to the tax issues as well. And I was on the Conference Committee for that, and we put together an income tax bill that we—

EF: You're talking about 1991.

JW: Ninety-one—that we thought would pass, and the governor vetoed it. Here we are, Democrats in the majority, and the governor just vetoed it. Well, that I think pushed us in the position where then we had to come in on '92, and we had—it was unconstitutional, so we all had to figure out what to do. Rick Bowden carried most of the legislative burden on the mechanics of the school bill, itself, and I carried most of the mechanics of the tax piece that went with it.

But we sat back there in that speaker's office, and there'd be fourteen or fifteen of us, not all Democrats, just folks that wanted to get it passed, and we'd sit there and argue about what the court was trying to tell us and what did we need to do, and so we kept—we finally came up with this notion at that point, which I think was a departure from what had been done in the past, that we were going to fund schools by passing the levy for—a statewide mil levy, and we could coincidentally use that to

reduce [the] property tax burden, which at that point I think the average was, like, seventy-five, seventy-six mils, and we knocked it down to thirty-five, which is not bad, and that we would spread that tax base across to all of the schools on a per-pupil basis. And that is a big departure from what had been done in the past, by looking at assessed valuation.

And so, the first thing we had to do was sell the concept of how we were going to resolve the problem, and then we had to negotiate the details. I was in favor of a statewide mil levy and a statewide amount, the base per pupil, which we still have today, the base amount—I can't remember what it was, maybe thirty-six hundred—and Gary Blumenthal, a legislator that was elected at the same time I was, from Johnson County, said, "You gotta take care of the local option portion." So, we argued for weeks over how to construct a local option budget that we could get the Johnson County votes, which we had to have, and still stay within the confines that we thought the court had given us at that point in time.

So, I cooked— (Isn't that typical for a woman?)—I cooked lunch.

EF: I thought you were going to say "cooked the books."

JW: No, I cooked big pots of chili and other things and would bring them in and hold meetings over the noon hour, and I would feed legislators, ten, twelve at a time. And I had this great office that even had a little kitchen, and so we would—we had a big flip chart. Ed Rolf just loved flip charts. And we had a big flip chart, and we would write things on the flip chart, and I would serve lunch. And both Rick Bowden and I would try to explain to them what we were trying to do in this bill. And I cooked my way through school finance.

EF: You softened the opposition on taxes with food?

JW: I fed 'em all. Well, what we softened was conversation. What we softened was opinions that had no basis in how they were formed. And we gave them facts. We gave them understanding of what we thought the court was trying to tell us at that point. And we—we negotiated. You know, "What can you live with? What can you not? Tell me what *your* community needs. How are *your* schools working?" So, we had many, many conversations, and I think the contrast that stood out in my mind between how they waited till pretty darn much the end of *this* legislative session to even start talking about it—we talked about it from the very beginning. And it was bipartisan. It was not just Democrats.

EF: The idea of a mandatory, statewide levy was radical.

JW: A radical departure.

EF: And I don't—where did it come from? Where did the idea come from?

JW: I think it was mine.

EF: Who? Yours?

JW: I think. It may have been Marvin's, but I'm—I mean, it came out of our conversations.

EF: I mean, just out of the gray matter?

JW: Well, out of conversations. You know, when we—the beauty about being able to talk to people about issues is that you—you can, in a small group process, work your way through. “Well, what if we tried this?” “What if we tried this?” So it isn't that I wrote a bill and said, “We're gonna do this.” It just came out in that office back there, in our conversations in talking about it. But I probably had the best understanding of anybody in our caucus of how property taxes worked because I had worked on reappraisal.

EF: Where was the opposition to that?

JW: Well, it was all over the place in the beginning. That's why we sold it with various and sundry little, small groups. And I'm sure people went to the bars and talked about it at night, too, but—and we had lots and lots of meetings. And we had the court pushing on us, and that helped.

EF: Now, you had a governor who started out with the notion that getting rid of exemptions would fund tax reductions and school finance and a variety of things.

JW: Right.

EF: How did that change in one session?

JW: After I stood for eight hours in this chamber, trying to sell that, it became abundantly clear that we weren't going to make any progress.

EF: And you're talking about '91 again.

JW: Mm-hm. We went back to an old legislative publication that Chris Courtwright, who is just a marvelous legislative staffer, pulled out for me, called the Hodge Report. And it went back to when Shelby Smith was chairing the Tax Committee and Robert [F.] Bennett was still in the Senate. And they decided, this group of six, that they were going to completely overhaul the whole tax system, and they repealed all the exemptions and started over. And I think that was in the seventies sometimes. But that's probably the last time that strategy would ever work.

And so, we went back and started talking about, “Okay, you know, if we remove them all, what kind of rationale would we have for putting something back? Well, if it's a definitional exemption, it makes it not the kind of tax—a value added tax, then we need that. If it's an exemption that we put in because it doesn't make any sense for municipal governments to pay sales tax when they're collecting taxes to pay sales tax, so it's just a shifting, so we can get rid of some of those.”

And so, we tried to work through all those exemptions. But when you get to the not-for-profits, everybody has a favorite. And if you look at the numbering system in the statutes right now, 3606—I think it's a vvvv [KSA 75:3606 vvvv] at this point. I mean, it just keeps going because somebody comes in and says, "Oh, I think the Rotary Club needs to be exempt," and everybody says, "Okay, we'll help you." And so, we have a circumstance where the Shawnee Rotary Club can buy things without sales tax, and there's a Wichita club that wanted to sell something and not pay sales tax. And so, it's this hodgepodge of irrational decision making that shows up in the sales tax code. And trying to sort that out and straighten it out—it was clear to me in my mind that we needed to fix it, but it was also clear to me, after several tries, that unless you build a huge base of support for making an overhaul of the whole sales tax code, you can't run a bill and expect to get out of there with anything except more exemptions.

EF: Now, the final tax package obviously was not just a mil levy.

JW: It was sales tax and income tax.

EF: Yeah. How did that get put together?

JW: Pretty much with a small group of us looking at how much money we needed and how—where we thought we had some room to make changes. We had gone through—I need to digress a minute. In 1986, the federal government made a major tax overhaul, and it was what was often called "the showdown at Gucci Gulch," you know, with all the lobbyists. And they really overhauled the federal code, so Ed Rolfs decided that in '87 and '88 we would make changes in the Kansas code to bring us in compliance with that, because we've always piggybacked on what the federal code is. It makes the administration of tax a lot easier if you can piggyback on what you're already filling out for your federal return.

So, we slavishly adhered to this notion that a good tax system is a three-legged stool. And you've heard that so many times. If you look at the balance between local property taxes and sales tax and income tax, you can fairly apportion that tax load. So, we looked at, you know, "Well, we've got a little—a little more coming in from property tax here, so let's make some adjustments in the income tax." And we added sales tax to just finish the thing off, to get the final amount we needed.

EF: So, the three-legged stool was part of the balancing of that tax package—

JW: Yes, yes.

EF: —in '92.

JW: Yes. Yes. We talk about that a lot. And then by '95—of course, I'm gone by then, but Governor [William P. "Bill"] Graves puts together another tax commission that reaffirms that this balance between

sales and incomes tax is—is important. What gets out of whack is the local option sales tax, and that's kind of like sales tax exemptions because people want to come in, and the Banner Creek Reservoir needed a quarter cent on its sales tax, and at some point, while I was still on the Tax Committee—I don't remember exactly when—we enhanced the ability of local governments to raise a local sales tax. For the longest period of time, they had to have an election to do it, and now we've just made it real easy, and I look at my sales tax receipts in Topeka, and I'm paying 9.15 percent.

EF: Well, for city wide or county wide, I think you still need an election.

JW: Yeah, we've had several.

EF: But you've got a lot of community districts, neighborhood districts bumped up, as you have said.

Your first comment about your experience. You pointed—you said the school finance result—I think you were saying—was a great point of pride.

JW: It is.

EF: And you're talking about the end product, basically.

JW: Yes.

EF: What about the process?

JW: Oh, I think the process—we wouldn't have had an end product if we hadn't done the process that we did. If Marvin Barkis had not been open to having lots of input—he was *not* an autocratic ruler; that is for sure—we wouldn't have gotten there. If we hadn't had people in—in various parts of our caucus and on the other side of the aisle as well that were knowledgeable and well informed, we couldn't have gotten there. If we hadn't had a willingness to respect the fact that the courts said we got to do something rather than say, "They're not gonna make us do this," we wouldn't have gotten there. So the process was how we made it work.

EF: And you had close votes—

JW: Oh, yeah!

EF: —on the House—

JW: We had sixty-three Democrats, and we had five Republicans that regularly voted with us, regularly, which helped us move things along.

EF: You may have been here when Fred Kerr did an oral history interview, and I have to say I was marvel—I marveled at his—his instinct to keep trying. It was kind of like, "Well, we failed five, six times. We're goin' at it again." And, I mean, I could have seen the Senate almost recessing, saying, "We'll deal with it next year," or a special session or—

JW: We couldn't have gotten there if he hadn't had that commitment to making Kansas work, to solving the problem. I think if you had to characterize any of us that were involved in those issues, Republicans or Democrats, we were problem solvers. We had a problem. We had a big problem. And we had to solve it. And we figured out how to work together and how to craft a solution that everybody could buy. It was politics at its best, I believe.

EF: One other element of the—I mean, when I look at what is in fact going to the court now in terms—the structure was really put in place in '92.

JW: It was.

EF: The Base A plus weightings. But the other one that came up and was new was the state aid for construction. Now, where did *that* come from in this who process? Who was really pushing that element?

JW: I think that came—

EF: I'm not sure that would have been a tax issue.

JW: Well, it had to do with equity. It had to do with whether or not you could—you could fund a school and then not have a school to go to school in, and so we had to look at the capital outlay mil levy, and it had to have the same requirements—I'm pretty sure that if you went back in and looked at some of the things that the Supreme Court told us, they would have made it very clear that that was a part of it, because it was easy to focus on base state aid, but you couldn't just—you had to look at all of those funds.

EF: Well, I'm going to move to another subject.

JW: Okay.

EF: You did not mention the Children's Initiatives, which kind of surprised me right off the bat. And I—I look at that interim committee. Quite unusual arrangement.

JW: Yeah.

EF: Marvin Barkis chairs. Bob Miller vice chairs. Joan Wagnon facilitates. How did *that* happen?

JW: Marvin knew his strengths, and his strength is being a visionary and looking way out, far ahead. His strength is not in details. He knew that I had, through all this work that I'd done at the YWCA, on the Child Support Commission, running childcare programs, all kinds of legislation that I had been involved in affecting children and families, that I had the depth of understanding of those issues to help move that committee through, and the facilitation skills.

So he let me do that, and that was just more fun than anything I'd had in a long time. We came out with a physical blueprint—I mean, a big blueprint, and a very detailed book of strategies, and many of those pieces of legislation, we just ran right through.

One that sticks in my mind right now is we were having a terrible time with DCF [the Kansas Department for Children and Families], the old SRS [Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services] and what they're doing to take care of children and families. And we've had a number of child deaths. Well, one of the things that came out of that Children's Initiative was a Child Death Review Board bill. And had they not let that lapse, they might have been able to deal with some of the issues that came up with these murdered children. And that's just one very small slice of the kind of things that were in there.

I—I loved doing that, and we did really great work, but it also falls apart if you don't tend to it, and over—over twenty years, from when we did the Children's Initiatives to now, a lot of things went by the wayside, like the children's budget. They just didn't keep them up and didn't stay on it. For a few years, it was a good guide for people who wanted to see where you could find ideas on what kind of legislation would help children and families. And agencies used it. They used it in SRS. They used it some of the private agencies. It was certainly one of the things that helped push towards privatization of foster care and adoption, so—

EF: One part of it that—as I watch how the legislature works—one part that is difficult for *me* to understand is how the Senate just kind of said, “Oh, you folks—you folks do it.”?

JW: Mm-hm.

EF: How'd that happen?

JW: They just didn't want to be part of it, so they'd pass our bills—it was a passion for Marvin. It was okay for R. H. Miller. I mean, he didn't wake up thinking about it every day like Marvin did. But you had people like Sandy Praeger, Kathleen Sebelius, me. You had four or five guys who were CEOs from—or executives from companies. John [E.] Moore [from Cessna] was there. Dave Somebody-or-other [King] came from Sprint. And it just got a life of its own. But the Senate just never caught the fever.

EF: Now you were the first chair of the Corporation for Change.

JW: I was.

EF: Was that a volunteer job, or—

JW: Sure. It was—it was intended to be kind of a think tank to keep it going, and John [Moore] was the vice chair. And it was a way that we could make it work, but it—like a lot of ideas, it—it did not—it did

not stand up because once the group that really cared about it moved on to other things, the people who came after that didn't see its usefulness as much.

EF: If you had to do it over again, would you?

JW: Probably not. I think you need to—if you're going to really bring change, I think you need to work through established structures. Creating new structures isn't a good model.

EF: In other words, the idea of a Corporation for Change kind of as an independent entity or—

JW: Yeah. I probably wouldn't do that one again. That came out of a lot of discussions that we had with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and we were working a lot with the [W.K.] Kellogg Foundation at that time, too. And foundations have the luxury of a lot of money, and they can float all kinds of new, high-flying ideas. And I think that was a hint, or a suggestion of a possible strategy that came to us from Casey, because Casey funded it. But it—it didn't have the permanence that it needed to.

EF: It was kind of independent of the whole—

JW: Yeah. And it wasn't attached enough. You know, people are always looking for strategies around here to—to get new ideas going, whether it's legislative post-audit or you have an interim committee or whatever vehicle it is. If you don't have a strong champion on an issue, it doesn't move. And the people who are successful in this legislature today, ten years ago, twenty years ago are people that championed issues, developed the skills to facilitate conversations, to bring other people on board. And that's what it takes to make things work.

EF: I want to go back to the '91 session.

JW: You loved the '91 session.

EF: I don't know why. Joan Finney, kind of a surprise victory?

JW: Very surprising.

EF: The House Democrats.

JW: Surprise.

EF: Surprise. Sixty-three votes. All of a sudden, Marvin is speaker. What happened?

JW: I think [John Michael] "Mike" Hayden—as I was going door to door in my own district, running for reelection (the toughest race I had, by the way)—

EF: Really?

JW: Mike Hayden had not succeeded in making the people across this state appreciate what he had done, and it wasn't until he left office that I truly began to appreciate what he did as governor. But that gravelly voice, the controversy that was going on, and Joan Finney being somebody, you know, just like

your old aunt that you knew that showed up everywhere and was nice. People would stop me and ask, “Do you think she’d be okay?” Because I could tell they were looking for some kind of reason to vote for her. I knocked on every door. I didn’t pay any attention to who was a D or an R. I just knocked on every door and got acquainted with the people that lived in my district. And after so many times of being on their doorstep, they kind of knew who I was. And so, they’d want to talk about, you know, “Who do you know?” and “Who is this?” But they really had questions about her, because she was talking about sales tax exemptions. She was just blasting Hayden everywhere she went. And the people hadn’t warmed to him, and I—I felt that election turn in the last ten days on the doorstep. You could just feel it when you go from house to house and you think, “These are—these are not the people that would normally vote for her.”

EF: But you are elected. You’re in office. You’re taking your seat, and it’s chaos.

JW: Oh, yeah.

EF: Someone described it to me as an Alice in Wonderland quality, with the Red Queen exclaiming, “Off with their heads.”

JW: That’s exactly how it felt.

EF: Is that fair?

JW: Yes! Yes! She was all over the place. We—we as Democrats and as the majority party thought, “Okay, we may not have thought she was gonna get elected. We’re kinda surprised we’re all here. But we’re gonna do everything we can to make her look good and to carry out her policies.” But she didn’t work with us. She had no structures in her office, in the governor’s office, that moved things through. She appointed strange people to—you’re laughing, but—

EF: laughing. I’m sorry.

JW: Well, she called my husband and said, “You know, I took a class from you. Do you know anything about government? Come work for me.” And he took a sabbatical and worked for her that first year. Yeah! And we were in an interesting place because he was trying very hard to be loyal to her, and I kind of lost—lost this feeling that just because we’re Democrats I have to support anything she does. Even if it’s screwy. So, it wasn’t until we got really towards the end of the session, where she was spending a lot of time with people like Kerry Patrick and the “Rebels,” and she was vetoing — Kerr was just floored, and so was I, that she vetoed that tax bill that we had moved heaven and earth to get it passed. And she just—she was mercurial. She was—it—you just never knew what was coming.

EF: Sort of like [President Donald J.] Trump, —

EF: Now, —

JW: —with a higher moral code.

EF: —I believe Marvin said that “we sent Sebelius and Wagnon up to talk to her.”

JW: Oh, she did. He did. He did.

JW: He would send me down to the second floor to go try to talk sense into her, and she didn’t li- —

EF: How did those conversations go?

JW: “Governor, this is what we think.” “Well, I don’t like that.” “Well, Governor, if you do that, this is what will happen.” “I’m not gonna do that.” Just—it was—it was irrational. It was irrational. And we got towards the end, that we were, as a caucus, unabashed about overriding vetoes —you never knew where *she* was, and we thought, “We are the elected people, and we must make this work”. So, we formed coalitions with Republicans. And there are plenty of good Republicans that believe in good public policy. And we paid no attention to her, because we had to move ahead. And I think you saw more coming out of—more legislation coming out of the legislature than you normally do, where we were really driving policy, where policy—if I read your—your next-to-last book correctly, policy comes out of the governor’s office. Well, there wasn’t any coming out of the governor’s office, so we were making it. And it was an interesting time.

EF: And I did some looking at the vetoes. I mean, she was overridden more frequently in her time period than—

JW: You’d hear people on the floor whooping when they did it. “Ooh!”

EF: Well, —and the Democrats have a majority.

JW: I know. I know. It was—it was surreal. You had fallen down the rabbit hole.

EF: I may have gotten that Alice in Wonderland from you.

JW: You may have.

EF: Well, I have to ask. One Wagnon is chair of the Tax Committee. The other Wagnon is in the governor’s office. What kind of dinner table talk?

JW: We talked politics, which is fine. We love it anyway.

EF: What did you—what was that like?

JW: He could let his hair down and tell me what he was feeling and thinking, and so could I, and he could tell me, “You’re being really foolish. Don’t say that out loud.” Because I have a tendency to be rather frank. Yeah, it was helpful. It was—it was a fun time.

EF: The ’91 session?

JW: Yeah.

EF: Are you talking about personally?

JW: Yeah, personally, personally, for the two of us to be involved. Bill has always been the person in our family that has cared the most about politics. I mean, I still defer so he can read the newspaper first. But it works, right?

EF: I'll try that at home.

Did the chaos of that session finally sink with Finney, you think?

JW: I think what happened is that her staff figured out how to—how to work around it. And, yeah, I think she understood that she needed to get some things done. She knew she had to work with us to get a school finance plan passed. She was over there at the Supreme Court when we all went over and listened to the court tell us what was going on. She knew that we had to make that work, and I think she finally realized that she had to make—she had to work with us so we could make the legislative session work. But for a while, I just had this mental image of her like a kid, you know, with all these buttons and wheels and just turning them all, just to see what happened. That's what it felt like.

EF: Yeah. Well, she ultimately did sign a tax package—

JW: Yeah, she did.

EF: —quite different than this vision she had when she started.

JW: Yeah. I had to tell her, "Governor, it won't work. I can't—I've tried. You can't get this passed."

EF: And you literally brought it down to the floor?

JW: Eight hours. I'm not kidding. Yeah.

EF: That must have been quite a session.

JW: It was awful. And the end result was more exemptions that we started with.

EF: Did you just send it back to committee?

JW: I can't remember what we did with it.

EF: You didn't pass it, I don't think.

JW: No. No.

EF: Okay. All this time on the Tax Committee, you mentioned three-legged stool. Did you really start with that? I mean, you started the Tax Committee ten years earlier than that or so.

JW: Well, that was always what we talked about.

EF: Even early on?

JW: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that goes all the way back to the Hodge Commission. You'll find that in the Hodge Commission report.

EF: So, it was balancing those major tax sources.

JW: That's right. And it was reiterated several times since then, and as late as 1995 with the Graves Tax Commission, that "this is the appropriate approach." And I think you see other states do that, too.

EF: I remember looking at the Hodge Report, which was a dramatic reform document.

JW: It was.

EF: But I don't recall seeing this balancing issue in it.

JW: Well, maybe I'm remembering it wrong. I mean, I'd have to pull it out and look at it.

EF: I mean, you may be right. I just don't remember.

JW: I just know that that was always the rubric that was in my mind, and that's what I learned on the Tax Committee, that "this is how things work, and this is what constitutes good tax policy."

EF: So, in your memory, though, during your service on the Tax Committee, that was—

JW: Sure—

EF: —in the back of your mind as tax—sound tax policy.

JW: Yes. Yes. And my guess is if you interview any of those chairmen in that twelve-, fourteen-year period, they'll say the same thing.

EF: Well, we've talked a bit about Finney. My notes say that it was in '85 that—no, '86—'86 that the Carlin tax issues got put forward. Do you remember much about that time period in terms of the Tax Committee? I'm thinking specifically there was one constitutional amendment that allowed economic development exemptions—

JW: Oh, I know all about *that*, yeah.

EF: —on property taxes.

JW: Yeah.

EF: Where were you on that?

JW: I was in favor of it. He had five constitutional amendments in that '83 to '87 timeframe, and the byword was "economic development." We had the Redwood-Krider Report, which Tony Redwood and somebody named [Charles E.] Krider over at KU had put together. And it began, as I reflect back on it, the trend towards giving economic development incentives. I had served on a very small task force, at the invitation of the Chamber of Commerce—[Norman] "Bud" Grant was the lobbyist then, and, gosh, Carl Nordstrom was probably CEO—and they were looking at industrial revenue bonds, because prior to

that time, all they really had was IRBs [industrial revenue bonds]. And they had a tax component in there, and that was my first introduction to that. I used to get endorsed by the Chamber of Commerce, by the way, as a pretty pro-business Democrat. And so, when Redwood and Krider put their report out, we formed multitudinous committees. I was on Economic Development for a while as well as on the Tax Committee, and we looked at what we need to do to spur investment in the—in the state and to allow for incentives that companies would grow. And the whole focus was: Take the businesses that you have and grow them bigger. So, I spent a lot of time talking with people from Boeing and Cessna and major industries around the state, and that kind of folded into, when we were working on classification and reappraisal, about what do we do with business taxes? And these weren't particularly my ideas, but they're ideas I supported, that we're going to protect homeowner— (Fred Kerr probably had more to do with that than anybody)—protect homeowners, and it's okay if businesses pay a higher tax rate. And we put utilities way up at 30 percent.

So that whole—those two issues kind of ran into each other from time to time, and because we had raised the property tax assessment ratio in classification and reappraisal, they're coming in saying, "Hey, you know, you're raising our property taxes. That's damaging to us. We need some incentives." And we said, "In return, we want jobs." So, we started tying the tax breaks to jobs and figuring out, "Okay, how do we count those?" And we talked about things like claw-backs and, you know, what kind of industries do we want to support? What are primary job generators? What kind of help do we want to give to small business? That was all the conversation from—in '87 through '90 session—'86 through '90, whatever the years are—'87, probably.

Does that answer your question?

EF: Yeah. Were you pretty much in line with Carlin during that time period?

JW: Yeah.

EF: I mean, he—

JW: I thought he was right on. He knows what he's talking about. I have great respect for John Carlin and what he did as governor, and in my continued contacts with him—I still talk to him a lot—I think he's a pretty smart guy.

EF: I'm going to go back to the general tax policy. There were three sales tax increases during your time on the Tax Committee. Were you there for all of them?

JW: I was. And voted for them, I think.

EF: Now, we tend to say that's regressive. In fact, some Democrats would argue, "Never, never, never sales tax"

JW: And some Democrats—

EF: You didn't have a problem with that.

JW: And some Democrats did. No, I didn't. I—just to show you what kind of good Democrat I am, I really didn't want them taking sales tax off of food, because I thought there are better ways to direct money and resources to lower-income people than taking it off statewide, because the cost was so big. I fought that battle a lot. And a lot of my Democrats didn't like that. Sometimes you need to raise the sales tax.

EF: Now, a few months ago, we heard Marvin Barkis weigh in, and he was tactful, but he didn't like Hayden infrastructure.

JW: Oh, no, not at all.

EF: And the highway plan, the water plan, the state prison—new state prison. Were you with him on that?

JW: I stayed with Marvin on that, yeah.

EF: Was that—how did you—I mean, were you just a loyal Marvin, or did you have problems with all of that infrastructure?

JW: I didn't know enough to know one way or the other. I never spent any of my time working on anything that had to do with infrastructure. In retrospect, I'm glad we passed the highway plan. It politically was a really good move for the Democrats, and that's in part what allowed us to be the majority party and allowed us to do some of the things that we thought made good sense for the state. So, yeah, I didn't buck Marvin. Sometimes you have to, as my grandma said, go along to get along, and that's what I did.

EF: Well, let's, then—I'm going to jump a little bit, again. Let me double check my notes here. After the '92 session, really fundamental change in school finance. Some significant things in Children's Initiatives. I mean, in a sense, you're at the end of almost ten years of pretty active legislative process.

JW: That's right.

EF: In '92, the Democrats lose four Senate seats and four House seats. In '94, Democrats lose two congressional seats, one because [James C. "Jim"] Slattery runs for governor, vacates the seat. Fourteen House seats. And, of course, Robert Miller is deposed as speaker. How do you understand all that? When you look back, what was going on?

JW: Ninety-four election was Newt Gingrich and a lot of things that were going on at the federal level. And what happened to us happened in a lot of places, not just Kansas. There was a significant shift in the way that campaigning started happening. Gingrich's Contract with America, the rise of the Conservative Party—they called themselves Republicans, but they were not my Republican friends. There were only eight or nine of the so-called conservatives. But they pick up a lot of seats at that point, and they're ideologic framework had a huge impact on it. Abortion got to be a big issue at that point. The right-to-life people started making great gains, both in terms of the people they were electing and their power, so to speak, to influence things down here.

It would happen in the past, in the late '80s, if [an] abortion bill came on the floor, either Rochelle [Chronister] or I would call the other one and say, "Okay, let's get busy," and we'd go line up our troops and keep them down. And all of that shifted with '94, and it was happening nationally. It was happening in Kansas. It was a rise in the more ideologically oriented people who were one-issue folks or, you know, hewed a certain kind of philosophy. Not the Fred Kerrs. You know, Fred Kerr comes to solve a problem. Jim Braden comes to solve a problem. He's a little partisan, but, you know, he still—they're here to make Kansas work. And that attitude shifted a lot.

I wasn't here after '94. The governor's race, I think, was impacted between Slattery and Graves, maybe not so much by that framework as the legislative seats were, because there was a lot of grassroots effort that was going on to get conservatives elected to the legislature, and it's continued—until this '16 election, and it began to shift back in 2016.

EF: Now, you've mentioned the abortion issue most prominently. Did you see at any time what we now think of as the Koch brothers type politics at that time?

JW: No. No, that happened after.

EF: That was later.

JW: That happened after I was serving in elective office.

EF: So, you think more than anything it was abortion.

JW: I think it was abortion and that national wave election that brought in the dramatic change in Washington [D.C.] with Gingrich. And the tenor of debate and the kind of conversations that people had changed, and that gets reflected down the road. It's just hard for Democrats to win elections and, when you win, to stay in power. Period. And so, if you get something like the '94 election that comes along, it has a profound impact.

We also recruited a lot of people to run. I mean, we were almost grabbing them off the street corners to fill—for '91, '92, okay? We had several that changed parties. Elaine Wells was a good example. She felt a lot more comfortable—we talked her into running as a Democrat. She just felt more comfortable with the Republicans, so she switched. And so, there was a lot of sorting out there.

EF: How were Democrats so able to win in the—well, I mean, you start with John Carlin in '78, reelected. Finney. But the legislative seats were close. The Senate was a vote or two. I mean, based on what you've said, it was—the abortion issue, more than any one thing, —

JW: It sure stands out in my mind as being a bigger factor. I don't know quite how to state this. We had a lot of people who ran for the legislature as Democrats, who were well prepared and well educated to do that job. I don't think we have that deep a bench anymore.

EF: Okay. Well, we've covered a pretty good bit of territory during your legislative service. What have we missed?

JW: I don't think you've missed much. Maybe a few things I should have—

EF: Well, I'm going to—I'm going to move on. You've had an amazing career post legislative, and I wanted to visit about it. Number one, you've run for governor.

JW: Yeah, that was probably not the smartest move I made, but—

EF: How did you decide to do that?

JW: One of the things that people don't understand is how many folks come up to you and say, "You ought to be the governor." And it kind of catches on. And at that point, it looked to me—I was chair of the committee, I've had a great deal of success, I had a good strong base at home. I had some groups that I had done things for, like car dealers, property taxes on cars and things like that, who—and I thought Joan Finney was going to be our standard bearer, and I just couldn't stand that. I mean, she was the incumbent, and she was going to run, and I thought, "She should not do this unchallenged." And everybody thought I'd lost my mind. And maybe it was a bit impulsive, but when she got out of the race and said, "I'm not gonna run again," then here came Jim Slattery. And then there were five candidates in that primary. I came in second, and there's no prize.

EF: Did you get—was your announcement of running like '82?

JW: I don't understand.

EF: Well, Bill announcing—

JW: Oh, no, no, no. No, I did that when he—he was pushing me.

EF: So, he supported you.

JW: Oh, yeah. He worked every day in my campaign office, and we came right up to the point where Slattery got in after Finney had announced—this is late May—that she’s not going to run again. And I’d been in there for a while. I had the support of Emily’s List. At that point, I’d raised a fair amount of—a sizeable amount of money, not millions, but I had some good support. And then when Slattery got in, I thought about not running. I thought, *No, I’m in it. Let’s just see what happens.*

EF: Okay.

JW: So—but it didn’t hurt me because I got a lot of statewide exposure, and I learned a lot about how you campaign, not retail politics, which is what I have always done, which is go up and knock on every door, wear comfortable shoes and nice clothes and speak nicely to people. And I learned that running for governor is a *whole* different ballgame. So, I learned a lot. It was worth what it was, and I was ready to do something different anyway.

EF: Well, the one thing I know about that was different: You run for mayor of the City of Topeka. Was there something in between?

JW: I spent two years when I left the legislature in January of ’95—I went to work for a group called Kansas Families for Kids, and it was a project that was funded by the [W.K.] Kellogg Foundation. They funded five projects around the country to look at new ways of doing foster care and adoption. So, for two years, I went across the state and was executive director of an effort to privatize adoptions, which we did. We got the legislature to pass it. By this point, Rochelle Chronister is in the SRS chair. She’s the secretary of SRS. And she and I worked together very well. And so, I was at every state fair and every county fair and every black church all over the state, trying to get the number of foster children reduced and the number of kids that could be, adopted.

EF: Was that under the umbrella of the Corporation for Change or separate from it?

JW: It was separate from it. It was a—that’s why I left the Corporation for Change, because I went to work for Kansas Families for Kids. I mean, we had a \$2 million grant from Kellogg, which was at that time reasonable, [a] reasonably sized grant. I had staff, and we were working with seven different adoption agencies and foster care agencies. And I was working with courts. I mean, this is something I love and knew something about. And certainly, the Children’s Initiatives had given me the recognition on the part of the community that does children services as someone who could do it. So, they hired me as their executive director, and I did that, and I kept with that until Harry [L. “Butch”] Felker [III] decided not to run for mayor. And I had a whole bunch of people that come out and said I should do that. So, I did.

EF: The adoption project—you worked in cooperation with Rochelle as secretary of—

JW: Right, and Lutheran Social Services and the whole group, yeah.

EF: Folks come up and say, “Run for mayor.”?

JW: Yes. A lot of them.

EF: Did you have a plan? I mean, what did you want to change?

JW: I *always* have a plan.

EF: What did you want to make different?

JW: I wanted the City of Topeka to kind of wake up and not be so moribund in its effort. I wanted downtown to get redeveloped. If you ask me what I was able to do in four years as mayor, I would tell you to look down there at the new state office building, the Curtis Building [sic; the Charles Curtis State Office Building]. We built that with the Public Building Commission that I created by city ordinance and then worked with [Art Griggs, Secretary of Administration] and the Governor, Graves, to build that, because the state would never have built that building. I mean, the politics of it.

EF: Nice building.

JW: It’s a lovely building. But the city didn’t need a building; the state needed a building, so the Governor and I worked closely on that project. We worked closely on a number of city projects. I got some infrastructure things passed—not highways, not concrete; I’m not into concrete—but some infrastructure things passed for the City of Topeka that allowed them to do economic development. We created a group called Go Topeka, and it was a joint economic development organization that’s a joint city-county organization that took the proceeds of a quarter-cent sales tax that I got passed in the city and used that to lure business, take advantage of the state’s economic incentives, and we brought the Mars [Chocolate North America] plant that’s here in Topeka. We had several others that were attracted at the time. We put together an economic development plan that the Chamber is now working—we woke the Chamber up.

So, the infrastructure also put in place a fund for roads and street improvements, and I managed to get the—I couldn’t consolidate with the county; I would have if I could have, but I managed—

EF: Was there a vote during your time?

JW: Not to consolidate. I couldn’t get it together.

EF: There was a vote of some kind.

JW: Yeah, they—

EF: That was later?

JW: That was after I had left the mayor's office, but it consolidated Parks and Rec with the county. But I spread the mil levy for Washburn University county wide and traded their very high property tax for a sales tax, and I spread the tax base for the library, the Topeka Public Library county wide with a funding component that went with that. So those are some of the kind of things I did.

EF: Well, --

JW: I worked on neighborhood redevelopment. I spent a lot of time on neighborhood redevelopment. Tried to get a big development in downtown, where the water tower is. I even had a developer that was coming in from Dallas [Texas] who was going to redo all that. I figure out then why people hate eminent domain. I don't mind eminent domain. I had to learn about that. So, I didn't—I didn't succeed with that. But I think what we put in place with the JEDO [pronounced JAY-doe], the Joint Economic Development Organization and Go Topeka and the sales tax component for economic development, and some ordinance changes that we made, that it has allowed somebody like Larry [E.] Wolgast, who came in as mayor in the last eight years, to take what we had started talking about in downtown redevelopment and make it start happening. So, I, like I do sometimes, got to an issue too soon—you know, before the public was ready to talk about that. But I think we laid some of those infrastructure things that they needed.

EF: Now, the City of Topeka has been off and on about a city manager. Was there a city manager during your time?

JW: No, I was a strong mayor.

EF: So, were you a full-time Mayor?

JW: I was a full-time Mayor, CEO, just like Carol Marinovich was [as mayor of Kansas City, KS].

EF: Okay. You ran for reelection.

JW: Didn't win. City Council doesn't like [a] strong mayor. They immediately changed it back.

EF: Yeah.

JW: Yeah. I had a CAO [Chief Administrative Officer], an administrative person, but I hired and fired.

EF: What kind of issues gave you trouble?

JW: Neighborhoods. I really—we—we had a very bizarre system of passing out HUD [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development] money into neighborhoods.

EF: Comprehensive community development funds?

JW: Yeah, yeah. It's kind of like they liked their pork. You know, they wanted their little local pork, so they could do their newsletters and all of that. They were not interested in looking at bigger projects

that might actually help the community, like this new East Topeka Learning Center that they're putting in now. I tried to do some of those bigger ideas, and they weren't—they weren't ready.

EF: How did they run against you when you ran for reelection?

JW: [William W.] "Bill" Bunton ran against me.

EF: Did he win at that point?

JW: Yeah, he won.

EF: So, he was elected.

JW: Yeah. The support that I had when I ran the first time came out of the neighborhoods but the neighborhoods were not happy with me because I had created a Division of Housing and Neighborhood Development and gotten rid of the little pork things that they had. And so, they didn't vote for me, and that's—that's why I didn't win. Another lesson learned late in life.

EF: Well, Joan Wagnon seems to land on her feet, because a year later, Kathleen Sebelius is elected governor. Were you involved in that campaign?

JW: Not really, but what happened in the intervening time is the day after I lost the election, Ed Rolfs called me, and Ed, my good friend, who had chaired the Tax Committee—

EF: He became a banker?

JW: And he said, "Come to work for me at the bank." And I said, "I don't know how to do anything except fill out a deposit slip." He said, "But you know everybody in town." I said, "Okay." So, I went to bank school in Nebraska and—

EF: I'll be darned.

JW: —learned how to be a banker. And apparently, I did okay. And then when Kathleen called me—she wanted me to put her—I had put her transition team together when she won insurance commissioner and I just lost the governor's race, and I helped her transition into the insurance office, so she called me again and said, "We won, and we gotta do somethin' here." And I said, "Well, I'm committed to the Rolfs family. You know, they've trained me. They hired me." And she said, "I'll call Ed." And—of course, Ed had been secretary of revenue and just thought that was the most fun job he ever had. He hated banking. Still hates banking. And so, she let me—he loaned me to her to help set up the Department of Revenue and find a secretary. And I went over there with the intention of returning to the bank. And got hooked. And we were in the middle of an interview. Some guy she had brought in from the state of Washington, who was their sales tax director in the state of Washington, sales tax. And she took me

outside, and she said, “You know, I don’t know why I’m interviewing *him*. Why don’t you just stay?” I said, “Call Ed.” So, he turned me loose.

EF: Did you start with her immediately or was that a few months’ lapse?

JW: No, it was, like, right after the election.

EF: ’81?

JW: Yeah. Well, she had to figure out what to do over there. And I stayed there for eight years. Best job I had.

EF: How do you remember it?

JW: Oh, fondly.

EF: Fondly!

JW: I loved it. It was a *wonderful* job. It had its moments, but I enjoyed the staff. I enjoyed what we did. I know the issues. There were all kinds of people over there I knew. And I got to do the thing that I love the best, which was work with the legislature on the issues I cared about and not have to sit over here through the rest of it. And I spent a lot of time on the Senate side, because that’s what it took to get her package passed. Right off the bat, first session, we passed streamlined sales tax. And I went out to Washington and negotiated with Amazon to get them to collect our tax, which they did. And then we got Cabella’s and some of those others. I mean, so I got to work on streamlined sales tax, and that was—that was really very—very satisfying. The only thing that wasn’t satisfying is that it hasn’t passed yet. I mean, it passed Kansas, but it hasn’t passed in Congress.

EF: Yeah.

What other things would you point to that—

JW: I worked, as you well know, with you and others on the ACIR, the—gosh, what does it stand for? The Advisory Council on Intergovernmental Relations, because I had authored a bill on that when I was in the House. And Kathleen said, “I need to appoint you to this.” And of course, it was right up my alley with local government tax policy, and I thoroughly enjoyed that, although getting a lot of those issues passed is tough, tough, tough. I liked working with county treasurers and county officials. I did a lot of traveling across the state. I enjoyed hearing complicated tax cases when they would come before me for review.

EF: Surely, in eight years you have a time when you and the governor weren’t in sync on something.

JW: Not with—not with Sebelius. When she left, after I'd been there six years, —she let me run the place—I mean, that was the beauty of it. She didn't—she had plenty to do, and we have worked with each other for a very long time and know each other very well, and so that just wasn't a problem.

When Mark [V.] Parkinson came in, I didn't have that same close working relationship with him. Knew him, but he developed his tax plan, you know, when he passed the sales tax in 2009, right after—we had that horrible recession in 2008.

EF: Temporary.

JW: Yeah, temporary. And we had to do something, and I went in and talked to Parkinson and said, you know, "Would you like for me to work something up?" "No, we're just gonna do this." I mean, he knew what he wanted to do. He was a delight to work with, but he said, "You go"—you know, "You run the department, but this is what we're gonna do for policy." And the only time I got crossways with him was over the incentives on the STAR [Sales Tax Revenue] bonds, the—why am I blanking on the name? The big development in Wyandotte County.

EF: Oh, yeah. Racetrack, whatever.

JW: Yeah, whatever it was. We had—we had an issue with—the KC Sporting Life, the soccer people? They wanted to keep collecting the tax and not giving it to the state, and I kept saying—

I kept saying, "Well, you know, this was a deal. You know, you've had it all this time. We supported you. I supported you. But enough is enough." And they want- —they tried to override me, and I wouldn't yield. And Parkinson overruled it. It's the only time I had to swallow hard.

EF: So, with Kathleen you were in sync?

JW: Pretty much. I mean, I can't remember any time that we weren't.

EF: My notes say, then, chair of the Kansas Democratic Party.

JW: Well, yeah.

EF: Now, people on the street weren't coming up to you and say, "You ought to be chair."

JW: No. No, they weren't. But there were people behind the scenes who were coming up to me.

[Robert C.] "Bob" Harder, John [Frieden], people like that, who said, "We've gotta do something," and "What are we gonna do?" Harder had this little group he called his political roundtable of folks that would get together and talk about things that went on, and there was some discussion about who would—who would—because there was no chair. I mean, it was—it was open. And we didn't have a governor to name a chair, and so I called Anthony Hensley, and Anthony set up a meeting with me and

Lee [Kinch] and said, “Joan’s thinkin’ about running for chair. Are you thinking about running for chair?” He said, “I’ll be your vice chair.” And that was it.

And we worked extraordinarily well together. That’s hard work. I mean, it’s no pay. I was there every single day. I hired an executive director. I know how to run things. I knew how to manage the structure of an organization and how it should work. I knew that I needed to get out across the state and talk to people, and so Bill Wagnon and I got in the car and drove to just about every pie supper and barbecue and whatever that we could find, and talked to Democrats across the state, who were at that point—this is after 2010. [Samuel D.] Brownback is now governor. We got creamed again in 2010, just blown away. And I don’t remember how many now, but it’s like there were so few Democrats they could have caucused in a phone booth. It was terrible.

And I thought, “Okay, I’ve got to go into these counties and talk to these people.” And I had a lot of connections from having run statewide before, where I knew people. Some of them were gone and weren’t in place, but—and as secretary of revenue, I was all over the state, so I—I just made it my mission to go where I needed to go. And I went southwest, northeast, central, southwest, where- — everywhere and tried to create—and we tried to create a—rebuild the Democratic Party at that point, because it just almost didn’t exist. So, we doubled the number of county chairs that we had in the time that I was there. We raised—Lee gets the credit for raising the money. He would sit in that chair and call until he was blue in the face. And I think I gave the party some credibility, because I had some experience, and people seemed to respond. So, we—we started recruiting candidates, and that’s hard work. We never were able to build fast enough to make up the deficit that we had in the number of seats. And as long as Brownback was there, it was just really, really difficult.

So, I lost two elections in a row, and I thought, “Okay, somebody else needs to do this. I’ve done what I know how to do, which is organizational development. Let somebody else come in with a different message.”

EF: Did you—I didn’t—I don’t think of it as a policy position.

JW: Oh, it’s not.

EF: I mean, it’s mainly rally.

JW: It’s grunt work.

EF: Rally the troops.

JW: It’s rally the troops, and it’s [an] organizational kind of thing. But I had to train candidates. I did lots of candidate training. And that was fun because then I know the issues.

EF: You had mentioned during your legislative service the Kochs, Americans for Prosperity, Chamber—

JW: No. Weren't around.

EF: They weren't around. Obviously, they start to appear while you're Secretary of Revenue and state party chair. Visible except at election time? I mean, —

JW: Yeah. You would see where Americans for Prosperity was organizing. You would see their money at election time, but you would see—in between elections, you'd see their organization that they do.

EF: Talk about that.

JW: Well, I would—the Tea Party was in as part of that, too. I would attend a forum or something in a community, and you would hear them shouting things at their candidates or talking—you know, standing up and talking and carrying on and kind of intimidating congressmen. And I knew that they were out there, organizing these groups. You could just tell what was going on. And you'd talk to people in a local community, and the tenor of conversation was very different after 2010 when I would go into a community than it was ten years earlier than that. People were much more polarized. They were getting more tribal about their allegiance. And they—they worked their constituencies very—very much.

EF: Was that independent of the Republican Party? Was it in cooperation, or could you tell?

JW: I couldn't tell. I ran into Alan—

EF: Cobb.

JW: —Cobb a lot. And his counterparts. You know, the Dave Traberts of the world started showing up. And just—you could tell they were there. They were dominating the press a lot more than they had in the past. They were present in community rallies. They were present when you'd have conversations with people. I'd go to—I'm trying to think of a more concrete example. I'd go into southeast Kansas, into Crawford County, which has always been a Democratic stronghold, and they'd be telling me what the AFP had—what kind of a rally they had had. You know, we'd hold a public meeting on an issue, and they'd show up and want to talk.

EF: How did Kathleen kind of buffer that?

JW: You mean while she was governor?

EF: Yeah, and when she ran.

JW: It wasn't—she was running against—it was a banker from Baxter Springs.

EF: Shallenburger.

JW: Shallenburger, yeah, Tim Shallenburger.

EF: And [Jim] Barnett.

JW: And Barnett, yeah. But Barnett was kind of immaterial. That was the second term. She was in [office]. But running against Shallenburger—there was a lot of fear that he was part of that Rebel group, that Rebel conservative group, and a lot of Republicans were afraid of him as well. And she was effectively organizing Republicans as well as Independents and Democrats to support her. And that would not have happened if she'd had a different kind of candidate. If she'd been running against Bill Graves, it [would have] been a different story. But Shallenburger kind of scared people because it was still the beginning of when the conservatives were beginning to establish their stronghold. So, she just kind of rolled all over them. I noticed that she—as you move towards the second term, was a lot more careful about what battles she took on.

EF: She seemed to be in the forefront of a lot of business-related tax issues—

JW: Yes. Yes.

EF: —that kind of buffered certainly the business community.

JW: Well, the responsible business community appreciated that we understood their issues and I don't think ever saw me, as the Revenue Secretary, or her as a barrier to getting what they needed done.

When the Chamber tilted, the state Chamber tilted, then it was a different story.

EF: Well, talk about that. When did the state Chamber tilt?

JW: Well, when—who was it that they hired first? I'm sorry, I can't remember his name. I blocked it. But they started taking a very decided bent towards the Kochs, and it was very clear at some point during Kathleen's term that the Kochs were taking over the Chamber. That was where they started. And Kathleen reached out to them early on in her administration and tried to get Koch to send a loaned executive to work with her.

EF: I remember that.

JW: I mean, she kept trying, but then—that's not what they were—and she got somebody, but he was really kind of a—

EF: I remember.

JW: —kind of a turkey.

EF: I can't recall his name.

JW: I can't, either, but he was on the staff at KU [the University of Kansas].

EF: He was over at KU?

JW: Yeah, over at KU. And so, it was more lip service to “let's work together” than it was actual trying to figure it out. But when the Kochs took over the Chamber, that started changing things. And then you

found the local chambers—Lenexa, Overland Park, Topeka, Manhattan—all those chambers banded together all the way out to Hays. And said, “We don’t think like the state Chamber does.” And that’s when the Koch influence really started dividing people into camps.

EF: Do you—you may be like me: you see this from the outside. I can’t remember the year, but I think it was—it must have been 2010 when the Chamber changed its tax policy—

JW: Yeah.

EF: —to eliminate the income tax.

JW: Yeah, supporting Brownback.

EF: I mean, you would have been—

JW: Secretary of revenue.

EF: —secretary of revenue. Do you recall that?

JW: Just that they did it. We thought it was ridiculous. How could you possibly run the state without the money from the income tax? And I kept all these charts. I had lots of charts about, you know, what was going on. And we were—we were recovering.

EF: But you weren’t asked for counsel.

JW: No, no. I called a group of people together at one point when I was secretary. I can’t remember exactly when, but our revenues had dipped very, very low. It must have been right after that recession took hold. And I said, “Okay, we’re getting less than \$100 million in tax right now from the corporations. Let’s abolish the corporate tax.” And I had talked to Kathleen. I said, “I think we can get that done. I think it’ll be a win for us politically. I think it’ll help Democrats. And it will have the added benefit of all of these refundable tax credits that we’ve got would just be wiped out.” Wiped out. And—because some of these big companies—I can’t name them—would have hundreds of million dollars in refundable tax credits, so maybe they didn’t have any income tax to pay, but we were paying them money, and it would have been far to the state’s advantage—and I pulled together twenty people in the conference room at the revenue department, people from the Chamber, top corporation people, and they just looked at me like I was crazy to think about eliminating the corporate income tax.

EF: So, they didn’t—

JW: It didn’t fly, which shows you how we had perverted these incentives, to where they were—they were subsidy and not incentive.

EF: And they’re currently on the books that way, aren’t they?

JW: Yeah, that’s exactly right.

EF: We've covered all my notes. We surely missed something. You—one thing that strikes me: You talked about your husband, Bill, announcing you for office. You've had quite a partnership.

JW: We have. Turnabout was fair play. He was on a sabbatical. He was in Illinois, looking at house museums, and the opportunity for a Democrat to run for the state board of education arose. It was going to be an open seat. And we were in the district. So, I threw his hat in the ring, and we are now even. And while he was out of town, he came back to find that he had entered the race for state board. And he won that race, and we worked on it together, and he ran and served for twelve years. And this was during the time that all the creationism was coming to the forefront, and people were wanting to—we got some pretty crazy people elected to the state board. And it was really interesting. And he one morning woke me up, and he said, "You need to get that phone. That's Japan calling me." And he was getting interviewed by some Japanese press. He said, "You've never been interviewed in Japan!" So, we've had fun with it.

EF: Well, are you in complete sync?

JW: Most of the time.

EF: I mean, do you have disagreements?

JW: Sure, policy disagreements. But most of the time, no. I mean, he's—he helps me, and I help him, and it's been like that for fifty-three years.

EF: Pretty amazing.

JW: Yeah.

EF: What have I missed?

JW: You haven't missed anything. After I left the revenue department, I went to work for a company called FedTax, which was a small startup company that was trying to get a piece of federal legislation passed with respect to the streamlined sales tax. So, for four years, while I was doing all this other stuff, I went back—

EF: Party chair.

JW: Yeah. I went—because that was a volunteer job. This one actually paid. I went back and forth to D.C. and worked with a lot of the congressional delegations to try to get Congress to move on collecting online sales tax, and we were not successful at that, although I learned a lot about how Congress works, and I think the Supreme Court is going to take care of it.

EF: Boy, you're optimistic.

JW: Yeah. But there's a couple of hundred million dollars in Kansas that's not getting collected because we won't spread the tax base, so—I just like tax stuff.

EF: You're not doing that anymore.

JW: Not anymore. That got to be old.

EF: Yeah. I think I remember a conversation that you had a bottleneck in the House committee and the chair, and that chair is still there.

JW: He's not running. It's Mr. [Robert W. "Bob"] Goodlatte. And he's from very rural Virginia, Lynchburg, Virginia, and he is going to relinquish his chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee. So maybe there's hope. But I think—I think the Supreme Court's going to fix it before Congress moves.

EF: You're more optimistic than I am. I hope you're right.

JW: But it needs to be done. But I like that. Testifying before Congress is a whole different deal. It's a different side of politics, so that's—that's who I am.

EF: Anything else?

JW: I can't think of anything.

EF: Thank you very much.

JW: It's been a pleasure.

EF: It has been.

[End of interview.]