

INTERVIEW: JOAN WAGNON
(REVISED)

Q: Would you please identify yourself, Joan, for this interview?

A: I'm Joan Wagnon, State Representative for the 55th District. I'm a Democrat and I've been in office for eight years.

Q: Good. You answered some of our questions there. During what years have you served?

A: From 1982 through the present.

Q: And you're in the House, the Kansas House. How long have you been affiliated with the Democratic Party?

A: All my life.

Q: All your life? And we always ask this question and get good answers to it. Why are you a Democrat?

A: I was a Democrat by birth and then somewhere around 1960 I discovered it also fit what I believed.

Q: Could you describe, in 1982 when you were first elected, could you describe your election process there and what kind of a campaign did you run?

A: It was a pretty unusual circumstance because the incumbent had been in office for eight years. He was also a Democrat from two doors down from me. And everyone expected him to continue to run. The primary was past and so it was in mid-to late-August and he suddenly put out the word that he was facing a difficult bankruptcy and divorce, had been offered a job in Chicago and was going to leave town and resign and be gone forever. So, my neighbor called me and said, 'You won't believe what I just heard today, and I think you ought to run for the legislature. Will you do it?' And I had the car loaded, was going to pick up the children from daycare that afternoon and head for Arkansas for a two-week trip to visit my mother. So, I asked Bill to look into the situation the next morning and I left town, went, and while I was gone, there was an article in the newspaper that said 'Husband of Joan Wagnon says she might be interested in this job,' which was, of course, the wrong way for any announcement ever to come out. As if the ninny couldn't make up her own mind. And I cut my trip short, came back, after having thought about it for three or four days, and decided to do it. So, I had to go through a different process to get my name on the ballot than anybody else. And that's the process of having the precinct committeemen and women assemble, the county chair declares that there's a vacancy on the ticket, and 38 people elected me instead of having to go through a primary election like most candidates do. I had to do a very personal kind of one-on-one campaign with those 38 people. There were five declared candidates that wanted in and I won it on the first ballot. It was five days before Labor Day at that point and I had to put together a campaign. The candidate I was running against, my child was spending the night at his house with his child, the night that I

decided to run, so there were all these family and neighborhood relationships, good friends and whatever, all rolled up and involved. And, in fact, the wife of the guy I defeated the first time around is helping me on this election campaign, so needless to say it was a very friendly, non-acrimonious challenge. He was only on the ballot to ticket-fill. He wasn't really serious about running because nobody thought Loren could be beaten. When Loren withdrew, then he thought, 'Well, why not?' So we talked about it and agreed that we would each run our own campaign and not let any neighborhood alliances and our kids were all friends, and we weren't going to let any of that get in the way. And we'd go for it, and it remained very friendly and very affable. It was kind of awkward for the neighborhood because people were reluctant to put up one sign or the other because they didn't want to offend anybody but I think the fact that it was not a hostile, not an adversarial kind of campaign, that it was just simply who could get their stuff together quickest, who could make the best impression at the door. We had a lot of debates, one that was televised on KTWU for thirty minutes and it was strictly head-on comparison of issues and ideas and who had the best opportunity to run. In every sense of the word, it's what a campaign ought to be.

Q: Who was this candidate?

A: Malcolm Copeland. He died earlier this summer. That was the year that a number of women won office and Mal remarked--he had a tremendous sense of humor--he remarked the only way that a man could have won in Shawnee County that year was to have gotten a sex change operation and he didn't want to be in the legislature that bad.

Q: Well, you say you made that decision to run over a period of three or four days. What was the determining factor, what would you say made you decide to run? Did someone talk to you and encourage you real strongly?

A: I had a lot of experiences up until that point that gave me some insight into what I was getting into and gave me some confidence that I could do it. I had been approached in the past by several other people for other political office. I had been encouraged to run for the County Commission. People had tried to recruit me to run for city office, and that wasn't really what I wanted to do. I had worked a lot with the Kansas Legislature through my job at the YWCA. I'd frequently gone over and testified on bills. I had followed that process and I was conversant with state issues. Also, I had said that if I ever got the money together and got myself in order.... I'd lost thirty pounds and Bill had gone to teaching full-time at that point, and we had gotten an extra paycheck, so just miraculously I had money that I could finance the campaign with. It just all fell together, so it was something I'd been contemplating for a long time and the opportunity was right. It was a situation where I thought I had a reasonable chance of winning. I was willing to take the risk.

Q: Well, could you identify, besides Bill, who else encouraged you?

A: Oh, Lynn Hellebus, my neighbor down the street who at that point in time had just resigned from chair of the public disclosure commission, who was a political scientist, and, quite unannounced, he's the one who came up and said, 'I think you ought to run for this. We'll never have a better candidate than you and I'll help you and be your campaign treasurer.' And

I talked to...I made the usual obligatory rounds. The interesting thing is that I went in to talk with Fred Weaver who was the minority leader of the House at the time. Rich Benson, who was the Shawnee County Chairman or was hired by the County Party to recruit candidates, took me in to meet him. He gave me absolutely no encouragement, refused to give me any money. I mean simply wouldn't even...I mean, the House Minority Leader who was running unopposed, who has access to more political money than anyone else, didn't want to help me, thought I was too liberal and didn't need a lot of women around. And I thought, 'Screw you.' Pardon me.

Q: That's interesting.

A: So I raised my own money. I spent about \$6500 on that first campaign. I raised enough eventually to pay back about half of what I had put in of my own money, but I was writing checks out of my own checkbook to finance the first half of my campaign. And nobody thought that you could get a campaign together that quickly. Nobody thought you could organize five days before Labor Day. I had printed material in hand four days later and was knocking on doors the day after Labor Day. And I think because I'm a very organized person and because I organize people for a living, and I had a tremendous volunteer base from the YWCA, support, help, and money just poured in from friends. I had the contributions and support of organized labor and teachers, which have been two groups that have been mainstays of my campaigns ever since.

Q: You named a group of people that helped campaign for you. Were there any others that....

A: I marshalled close to two hundred volunteers. I ended up with something like four hundred people who put up yard signs. At the end of that campaign, I probably had six hundred and fifty or seven hundred people on my mailing list for the coming legislative session that I had identified as this group of 'Friends of Joan Wagnon.' Sara campaigned for me. I accessed everybody I knew. I went through the Randolph PTA Directory. I went through Sunday School lists. I used my church choir. I used former girl scout contacts. Used everybody I knew at the YWCA, anybody I knew at Washburn, anybody I knew. And I just spent a lot of time reaching out and pulling people in. I had lots of help.

Q: And you campaigned with, you say one debate that time, a lot of door-to-door. Any other media type things you did?

A: I don't think I bought any paid advertising, except in the Washburn Review. The Washburn Review is cheap. And it reaches faculty and students.

Q: Now, your district has stayed pretty much the same since 1982?

A: No, it's been drastically overhauled because of reapportionment this last year.

Q: Can you just describe your district a little bit and the changes that you've experienced in it?

A: For the four campaigns--'82, '84, '86, and '88--my district was exactly the same. It's very compact, located exactly in the center of the city. It had everything from the Crocker Trailer Courts, which has now been replaced by that cute little strip shopping center at 29th and Topeka Avenue, but at that time, the Crocker Trailer Courts were the biggest enclave of Democrats that I had. I died when they bulldozed it. And all the way to Westboro, which is the most silk-stocking area that I have. In the first campaign I won all the precincts but Westboro and I broke even in one of them that's kind of adjacent to Westboro, winning it like by two votes or something. Westboro remained an enigma. I just couldn't crack that until the last election. I won all the precincts in the last election, including Westboro and won by maybe a 70% margin. I only won by 58% margin in the first campaign. The second campaign I had a sort of non-entity for a candidate, not a credible candidate. The third campaign found a well-known, well-respected doctor's wife, good Republican, long-standing person who was extremely credible and she knocked my margin down to about 54%. The last time, the candidate was almost nonexistent. He walked door to door and he was a nice man, but he didn't do very much, wasn't very well financed, and wasn't very well thought of.

Q: You say they did change the district this time?

A: This time they changed the district boundaries through reapportionment and I'd only had about...the population estimates for my district had been around 13,000. Based on the 1989 census, figures determined that 19,200 is the correct population estimate for every legislative district. So, using that, they redrew the boundaries. Topeka lost one representative district and what we did was spread by consolidating the centermost districts to ones that were adjacent to it. And it spread out into nine districts instead of ten. I picked up four precincts that are inner-city precincts around the fairgrounds, around the YWCA, around the Capitol, and I picked up one precinct which is where I also picked up my opponent in this election. Which is part of Knollwood.

Q: What issues do you think are important to your district now? I mean, maybe the same district over the years? What issues did they identify with, are they the most interested in?

A: I'd say that they're a fairly average and middle-class kind of district in their concerns. They're mostly family-oriented people. They're not terribly conservative or terribly liberal. They're kind of middle-of-the-road, average-thinking kinds of Kansans. They are basically pro-choice on the abortion issue. There's a strong tolerance for and support of women's issues and things relating to children and families because they are family people themselves. Some of them have business concerns; some of them are labor members, but not an undue proportion one way or the other. Education is on their minds. They're not...they're a fairly thinking group of people and they tend to be well-informed about what's going on. As a group they have been hard hit by reappraisal because it's an older area and so taxes and tax relief is on their mind, but they're not wild-eyed crazy about 'cut government and slash it with an ax, do anything at all costs because my taxes are too high.' Of course, there are always exceptions, but it's not a district that's characterized by a lot of fringe political thinking. It's pretty mainstream.

Q: In your first election and debate, what issues did you debate on?

A: At that time, John Carlin was running for his second term and the severance tax was the key issue. The severance tax was on the minds of maybe 80% of the people whose doors I knocked on because they saw that as tax relief. I was able to a certain extent ride in on John Carlin's coat tails on the severance tax because I supported that. Now, my opponent also supported the severance tax so that didn't distinguish us. We were....We think alike. My opponent and I thought alike on a number of issues but he supported the death penalty and I was opposed to it. We both were pro-choice on the abortion issue. The other two things that were really, really big were liquor-by-the-drink, parimutuel betting and all of those things. People wanted to know more about where I stood on those moral issues than anything. Mal and I both supported liquor-by-the-drink. He supported gambling and all that kind of stuff and I didn't.

Q: In succeeding elections, what were some of the issues?

A: Once liquor-by-the-drink passed, it ceased to be an issue. Once John Carlin vetoed the death penalty again, nobody asked me about the death penalty anymore. I had one question this whole campaign about the death penalty. Abortion used to be asked only by pro-lifers and abortion is now a question that many, many people ask me about and so that issue has almost taken the place of liquor-by-the-drink and gambling and all that. I'm often asked where did our lottery money go? Taxes are on everybody's minds.

Q: What seems to be the issue in this campaign?

A: I want to make just one more comment and then I'll answer that question. The other thing that I would notice over the years is that when I first ran, people would ask me about public education and the support for local schools was extraordinarily strong. That's almost switched to the point where older people are not telling me the future of our country lies in our young people anymore and we must take care of it, which is what I heard eight years ago. They're telling me those schools aren't teaching those kids anything. 'They don't mind; they don't behave, they're terrible, and I don't want you spending any more of my tax money on it.' There's a real anti-education bias on the part of those who don't have kids in the district, or don't have kids in school, and there's a real disenchantment--a growing disenchantment. I would not say that it's totally a majority, but there's a real frustration that education does not deliver a work product that people are proud of.

Q: Can you tie this to anything? I mean is there any reason for...?

A: I think a lot of that stems from what's happening in families and what they're observing as social change. I think a lot of it stems from...I mean there's always been a rift between the old and the young, but no one would...people can't bridge the gap. I think the rise of juvenile crime and a lot of things like that frightens people. Juvenile crime is a real issue with all the gangs that are marauding in the neighborhoods and it leaves people very fearful.

Q: And that somehow tied into the schools in people's minds, you think?

A: Well, they just don't...you know, if schools did a better job and if parents did a better job, we wouldn't have all these problems.

Q: What about this election? What are some of the issues? Are you going to debate or...?

A: I would if such were arranged. My opponent is running a very values-laden campaign and that's the real difference between this campaign and previous ones. In every other campaign we really talked about issues and it's been where do you stand and do I like where you stand better than I like where your opponent stands. In this issue, they're running a very subtle, almost Vance Packard "Hidden Persuasion" kind of message that has to do with she's an incumbent, she's part of the problem, the legislature is a body of low repute. This is a sleazy operation, let's get new people in, and I think the mood of the electorate in terms of their disenchantment--disenchantment's not a strong enough word--they really have a low opinion of government, and the last time I remember having such a strong anti-incumbent bias and having a real dissatisfaction with leadership and where government was going was back in the mid-seventies when Congress went through that messy purge and brought in all the new people. Jimmy Carter was elected. Jimmy Carter ran on the theme of an insider. Now my opponent would not like for me to characterize him as a lot like Jimmy Carter, but in one sense that's exactly what he's doing. He's trying to paint himself as being an outsider, which he is, and bringing something that anybody who's on the inside is just tainted with all this poison. And so in order to get at that, you really have to get in a lot of values, and he's picking at all the things the legislature has done that have not been necessarily the kinds of things that make people proud. To the extent that the governor and the dissatisfaction with the governor extends to the dissatisfaction with the legislature and government in general, that's washing across all of us.

Q: What does the media have to do with all of this? Does the media support you, have they in the past?

A: I have wonderful media support. I have good relationships with the media people. Jim McClain, who was the reporter for KANU, told me that I was probably the most quotable person in the Capitol and, probably other than the top leadership, most often quoted. Simply because they know that they can get a short answer that's reasonably on target.

Q: Well, after you were elected in '82 and then started this session in January '83, did you have a mentor? Was there some legislator or leader who helped you as a freshman legislator?

A: Well, it sure wasn't leadership because Fred Weaver was the minority leader and he would hardly give me the time of day. There was a lot of legislation being proposed that had to do with spousal rape and I took a real leadership role in my freshman year, which is a no-no. I should have sat on the back bench and been quiet and ladylike. And Fred opposed spousal rape provisions that we had and he was...the veins in his neck would stand out and his face would get red, when he saw me coming. So, he was definitely not my mentor. I think the first person who called me to congratulate me from the legislature about winning the election was Jessie Branson in Lawrence, who picked up the phone and said, 'You don't know me

but I live in Lawrence and it's so wonderful to have more women being involved. I understand you're interested in a lot of the same issues I am and let me know what I can do to help.' The men in the local delegation, Anthony Hensley and Vic Miller, probably took me under their wing better than anybody, and those were actually my mentors in that they kept me from getting in trouble, and they still are. We formed a close bond over that that won't break. But I would say that a couple of the women.... Interestingly enough, I was pretty good friends with Rochelle Kronister, who has risen to a position of real leadership within the Republican party and my first year up there, Rochelle and I were still good enough friends, and she wasn't tied into Republican partisan politics that she kind of looked out for me. Particularly when we were running the spousal rape bill through, she helped me line up some support and keep my relationships with Republicans open, so it was nice to have a friend on the other side of the aisle. And she had been there two years ahead of me, so she was still pretty new that year. As she became more involved in the Republican hierarchy, we've socialized a lot less, but I still maintain a good relationship with her so that in a pinch, and particularly on the abortion issue and some of those others, she and I can work in tandem if we need to.

Q: What committees did you serve on your first term and have you served on since then?

A: My first year assignment was Public Health and Welfare, Judiciary because I was really interested in all the women's issues and that's where most of them come through, and the Pensions and Investments and Benefits committee because I'd been interested in pension plans and things like that and had a lot of state employees in my district, so it seemed like a good, logical place to go. The second year that I was in the legislature, still the first term, Fred Weaver, who was the minority leader, got appointed to the State Board of Tax Appeals and resigned and there was a two-way race for minority leader and one of our local delegation members was running, but he had never gone out of his way to do anything for me after I'd gotten elected and Marvin Barkus courted me and offered me a position on the Tax Committee if I would support him, so I voted for Marvin Barkus and ended up on the Tax Committee and switched my committee assignments. Beginning my fifth year, after four years, I got off the Public Health and Welfare Committee because I took a leadership position with the House Democrats and I couldn't handle three committees. Then, last year...and so I stayed on Judiciary and Tax and then I was the Agenda Chair for the Democrats, which means that I organize--I brief--all the bills that come through the House, and organize the morning briefing sessions for our whole caucus. So, every morning, I conduct a half-hour to an hour meeting talking about issues and explaining what's going on. I'm kind of the information and policy person who formulates how our caucus responds and reacts. This last session started and I got off the Judiciary Committee very reluctantly because it's one that I've enjoyed and where I've had lots of impact because of the issues of child support enforcement, custody and family law issues, all the marital rape and domestic violence, I mean that committee is just where fundamental rights for women is handled. But there were a number of new attorneys in the legislature, two of them from Topeka, so I gave my seat on the Judiciary Committee to Denise Everhart, so that she would have an opportunity to do that, and I'm real pleased with what she did in the last two years. I moved to the House Federal and

State Affairs Committee where all the abortion legislation is coming through, so that I could sit on the front row and block.

Q: You mentioned some of your leadership positions. Did you hold any others?

A: For four years I've been the Agenda Chair.

Q: You've mentioned a little bit about the statehouse power structure. Can you describe that a little more, what you've observed about that and how it works? Getting appointed on committees, knowing the right people, and who is doing what?

A: Interestingly enough, that's the hardest decision that you make or that you have someone make on your behalf when you first get elected because it steers you in either a good or a bad direction. Everybody comes in and says, 'I have budget experience and I want to be on the Ways and Means or Appropriations Committee.' Ruth Wilkin, who was another mentor, told me not to go in that direction. And she said, 'If you're wise you'll get involved--I know you're going to get involved in health issues and I know you're going to get involved in women's issues--but you ought to also get involved in the money issues, but you'll never make it onto the Appropriations Committee because the line is too long. Why don't you try for the Tax Committee. Besides I think you'd be good at that.' Well, my first year there weren't any openings on the Tax Committee. There were people with seniority. So, I asked for Public Health and Welfare and got it, and I asked for the Judiciary Committee and got it because I lobbied for it. And I asked for the Pensions Committee which I thought was a way to demonstrate some expertise in fiscal issues. Who I asked was interesting because Fred Weaver's administrative assistant for legislative--who sort of managed the legislature--was a female lawyer named Linda Terrill who's a Washburn graduate, and Linda was a real feminist. Now why on earth she and Fred got along I've yet to figure out. But I quickly learned that I couldn't deal with Fred Weaver at all, but I could deal with Linda Terrill very effectively. Linda was divorced, single mother, had a lot of interest in the issues I was interested in, and was supporting that spousal rape provision I wanted to work on, and so I told her, I said I needed on that Judiciary Committee, that these were the issues I cared about, I don't care where else you put me. I'd like to be on Public Health and Welfare and I'm interested in the Pension. Well, nobody ever asks to get on Pensions, so that filled up my hole and I didn't even try, rather than going for big plum assignments when you're a freshman which nobody was going to give you anyway, I went for ones that were more reasonable and got them. Largely because of her help. And I think that Vic Miller and Anthony went in and lobbied for me and got that done. I felt that it was necessary to have male friends who were willing to go to bat for you because there are some times that, whether you like it or not, they could talk to Fred Weaver when I couldn't. Sometimes you just need a variety of people who can carry your message and do what needs to be done. So they went to bat for me. They got me a good office, a good seat on the floor, helped me get good committee assignments, and I think the combination of Linda Terrell....I wouldn't call her a closet feminist, she was very outspoken about it, but she didn't push her feminism to Fred. But her inclinations were really very helpful and she helped me kind of soft pedal what I was trying to do. It was very unusual to put a non-attorney

on that committee, and there I was, I don't know whether I was the first woman on that committee or not. I may have been.

Q: You talk about some of the issues and some people would identify these as women's issues...

A: Sure they were.

Q: Did you feel like women were expected to respond to these and carry....

A: Women were reluctant to respond to the women's issues because the men gave them such a hard time about it. I got a lot of grief and aggravation from males. I mean they were....In 1982, there were a number of women who were elected that year, it was a good year for women to get involved, but it made the men uncomfortable. There was a lot of overt hostility about so many women being involved and a lot of the women wanted to be one of the boys and so they were not willing to push women's issues. I had a constituency which not only supported but expected it. And people kept saying, 'You're just going to label yourself as a women's issue candidate and they're going to put you on Public Health and Welfare and you'll be there for the rest of your life.' Which wouldn't have been bad. I mean, I enjoyed that committee. I dealt with some very meaningful kinds of things, but that's why getting on that tax committee was necessary because now they go with me as being both a strong advocate for women's issues and being in what is still a fairly male-oriented field.

Q: I believe you've already told us, but how would you describe yourself in your own words? Would you describe yourself as a liberal, a conservative or what on the political spectrum?

A: Nobody every believes me when I tell them that I'm a conservative Democrat. But I think I'm conservative to moderate on most issues. I'm not unwilling to have government step in. I'm pretty liberal on social issues in that I have a strong belief in justice and equality being provided, although I don't think that's being a real liberal. I'm slow to have government step in and regulate and control everything. I think that's what conservatives think about. I'm not unwilling to raise taxes and unwilling to spend money, but I'm careful about what I do. I think it has to be well justified. But I think that the image of a woman who deals with women's issues equates with liberalism and people don't understand what that means. But I more often vote on fiscal matters with...I mean you would have a hard time telling mainstream Democrats and mainstream Republicans apart on taxing and spending issues most of the time because we're pretty middle-of-the-road. We're not fringe. I'm not a fringe person.

Q: Did you participate in any formal or informal groups or coalitions? I know there was a women's coalition they talked about in the press this last....

A: I organized it.

Q: Okay. Tell us a little about that.

A: It was called the Study Group on Women's Issues and it quickly became apparent to me.... One of the first things you learn to do in the legislature is to count, and it became apparent to me that without some additional support, there weren't enough women to pass the agenda that I was interested in. And women's issues are of interest to women, but they're also of interest to men. One of the problems that people had was labelling them women's issues, so that meant that men didn't have to think about it. So by putting together, not a women's coalition but a study group on women's issues, we invited both men and women who were interested in those topics, which to me seemed to be a better approach. After my first year, I went to San Diego for the Center for American Women in Politics national forum meeting, and it was probably one of the most exciting meetings I've been to. It was a real focal point for me in terms of organizing thinking and planning directions. Occasionally, you get your batteries charged and somebody puts a direction signal in front of you and you see where you need to go. I learned a lot about issues and how to articulate them from other women in other legislatures across the country. I knew the issues from the Y. What I didn't know was how to make them work. And I learned a lot about strategy from other women in other state legislatures, about how you get those kinds of things passed. So, I came back with a commitment to several issues and figured the only way we were going to build any support for it was if we organized the study group. So Elaine Pascal from Abilene and I pulled it together. It was really my brainchild and I needed a Republican woman to work with me, so I traded on my relationship with Rochelle and she helped me and every year I would get the women together and we would talk about the issues we wanted to do. Every year except this year. Finally, a Republican woman organized it and got it together. I kept saying you'll wait forever for me to take this over and at some point it's got to be just not Joan Wagnon, but Rochelle would put her name on the invitation with me and that was the balance that we needed. That first year we organized the study group, it occurred to me why should we always meet and brownbag it, so I called Security Benefit Life and said, 'We want to talk about insurance rights for women. I want to bring about fifty legislators and I'd like for you to provide lunch, and we'd like to do it in one of your nice places.' And they said, sure. I mean it just never occurred to me to do that. So, Rochelle got Mike Hayden in tow, who was Speaker of the House. I got Marvin Barkus who was minority leader, and away we went. We pulled those men in and they didn't know what hit them, and we passed that bill on insurance and conversion rights for widowed women.

Q: What year was that you started?

A: '84.

Q: You've talked about a lot of issues. But can you summarize what three or four you consider to be major issues during these years you've been in the House?

A: There aren't three or four. I'm just, this is gonna sound screwy, but I can't even really remember all of them that I've been involved in. There've been lots of them. Health, women's justice and equality, and tax if you had to have three categories and three roman numerals.

Q: Did you feel like these three issues or categories of issues that you won some victories in the time that...?

A: Yes, I won a lot of victories. My footprints are across those statute books.

Q: Can you name one or two vivid memories that you have of fights you went through?

A: Well, the spousal rape provision we got passed. The continuation and conversion of health insurance we got passed. I carried the child support enforcement legislation that overhauled the whole child support enforcement in the state. Massive funding for children's health programs last year. Beating back the forces of darkness and evil on all the choice issues. Over and over and over. I managed to get a childcare tax credit into the income tax code for working families that was meaningful and made sense. I managed, when we revised the income tax code, to put a different structure in there that benefits working families. There's a long list.

Q: How many women...when you first were elected, do you remember how many were in the House?

A: Fifteen or sixteen.

Q: And how many in the Senate?

A: Two.

Q: And how many are in there now?

A: Thirty-three in the House and, I don't know, nine in the Senate?

Q: I was thinking eight, but maybe nine. Do you think women legislators, as a whole, are effective?

A: I think women legislators, as a whole, show the range of characteristics that men legislators as a whole do. Some are good and some stink.

Q: Do you think the legislature has changed in the length of time...?

A: I think the legislature has been shaped a lot by the fact that women have doubled their numbers since I've been in it. The decision-making process is a little bit more open. Part of that is just the public's expectation of government functioning out in the open, but women are less tolerant of all that backroom folderol and don't want to be left out. I think the fact that we have as many leaders talking now about women and family issues expresses not only the growing national concern, but also the fact that women have pushed those issues. I think their consciousness about their language and their gender reference and their pointed jokes about women that they didn't mind making... and the numbers of women has intimidated some of them. It's had an impact.

Q: That ends our questions about your public service and we're going to move over and Sara's going to ask you a few about your more private life.

Q: We are also very interested in what background the kind of woman who does go for government service comes from, and also the effect on her private life, interaction of her private life to government service. So we start out by asking you: Do you have a relative or close friend who has preceded you in the House or Senate, or somebody in your family or your life who...?

A: No.

Q: I know you're not a native of Kansas. Would you tell us your background?

A: I was born in Texarkana, Arkansas and grew up in a small town of about 50,000--that's Texarkana. I graduated from high school there, and went to college at a small Methodist college north of Little Rock, which was as far away from home as I could manage to get. Having tried several northern universities, my father said 'You ain't goin' up there with them damn Yankees.' He even thought Nashville, Tennessee was too far north.

Q: So how in the world did you end up in Kansas?

A: He was dead by then. I took a degree in biology, fully intending to go to medical school and they turned me down, saying they didn't want women. You know, they get pregnant and drop out. This was before the Civil Rights Act was passed and you could say about anything you wanted to. But they just didn't admit women to the 1962 class at the University of Arkansas Medical School. My father wanted me to take a job as Christian Youth Director at the Hope First Methodist Church which they had offered me. That was only thirty miles from home and he thought that was an appropriate vocation for me to be involved in. They offered me the job. I accepted. I thought about it the night before I was supposed to go; I thought I don't care what anybody thinks, I'm not going. I'll be buried there for the rest of my life. So I called and told them, no thanks, and I called my father and said no thanks, and went to Little Rock and went to work running a medical research laboratory at the University of Arkansas, and worked for the neurologist there. I decided to marry Bill Wagnon instead of going to New York where I'd been offered a job to work in an electron microscopy thing at Cornell University. So, I pulled out of that and went to work at the University of Missouri. Somewhere along the way, I decided that the skills that I knew how to do in a research laboratory had limited applicability on a nationwide basis, and if Bill was going for jobs we could end up someplace where I would have no visible means of supporting myself. So I got a teaching certificate and he was offered the job here at Washburn, and I dutifully followed.

Q: So, your husband's name is Bill Wagnon, William O. Wagnon, Professor of History at Washburn University, and you came here to Topeka in a family move?

A: Yes, a family move, with no job and no prospects on the horizon. By the way, I would never do that again.

Q: When you got here to Topeka, what organizations or activities did you get involved in?

A: The first phone call we had after our phone was connected was the Kaw Valley Girl Scout Council asking me if I would like to be a leader. They knew that I had been a leader in Columbia, Missouri, and that someone had said I was coming and they had been just waiting for my phone to be connected. So, by the end of the week, I got the boxes unpacked, sent my mother home, and had a girl scout troop starting in September.

Q: What happened next?

A: I joined the Methodist Church and they asked me to direct the choir and I did. Then I taught school at Northern Hills Junior High School that first year and got involved with that. So, basically, the church and the scouts and the school, and then Washburn faculty wives which was a dreadful experience.

Q: Why?

A: I bitterly resisted being affiliated with anything only because I was married to somebody and I was afraid not to go. I mean, who wants to crash your husband's career when you're brand new. But I thought it was stifling and ridiculous and they wanted us to all get in book groups and sewing groups and crochet groups and I just couldn't stand it. So, I finally...I mean, I hung in there so that I didn't embarrass him.

Q: Let's establish this. What year did you come to Topeka?

A: '68.

Q: Now, when you were elected to the legislature, you were director of the Topeka YWCA as you still are. How did you come to get involved in that?

A: Quite by accident. Bill was working on the bicentennial commission with a group of people and we had become acquainted with Velma Parris and some other people. They needed a humanities program grant written. We were friends with the Cotts. At the time, Marion was humanities program director, so I wrote a grant for a humanities project as part of the bicentennial. This precedes the Y. It was funded and I directed that project on a short-term basis. So, someone who was on that commission was also working with the YWCA and the YWCA was interested in doing a program called 'Women and Work' and they were exploring the women's movement. They called me and said they didn't have any money and they wanted to write this grant. But if I would write the grant and it got funded, then I could be the project director. So, I told them...I mean, I was at home with little kids and didn't have anything else to do and I was bored out of my mind, and that sounded like fun so I organized a major conference for the YWCA. We brought in Dorothy Hite, who's the president of the National Council League of Women and a number of resource people from around the country. I was organizing academics from KU, K-State, Washburn, and whatever, and it was a big, major thing. It was a lot of fun. So, we left and went to Boston because Bill had a sabbatical that summer and we were doing some research, and when I got back the Y was

still in the old building, and they called and said their public relations director had quit and would I like to come in and fill in for them. They were just real short of help and they didn't have any money to pay anybody because they were about to move into the new building, but moving into the new building would be fun. I said, 'Well I don't know anything about public relations.' They said, 'We don't care. You did fine for us on this other grant; surely you can figure this out.' And so they paid me minimum wage. I went to work for them at minimum wage, doing publicity, and organized all of the public relations surrounding moving into that new building. That included full-page coverage in big sections, and I just had a wonderful time doing all that. I used the girl scout press manual, how you do publicity for your troops. Then they said, 'Would you write a grant for us to get a latchkey program?' So, I wrote the grant, and it was a federal grant, and it got funded, and we started the first latchkey program in the city of Topeka, and I was running that. By then, Jack was close to school age, and Gay Shepherd, their executive director, retired. These were a series of low-pay, part-time, fill-in jobs because of my writing skills, and somebody knew I'd done something. The search committee invited me to apply and hired me as the executive.

Q: What year was that?

A: 1977.

Q: Would you describe for us your spouse and your children. How old your children were when you first got in office? Where your family was at when you got into the legislature.

A: Well, in 1982, my oldest child was twelve and the youngest was ten, I think. That meant...well, I think William may have been in sixth grade. They were pretty close to junior high school. We were past needing to be involved with them on a constant basis like you are with little kids. My husband's extremely supportive, lives vicariously, loves politics. It was the next best thing to his running and he realized that I was a lot more electable, at that point, than he ever would have been. He had a better-paying job at the time and it was practical for him to stay involved, and he likes knocking on doors and he just loves to do this.

Q: How were you able to combine your YWCA responsibilities?

A: Well, I have a good relationship with the board of directors, and the board thought that it was in their interests to see me get elected. They were able to see that and I offered to resign and they didn't want me to resign. They said men don't have to resign, give up their jobs, why should you? I told them I would not be able to give them incredible amounts of energy during the campaign that I normally...I never have worked forty hours a week. I'm just a workaholic, that's just basically what it boils down to, whether it's paid or unpaid, volunteer or what. I'm going from morning 'til night. We worked out an agreement and they said get yourself elected and we'll figure out where we go. And I got myself elected by leaving every afternoon at four o'clock and knocking on doors and not working any weekends. We worked out a staffing pattern that allowed me to manage and delegate a lot of duties to other people. There's just never been a time in the whole eight years that I've had any negative criticism or any feedback from the board that it's a problem.

Now, along about March after the legislature has been in swing for three months, things get a little bit ragged because I get pulled away, but most people go out to lunch and fool around and go out to dinner, to receptions, and I go to the Y at lunch and work and I just never got involved in all that round of socializing that goes on with the legislature. I mean, that comes about because people are away from their families and away from home and it's cheaper to go and eat the lobbyists' food than it is...because the amount of money that we get to live on is really pretty dismal. It doesn't apply to me because I have a house in Topeka. So, I'm not disenfranchized, but if you live in western Kansas and have to rent an apartment, drive back and forth, you have a tough time making your expense money meet. Which is one of the reasons that everybody feeds a lot, I mean, feeds legislators. I just never did that, and that was the way I managed and I think in retrospect it's probably one of the healthiest things I ever did because I never lost my connection with the community. A lot of people come to Topeka and get caught up in being a legislator and all that goes with it, and lost touch with the folks back home. I was right in the middle of this community, shopping at the grocery store, seeing them in the locker rooms, and so it was a real healthy two-way street. And the YWCA didn't suffer. I'm a good manager and I'm well organized and I know how to delegate, and I don't have any problem doing that.

Q: I think you may have just answered this. We have a question which says: what helped, hindered, shaped your ability and desire to serve in public office.

A: I did just answer it.

Q: Do you have anything to add to that.

A: No.

Q: As a legislator, what do you consider to be your major contributions?

A: I am very good at analytical thinking and I am able to ask the kinds of questions that need to be asked to look at issues as we go through the process. I am able to, once having boiled things down to the essence of the issue, to come up with and figure out what works and what won't work to fix it. I am able to communicate that to my colleagues. I am persuasive. I usually do a lot of homework so I have a lot of background residual information and I am a resource person to my colleagues, so I think....Am I going the way you want to go?

Q: Any way you want to go, but you are giving us some information we want to know, yes. What did it cost you and your family for you to be in the legislature?

A: A thousand dollars into that first campaign.

Q: But also beyond that, what's been the rubs, the difficulties? Have there been any?

A: Oh sure. You know when William really gets mad at me, he says, 'I'm going to change my registration to Republican.' I mean, now what other kid has that kind of a hold over his mother?

Q: Seriously, when your sons were twelve and ten....

A: Oh, they were the teens of patronage in the neighborhood because they could pass out page positions.

Q: It was not destructive to your family life?

A: No.

Q: How has your service changed how others see you and treat you? Has it made a difference?

A: I think it has for some. It's kind of strange. I don't think I...I'm not going to answer your question. I'm going to do something different. I think I react to people differently than I did eight years ago sometimes because I am a lot more combative than I used to be and that comes from being over there and having to stand up for yourself or get hit with a truck. My staff is always yelling, 'Take your combat boots off,' so I suspect that, because I am sometimes more combative which I think is just a byproduct of being involved in that, that people see me a little differently. I don't realize I'm doing that so sometimes I see them react to that side of me that I haven't known I've put out there and it's been a little different. For the most part, people that I don't know well react very positively. They see me as doing something for them, being approachable, and that's how I see me, so those pieces are congruent. But the issue of conflict and how I deal with it and how they deal with me in a conflicting situation, I think has changed. Some people see me as having a lot of power and, again, it's part of that conflict thing. If they're crossing me, I may get deferential treatment. Somebody will call the Y and they'll just chew one of my staff out, just up one side and down the other, but when they get into my office, they're not anywhere near that free to rant and rave. I don't know whether that's a function of being perceived as having some power or what. I don't know whether that's because I'm a legislator or not. I don't feel any different. I try not to trade on political position. I never introduce myself as Representative Wagnon and I always introduced myself as Joan. I don't know; it's a hard question.

Q: Broadening out from your own experience, what perspective do you have on what political roles and expectations and influence of women have changed? I'm thinking mostly in terms of women in the legislature, but perhaps anything else you might want to say will be equally as valuable.

A: I'm not understanding your question.

Q: Okay, do you think in the eight years you've been in the legislature, you've seen the changes in political roles, expectations, influence of women either as legislators or as voters? Are you seeing women's roles change?

A: As far as the voters go, I think they see women legislators as being more honest, more trustworthy, more conscientious, more 'gooder,' more better, which may or may not be true. Because some of them are and some of them aren't. I think as stereotypes go, it's always difficult. But the electorate tends to view women more positively. I believe that inside the legislature, once you get acquainted with somebody and you know what they're like as a person, gender role stereotyping vanishes and they treat you, not with any deference, because you're a 'lady' or you're a female, they just treat you like anybody else. If you try to get in a line, on your way to a position on the way up, that's a very popular line, they don't have any trouble trying to push you down the line. I mean, nobody is going to stand aside and let you get ahead just because you're female. People don't get up on the bus and give their seats to women anymore; men in the legislature don't stand aside just because you're female. They may judge you differently when they don't know you and they may make certain assumptions about how you act based on your sex in the beginning, but that quickly disappears because you establish the reputation either as an air-head or somebody who knows what's going on, somebody you don't have to take seriously or somebody you really have to be nice to. And we do the same thing with men. We make superficial judgments based on appearance and outside characteristics about 'Oh, you're from Johnson County; you must be....'

Q: Now, you started out telling us about the fact that your first year in the legislature, you at least ran into a few people who were not helping you, perhaps partly because you were a woman and they had some stereotypes. Has that changed in the legislature? Are women taken more seriously or not facing the disability...?

A: Yes, I think so. I think that change is definite.

Q: Then why aren't there, in your opinion, more women in leadership positions?

A: Because it is a long line and they're not willing to get up on the bus and give you their seat. So, when we're talking about equal footing, there's a lot of competition and you've got to be good and you've got to be willing to fight. A lot of people still bruise easily and they're not willing to do what it takes. Do you know the most noticeable difference when I walk into a room and there are a lot of men legislators and some of the women involved. It can be a leadership meeting, it can be....We get called into the Speaker's office to talk about a proposal that we've got, I think the men all have more testosterone than women. Maybe some of it's socialization, but they just jump in and they're aggressive and pound their fists on the table and are just interjecting all of this stuff, and the women are just sort of sitting there. I do the same thing. I'm not... I kind of size up a room. I want to see what's going on. My whole style is very different from that. But they go in there and they just start tussling and the combativeness is immediately apparent. And the women kind of wait and watch for their opening and then they get in. Pretty soon, you can begin to throw in some ideas that shape that discussion. But men still go and seize the opportunity.

Q: Does that work better?

A: I don't know that it works better; that's just the way that it works and if you're intimidated by that, is my point, and you're not willing to jump in and grab your piece of the action, you may never get a place to come in. They're not going to come in and look around the room and say, 'Well, would the ladies like to speak first?' Because the ladies are going to say the same thing and they're going to run in and go to it. It's like throwing out a group of toys and watching a bunch of little boys and a bunch of little girls. The little boys get to them first and start playing with them, the little girl stands on the side and cries. You know, she's either got to go in and knock them in the head and move them aside--'I want my truck'. You know, maybe those are lessons from the playground that we have not learned when we've grown up, but men don't change their behavior to accommodate women is my point. So women have to change their behavior to accommodate the way that men act because there's still more of them. It's interesting if there are more women in the room than there are men, then they don't act like that, which tells me that numbers work.

Q: Very interesting. Well, we've come to the end of our official list of questions. Is there something we should have been asking you, something you would like to say that...?

A: I think you've covered the waterfront--everything but my sex life.

Q: I don't really want to do that, thank you.

A: That's what I'm saying. This has been an exhaustive list.