H. EDWARD "ED" FLENTJE: This oral history interview of Donna Whiteman, former majority leader 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 Ed Flentje of Wichita State University is conducting this interview at the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka, Kansas, on January 19th, 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. Whiteman is an attorney formerly in private practice in Hutchinson, Kansas. She graduated from Evangel College in Springfield, Missouri, in 1971, and from Washburn School of Law in 1981. She was appointed to a vacant seat in the Kansas House of Representatives in 1983, first elected to the House in 1984 and reelected to three additional terms, serving from 1983 through 1991. She served as assistant minority leader in the House in the '89 and '90 legislative sessions and as majority leader in the 1991 legislative session. She resigned from the legislature in August of 1991 to accept appointment as secretary of the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services and served in that position through early 1995.

Is that reasonably accurate?

DONNA WHITEMAN: That is accurate.

EF: Well, thank you. And delighted you are here today and can take time for this interview. We kind of start out by asking how did you get this political bug? What was your motivation, I mean, to accept appointment to the legislature and then to run for a seat? What were you thinking?

EF: You know, in fact, when I was campaigning after I was appointed in the south half of Hutchinson, I came upon a—an elderly lady and knocked at her door and was saying, you know, "I'm running for reelection. Would you vote for me?" And she looked at me, and she said, "Why do you want to do this?" And I'm not sure if she was questioning my

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sanity or—but I was appointed when John Meyers left the legislature in the middle of a term to go work with Governor John [William] Carlin as a member of his staff, representing education interest and helping the governor with education interest, so I was appointed to fill that position, and I really say I got it by default because nobody else wanted it. I was—I was working in a law firm, [Schmidt, Langley and Newlan], at the time and became aware that it was open. I wanted the position because I thought it would be great to be part of government and to help, especially as an attorney, and then—but I thought I hadn't lived in Hutchinson that long. I wasn't a Hutchinson native. But nobody stepped forward, so I got it by default.

EF: Was there something you wanted to get done or some issue that concerned you, or was this public service?

DW: I saw it as public service. There really wasn't any burning issue, and I had really not been involved in politics before. In fact, before, I considered myself as an Independent. But when I certainly looked at the district and the location and the voter registration, and it was a Democratic position—and I grew up in a family where I had one parent who was a Democrat and one who was a Republican, so I was used to the debating between the two.

EF: Were there debates in your family at the dinner table?

DW: Well, there certainly were, with, you know, my mother being a very staunch Republican and my father being a Roosevelt Democrat, so there would be always those types of comments about the fact that they—they went to vote and cancelled each other's out, but at least they voted.

EF: Had you registered as a Democrat once you got to Hutch?

DW: Yes. Yeah, I had been—I had those leanings. I think more—more of my leanings to the Democratic Party dealt with the—the background. Came from a working-class—my father worked for General Motors in Michigan, Pontiac. Then my—my grandfather had worked—grew up in western Maryland, where I was born, and he had been a—a coal miner. In fact, lost his life in a coal mining accident. So that sort of changed the dynamics in the family, and I think that's why my father was such a strong Democrat.

EF: But your father broke out of coal mining and headed to Michigan.

DW: Well, right. I think in the early '50s they were pretty much closing the mines down, and he had worked in the coal mines, himself, and then lost a kidney. But as they closed them down, then they moved to Michigan, near Pontiac, where he worked with General Motors in the automobile factory. So pretty much, you know, a working-class—Pontiac was very much a working-class, urban district, in a sense, thirty miles from Detroit, so I graduated from a high school that had 540 in my graduating class, so I consider I grew up in the big city.

EF: You said earlier you studied political science as an undergraduate, and history. Was that just—did that come naturally, that direction?

DW: It's always been an interest of mine. I guess I always—I love studying history because of the old saying that, you know, those that don't learn from history are destined to repeat it, so history is—is a great opportunity to learn what not to do or what *to* do, in cases of—there have been some very successful, you know, efforts that have kept us moving forward.

EF: Well, you're in the legislature, and you don't wait too long to run for leadership. Do you decide, *I can do* this? Or—

DW: Well, the first—coming in in the middle of a two-year term, I think the—the Democratic Caucus made sure that they placed me next to an experienced legislator. I was placed next to—my seatmate was Vic Miller, (representative from Topeka), one of the brightest people I think in the legislature. And, in fact, he has returned to the legislature now. But I sat next to him, and the—the rule was, particularly during the time I entered, that, you know, freshmen are to be seen and not heard. And it's a very daunting experience when you—you're one of 125, so quickly you watch and learn how things are done, and generally freshmen don't go to the mic very often; that was the rule until you knew the ropes and knew what you were talking about.

But I got appointed to three committees. I was put on Judiciary because I was an attorney, and loved that process. And then I was on Labor and Industry because of my district, and then Public Health and Welfare, and then ended up being on the Rules

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Committee. I certainly wanted to be on the Education Committee, but the speaker at the time, Speaker John Michael "Mike" Hayden, as anyone who knows him can appreciate
—when I, as a, you know, freshman beginning representative, asked to be on the Education Committee, as a former teacher, and Mike said, as only Mike would, that he wasn't going to put one more blank-blank teacher on the Education Committee. So having heard—

EF: Blank-blank?

DW: Blank-blank. But he always had colorful language, and it was always very entertaining, and—but so then I ended up on the House Rules Committee, which would basically, if there was a floor debate and a question about whether an amendment was germane [sufficiently related to the subject of a piece of legislation] or not, then I would be the Democratic input, and the Republican Party had one also, so we got to help settle any rules fights on the floor of the House, which was always very interesting.

EF: Your legal background seemed to be a real aid in the legislature.

DW: Right. I didn't realize that we had such a wonderful support, Legislative Research and Revisor of Statutes. You just give them the idea, and they would write it or revise it. But it was very helpful, especially on floor amendments. And the one thing that was so dynamic about the House was the fact that the floor debate was always—you could never—you could never determine what was going to happen on any given day, and there was good debate on all bills. There were very few bills that appeared to go through without, you know, both sides getting up there and giving their arguments and their positions. Very dynamic. It was kind of a constant learning environment. That, plus the committee.

I mean, the legislature works through the committee process and relies heavily upon the chairmen of the committee and the majority leader referring the bills to committee. But the committee process to me was one of the—the most fun aspects of being in the legislature, because you've got the bill, you've got a briefing from the revisor's office and research department, and then you had public hearings. And I was

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always amazed that no matter how simple the bill appeared, by the time you heard from both sides, the proponents and opponents, it would always give you food for thought: Is this something that we need to pass or not?

And then it went from there, of course, to the House—the floor of the House, and that is a very dynamic—particularly—we had some very, very articulate, capable people on both sides of the aisle during the time I was there, so you always learned something, listening to the debate on the floor.

EF: You're not there long, and you put your name out for a leadership position, assistant minority leader. How do you remember that?

DW: It was one of those things that I—after the first session or two, I got very comfortable with the dynamics and the fact that anything could happen on any given day, but wanted—I wanted to be part of the—helping to prepare the caucus, reviewing the bills, helping to plan the strategy: What's the best way to approach this bill? Does it need to pass at all? Helping other people to understand the implications of the bill. So I started out as the minority whip, and that really is basically a job where you try to make sure everybody is in their seat and voting.

EF: Taking roll?

DW: Yeah, taking roll. So I go back to taking roll as a teacher at the beginning of the classroom. But then it evolved into—I basically would take all the happenings that happened that week in the legislature and then summarize it into one or two pages and then distribute it to the rest of the caucus so that they had an idea: What were the—what were the important points? We used to call it: What were the "peanuts" of this bill? What's the important point? What are the positives? What are downsides? So it gave me an opportunity to further review the bills and, you know, provide some service, based on my legal background, to the rest of the caucus.

EF: When you announced your interest in being assistant minority leader. Or was it—were you a shoe-in, or were you—Marvin Barkis was the minority leader at that time, early time. Were you and Marvin a team, or—

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DW: Marvin and I were—we were—probably the most important thing we had in common is we were both attorneys, but other than that—we certainly had different approaches to how we did things. Marvin was a very big—big ideas, see the big picture type of person. I was more of the detail—you know, what does it say? What is the language? Is it correct? You know, what—looking more—so we—we worked well together because he had the big picture, the big ideas, and then I was the one who wanted to make sure that it was done—the bill was—you know, it—the summary and what was said about it and promoted to the public and passed was actually a good one.

EF: Did you put your name before the caucus? Were you alone?

DW: Oh, yes, yes. It wasn't a team or—we weren't—you know, we didn't do it as a—both of us, you know, doing it together. But I don't recall ever having any opposition as I moved up into the leadership. But partly—part of that was the—you know, usually once a bill passes to the House, then there are always—someone has to carry it, you know, on the floor of the House, so I got asked to carry some—any bills that was controversial or that would generate a lot of debate or was an extremely long and technical bill, then I generally would be picked to be the one who would present that in—from the Judiciary Committee. So it was a good way for me to learn the handling the debate on the floor, responding to questions, which was part of the fun of it, though, responding to the questions, because you had to be very quick at the mic, on your feet.

EF: Now, you served in leadership for a number of sessions. How do you remember that? I'm going to break it—I'm going to get into some detail and break it down, but how do you remember that time?

DW: Being in leadership in the Democratic Party during that time was—I'd call it an exciting time. And it was always an opportunity—the Democratic Caucus was a caucus where—well, first of all, one of my biggest concerns about getting appointed and elected was the concern—you always had this image in your mind that, well, in politics you had to follow the party line. In the Democratic Caucus in the House, it was never—certainly there was a Democratic position, but there was flexibility within the caucus to vote your conscience, and if you did not agree with it, you know, you didn't—you

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weren't forced to or intimidated or required to follow the party line. But then that's the joy of being in the minority. You didn't have to deliver the votes. You didn't have to have the vision for the future. You could just do what you thought was the best and right thing to do. So it was—there was quite a lot of freedom in the Democratic Caucus. And under Marvin's leadership—he would often say—sometimes he'd look back and think everybody was supporting him, and then there was no one supporting him, so—

EF: "Follow me"?

DW: Right. I think he would call the roll call vote once, and there were no hands up, so it's a humbling experience, leadership. But there was quite a bit of range if you disagreed with, you know,

EF: In those early years, was there something that you kind of grabbed a hold of and said, "*This is mine*," or was it more, "*I'm a team member and part of the bigger forces*?"

DW: I think the legislative process forces you to specialize either in your committee work or one or two topics. So certainly the time I was in the House, there were a number of dynamic women on both sides of the aisle, Republicans and Democrats, so we started to get together on many of the issues that affected women and children, and worked as a group, so you would find people, you know, crossing the aisle, doing what was right. And I was always impressed with the fact that all the perceptions I had had about politics were not valid or true, particularly in Kansas. I used to always say that once—the only time we really worried about politics was during an election. Once the oath of office was taken for a session, then, you know, 90 percent of the legislators were interested in good government.

Now, there were different viewpoints on how that good government would occur, but it was not as political or politicized as I perceived or had read, you know, that legislature would be. There was certainly a lot of bills that—there was, you know, support from both sides of the aisle, so it was a great experience to see how dynamic and how well democracy can work when their focus is on, you know, what's good for people.

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And I look back on my legislative experience very fondly in the sense that it really supports the idea that particularly in Kansas—and Kansas is the only one I know—the Republicans and Democrats did work together to try to do what is the right thing. Now, the debates would be what's the right thing to do, and how much money we're going to spend, but there was a focus on public service and, you know, doing what's right for the citizens. And I was very pleased to experience that.

EF: Let me focus in on your first few sessions. The, in a sense, policy '84, '85, '86—John Carlin is governor. You've got a Democrat in the governor's seat. Pretty active time.

DW: It was a very active time. I was—

EF: I recall that those—I mean, really, your first six—or fewer years, three or four years, when you have a Democrat in the governor's office.

DW: It does change the dynamics for your party when you have the governor of the same party, and Governor Carlin was a tremendous leader. He had a vision, and he knew how to use his staff to try to count the votes before it became critical, so he was a good vote counter, used his staff very well to educate on any issues. I found him extremely accessible. If you had a question or had a problem with something, he was willing to compromise because he could see the big picture, that the process was compromise. And even with the Democratic Caucus, they did not just blindly follow him, every bill that he wanted, so there was a lot of opportunity for give and take and reshaping and fine-tuning with the Democratic Caucus and then, of course, between—once it passed the House—between the House and the Senate. But he was very open. Always had a vision, and you want leaders to have a vision, and so I think it was [writer-philosopher Ralph Waldo] Emerson who said that, you know, for lack of a vision, the nation perishes. And the same applies to the state, that you want your leaders to have a vision. It could get uncomfortable at times, particularly on the floor of the House in the veto session, when push came to shove and he needed a few extra votes, but he knew how to use the telephone on the floor of the reps and was very persuasive many times.

EF: Do you ever recall being leaned on?

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DW: Yes, once or twice. And as I recall, I did not budge, so he found the vote someplace else.

EF: Really? What were you leaned on that you didn't vote?

DW: I think there was probably appropriations at the very end that—and I'm sure, from my perspective, it would have always been anything dealing with social services or juveniles. I had a fairly clear vision, having represented juveniles and children in need of care and juvenile offenders, you know, what I felt needed to be done with those programs, and any sort of aid or social services was always a very—a strong point, something I was always interested in.,

EF: I recall there was a sales tax increase towards the end of Carlin's term.

DW: That's the—

EF: Did that give you any difficulty?

DW: Yes. I think that was—

EF: I didn't look up your vote.

DW: I think that was one—that was one of the ones where the—I would have gotten a call and graciously declined. And luckily, there were others who felt more comfortable, because some reps could go either way. It's just with my legislative district, sales tax, you know, hurt the south half of Hutch and south Hutchinson greater than any other tax, being it's a poor area.

EF: So you didn't like the sales tax.

DW: No.

EF: If you could avoid it.

DW: And one of the things you learn very quickly there is no fair tax, though. Maybe the saying was that the only fair tax is to tax someone else pays, because it always comes down to, you know, do you want to maintain the quality of service or education, and if so, are you willing, you know, to support it with the money or some sort of tax increase, because it's very hard within any agency, or even the legislature—once you provide and give something, it's very hard to take that away, any new program, because it creates a constituency, and so then you have that difficult—of trying to get the votes to pay for it,

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because no one wants any reduced services, but on the same hand, no one wants to pay any more than they currently are. And I think that's the dilemma that every legislative session has. I always thought the positive side of living in Kansas is that it requires a balanced budget, but the negative side is there's always very, very tough choices, particularly at the end of the session, on what's going to get passed and what's going to not. And that's where you set your priorities as a legislator, as a party. What are our priorities for next year, to two years?

EF: Let's move on to Mike Hayden, who's governor. You are four years in leadership during that time. As you look back on that, what pops in your head?

DW: Mike Hayden's leadership in the House—it was always interesting because, again, dynamic on any given day, with the Republicans having the majority, they certainly could get bills out of committee, out on the floor. The only opportunity for the minority party at that time was to either try to get an amendment on the floor and then drafting an amendment that would pick up not only the Democratic votes you need but the R's, the Republicans, too. So there were some dynamic floor debates. And it was never—I don't remember it except on, you know, a few issues, that it was ever one sided. I mean, part of the dynamic is that you make your arguments and appeal, present facts and try to convince some of the Republicans to vote in favor.

And I think the hope that you always had, and the good thing about Kansas, is that the Republican Party was a moderate party, so you could always pick up votes from a Republican, or they could pick up votes—the Democrats could pick up votes from Republicans, depending upon the makeup of the representative's district, because even a Republican representative would have low-income, poor, education—and there was a lot of support for education in the Republican Party throughout the time that I was there. There was just never enough money or the votes to get it all together. But you relied upon that, being able to pick up votes from the moderate Republicans. And then they—the Democratic Party—we had a number of—we would often say who—the cheap, cheaper and cheapest of the Democrats, you know, who pinched pennies and were very tight on budgets, too. So we—that's what was so dynamic, and you would see

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people rising to the occasion, that they would ignore the party label to do what's right for their district or what they thought was right for—you know, for Kansas.

A typical example would have been issues related to the death penalty and even the lottery. I mean, I don't know how many years we debated both of those, and, you know, the votes were—were not D's and R's, it was what do you think is the best approach on this issue for Kansas in the future?

EF: Yeah. Some would view Marvin as a partisan minority leader at that time. Were you in there, plugging like Marvin, or were you trying to soften his partisan orientation? Or is that even fair?

DW: I never thought of Marvin as really partisan, that—he certainly had an agenda and wanted to move that agenda along. Marvin had a great ability to reach across the aisle and make friends with the Republicans who may not have been in lockstep with their leadership, so that provided an opportunity to try to get some votes. And most of the time, being in the minority party, unless you reach across the aisle and work and cooperate and try to work with the other members, you will not get anything done, so it was a great opportunity for him. I don't think of him as real partisan. I often say that—you know, I grew up with the Teamsters in Detroit, so even in Kansas, the Democrats are fairly mild. But you get—we got, I think, over the years, a coalition of Democrats and—and Republicans who would work together on children's issues.

And that's the one great thing about the dynamics of politics and the House of Representatives, is depending upon the issue, the coalition is going to change because how it affects and impacts their local districts. You would find—I used to always say the biggest difference in Kansas is not Democrat-Republican, it's urban-rural, because you would get the rural legislators standing and holding tight on a rural issue if it affected ag [agriculture]; likewise, the urban issues are somewhat different, at least then. I think now the major society issues that we see, of poverty and education, are the same, you know, whether it's an urban district or rural. But to me it was always—I thought many times we needed to send our urban legislators to survive in rural Kansas, in Galena or in Colby, and likewise, we need to send Colby representatives to Kansas City, Kansas, so

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that they understand that problems vary, but the needs of people are pretty consistent—you know, education, a good job, the ability to make a good living with health care.

EF: During the Hayden years, how did the caucus deal with some of [Governor] Hayden's high-profile issues, like highways, water plan, a prison? Do you have much memory of that?

DW: Yes, I do. I remember when we were going to build El Dorado Prison that the House kept—the Senate would send it over, and the House, we—the Senate kept sending it back, not being able to get the votes, and Mike [Hayden] was always very realistic about how to get things done. And the House, between the Democrats and the Republicans, the votes held out to the extent that the House ended up appointing three of us, who were not as experienced and not on Appropriations to the Conference Committee, with the Senate, to work out the—the El Dorado Prison. And when they finally built it, they even invited the three of us on the Conference Committee to the opening.

So that's, you know, just an example of how the—when the dynamic of the House and the votes weren't there to do it and they had issues with the cost and some other things, then leadership and Mike succumbed to the, you know, the will of the majority and basically appointed—I think there were three of us—Tim Shallenburger, myself and maybe—I can't remember the third--it might have been Kerry Patrick, but I don't think so; it would have been someone else—to the Conference Committee. And then once we got the issues addressed, then we could come back to the majority in the House and say, "We'll sign off on this." So it's an example of the process working. But certainly the Democrats had to be creative and work with the Republicans, who had concerns too. And, again, it was an issue of how big, how large, how much, and working together did get that resolved. So the process worked.

EF: There was another sales tax increase in that time period, and I assume you weren't on the—

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DW: Probably—no, I wasn't. The sales tax is regressive, particularly with middle and poor. The only nice thing about a sales tax is that, you know, those who have money do pay more, but those who are living on the margin always—particularly sales tax, on food.

EF: You mentioned working—getting a lot of things done by Democrats and often moderate Republicans working through things: money issues or big-time, big issues. And you'd been on the Rules Committee. Robert [H.] Miller [Wellington representative, then speaker of the House] was here a month ago and talked a bit about changing House rules at the start of the '89 session. I don't know if it's Marvin or you or who it was, aligning with the Rebels to change the rules. And that didn't seem like your normal coalition. What do you remember about that?

DW: We basically—part of the strategy was we didn't have the votes to get anything passed, and there were about nine—seven to nine, depending upon the time, Rebels who were not pleased with their speaker, had just philosophically opposed many of the things—

EF: Jim Braden

DW: It was Jim Braden, right. I remember the Jim Braden era because I was still sitting next to Vic Miller, and Vic Miller was on the Tax Committee, and so was Speaker Braden. And I remember that first session. I thought I was going to get hit. I knew that one day, that after Tax Committee, Speaker Braden—they could get Speaker Braden so worked up over issues that after the Tax Committee—and right after Tax we'd go on the floor, so Vic and Jim, Speaker Braden, were always still debating something from the Tax Committee, and I'd be sitting—they'd be right in front of you, and the speaker would be standing, and I'd be leaning this way [demonstrates] in my seat, thinking—they were both very passionate about their positions, but they were polar opposite positions. But, yeah, there was always prolonged debate on the tax issues.

But I would—with the Rebels—my role in the Democratic Caucus was I generally would meet with them, the Rebels, and then we would try to craft a compromise that we could all live with by the time it got to the floor.

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EF: On rules.

DW: On the rules or—it expanded to other issues too that we would compromise it and work it out, then take it back to each of our—he'd take it back to the Rebels, and I—we'd take it back to the Democratic Caucus, and then it was a coalition of trying to get—make something good happen.

EF: That was some—what an unholy coalition!

DW: Well, many times it would be the—There was David Miller, there was Kerry Patrick, Shallenburger—[Also, Robert Vancrum, J. C. Long, Clyde Graeber, Vernon L. Williams, and Dennis Spaniol and Bob Miller]

EF: —Kerry Patrick together on—

DW: Not many issues, but, again, on things that would benefit, you know, everybody, you set aside those differences on budgets and perspective on how to do things. And Kerry was, you know, one of the extremely bright person. And when he wanted to filibuster or—you know, he certainly knew how. I remember one time in a veto session he took out the tax code and started reading it. It was a long veto session. But, yeah, he believed passionately about several things—you know, certainly not the same that I would, but, again, most people position[s] are shaped by their upbringing and, many times, their district, so—

EF: I'm going to jump to the 1990 election and the 1991 legislative session. Democrats gained five seats in the House and reached the number sixty-three, and all of a sudden, Marvin is speaker, and you are majority leader. What do you remember about that?

DW: That was an amazing election. I think no one quite expected it, and things happened very, very quickly once election night was there. And when you think that it was—I believe, the last time the Democrats had overseen the House was 1914. [Democrats held a House majority in 1977 and 1978 legislative sessions.] They didn't quite know how to act as the majority party, and then the Republicans didn't quite know how to act as the minority party. And the roles are very different. But with the one-vote margin, and we entered the session with—there was an election challenge of

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Elaine Wells, a Republican, at the beginning. So it was always teetering whether there would be one vote or what would happen there. We got through that.

And then the biggest issue I remember in the '91 session, of course, was the shortfall. I can remember we started at about $85 million short of [what] the budget was, and I can remember Rochelle Chronister, who was the minority leader now in the Appropriations, and George Teagarden, who was the chairman of the Committee—they did a—and it was kind of unique because they did a—they had big posters that they brought onto the floor of the House, and they were educating everyone on how dire the financial situation was and what was going to need to happen in the budget.

So it started off with, you know, there was no money, and then that difficult debate on—you're going to raise taxes, you're going to raise revenue or are you going to cut programs? And it was really—it dominated the whole session. I remember it's one of the few times—well, and I think the House did finally send over a package to the Senate. There were, I think, nine Republican votes with the Democrats for an increase of about $119 million, but it was—the whole session was about: Are we going to be able to raise enough revenue or are we going to cut programs?

So it was not a good time to be in the majority when you had [a] one-vote margin and then a major deficit to work through. And I think that whole session—both the Democrats and the Republicans were—because it hadn't occurred in so long, they were really trying to find their footing and what the vision and—and where they were going to go.

And then you had the governor [Joan Finney], who was new to her job, and basically telling the House and Senate what she wanted and what she would veto if she didn't get what she wanted. So it was a different dynamic than in prior years as far as the dynamics between when you're the majority party and your governor is the majority party, and the governor's vision is not what the House is able to deliver, particularly on sales tax exemptions. I think part of Governor Finney's—[the] main part of her plan was she wanted to get rid of all the sales tax exemptions, which was certainly—had been

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debated in years prior, and then tax services, which made it very difficult for the Democrats to be able to deliver the votes on that one.

And then I think the issue the governor wanted—she wanted initiative and referendum. Again, there weren't the votes in the House, I don't think in the Republican or Democratic Caucus, for that one. So it made it a unique time between people—I think it caused new coalitions to form between the House Democrats and Republicans, and I think it caused the Senate to stand up.

I remember we used to have leadership meetings with leadership of the House. We would meet with the leadership in the Senate and try to devise an end-game plan. They, basically, I think, ended up stepping up and by '92, you know, helping get school finance solved.

EF: How do you remember the role you played as majority leader of the House at that time?

DW: My job as majority leader was certainly to work with the chairman of the committee and then set the calendar of the House and keep things moving. It was always a time when, you know, if you had to get something out—when you have a 63-62 vote and people go on both ways, you never quite knew how many votes you were getting on anything once it went up on the board. So we depended a lot on, I think, more cooperation, collaboration.

But I think by that time, the Democrats, who had never been chairmen of committees—I think they realized that they *had* to work more cooperatively with the Republicans and moderate and get the support of the Republicans because even if it came out of committee with the one-vote margin on the floor—if it wasn't a collaborative process, a cooperative process along the way—the days where you would just—you know, the chairman would say it would be a party-line vote we're over with, because it had to be something that was more cooperative than in the past, so it forced everyone to step back and look at, you know, where are we going and how we're going to get there with these new dynamics.

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EF: Now, I didn't mention this to you before. A group of us are doing a book on Kansas politics going clear back to '75, to the present. And I have the special privilege of doing a chapter on Joan Finney. And I've talked to a number of people, interviewed a number of people, and one reason I was interested in doing these oral histories was learning more. I actually had a telephone interview with Marvin [Barkis] before his oral history interview. In the latter he was much more tactful.

I'm going to tell you some things he said and see if you have any comment on them. In the telephone interview, "Finney was impossible to work with, often clueless about legislation, even whimsical, a wild card. … Had no knowledge or experience, no legislative agenda. …Vetoed bills we'd worked hard to pass without consultation. … I sent Wagnon and Sebelius out to talk to her, without success." He didn't say he sent Whiteman out. But obviously, a different kind of governor than—

DW: Right.

EF: John Carlin or Mike Hayden, or Bob Bennett before those two. How do *you* remember that? I mean, did Marvin and Governor Finney just get off on the wrong foot?

DW: There was a—it appeared to me that they had different ideas and things that they each wanted to accomplish. I think Governor Finney was—she was very populist, believed in representing the people. Very passionate, caring about people, but did not have any experience. Had come from the legislature and had been in a position of secretary or treasurer, which was a pretty—a one-man, one-woman show for all those years.

And I think the leadership style certainly was different from previous governors, who would put a vision out there and then work with their staffs and the legislators, the House and the Senate, to get it—to accomplish that agenda. I think she continued to try to do that, but, you know, when—the difficulty is that when their votes weren't there, you know, you couldn't make—particularly on some of the issues, like sales tax and the referendum, you really—you had no leverage with a one-vote majority to convince anybody one way or the other. So those were down-to-the-earth, good-government, basic tax policy, or how you run government, so they did hit heads.

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And Marvin tried to—and I think she tried, but never were able to find, you know, a middle ground. And then when veto threats started coming, then that's—you know, you have to be careful about making a threat to anybody, particularly, you know, 125 representatives who feel they are—they were elected to represent what their constituents want. So people got their backs up against the wall quickly and very easily.

But, again, we—you know, we were the majority party with one vote, and so that made it even more difficult, I think, because there was just nothing that the House could deliver that she wanted, because the votes were not there. So it was a difficult—I think both the Democrats in the House and the—well, Republicans in the Senate were trying to feel: What is the best way or how—what's the best way to work with this new governor to try to get something done and cooperate but yet, you know, be able to have something the House wants and something, the Senate.

Because part of the process does work on—and during the ninety days, you end up having a House position, and then you have, you know, a Senate position that comes together and compromises. But when you don't have the votes to have a House position or a Senate position on those issues, then you have to step back and think: What else can we get done that needs to be done? And certainly, I think, taxes are—income and revenue were a big issue that session, and I think out of just sheer desperation as the process moved on, then the House Appropriations had to start—well, if we're not going to raise any revenue, and it doesn't look like we are, then what is it that we need to cut? Because we have to have a balanced budget.

So it was a session where there were just—there—it was hard getting a position on, you know, what it is that we're going to do, because the votes were not there, and if the votes aren't there to raise the revenue, then you end up going to: What are we going to cut?

EF: Now, in a few instances, the votes were there to override her vetoes.

DW: Right. And, yeah—

EF: Democrats have a majority, and they're overriding their governor. What do you remember about that?

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DW: Yeah, I remember the—you know, it was just, in a sense, sad that it had gotten to that point, that they couldn't agree or compromise and be realistic about where the votes were in the House and the Senate, because no one wins when, you know, you don't compromise and you don't reach a solution. And no one wins, particularly when you have to start cutting budgets. And that's—that's the painful part of that.

EF: Now, a couple months after this, Donna Whiteman is named to head the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, after the difficulty of getting some of the things Finney wanted. And all of a sudden, you're a cabinet member, a department head. Did you avoid all this? Did you say, when Marvin wants to send somebody to the second floor to negotiate, "Send somebody else"? Finney obviously developed confidence in you, independent of all this difficulty that session.

DW: I didn't really get invited to her office, and it was somewhat of a surprise when she invited me, and it was near the end of the session, I think. It wasn't—probably it would have been in the veto session or close to it that she invited me in and asked me if I was interested. And I certainly was somewhat floored because of what had happened with the House and being the majority leader and the one-vote margin and the overrides going on. But I think she—we agreed on a lot of issues that related to social service and helping children, juvenile offenders, and she was always a very compassionate person. I always say that being secretary of SRS, I had the best boss because every time I would have a budget problem with children, foster care—we had a foster care lawsuit—[a] long-term care lawsuit at that time also, the—and all this was—all these cuts and problems were there in 1991, but once I became secretary, if I would have a budget or need and problem, and I would call her and say, "We need this" or "This is what's happening the foster care system. We need to look at long-term care," she was the most helpful person.

Her budget director did not like me very much because Joan Finney would always come and deliver the social services, and I think it—it doesn't often—and, you know,—in retrospect, people don't, I think, know that she was so compassionate and caring. And I was always quite amazed because as secretary, I would—my responsibility

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is to the governor, and if I would have a problem with a budget or whatever, I'd have direct access to her.

And I remember her telling me, and she'd say, "Well, you know, Donna, what's the right thing to do?" Particularly at the Senate at the time was real big on a sex offender program out at Larned [State Hospital], and we had issues with long-term care. I mean, 60 percent of the SRS budget was nursing home care, and that was the fastest increasing, along with foster care numbers were going out of sight at that time. But she was very compassionate about services for children and families, and it must have been just a soft spot because she—her budget—any time I needed a supplementary appropriation for, you know, children, family, foster care, long-term care, she would make it happen in her budget.

Now, the budget director was never very pleased with me. At cabinet meetings, it was kind of cool because—but the governor—I mean, I always say she was the best boss I ever had in the sense that she did meet the need. Now, there was a lot that I tried to do to manage and be preventative and, you know, looking at SRS when I took it over. It's an agency that was predominantly driven by federal mandates, but we certainly had relied as a state on institutional care with our mental health, hospitals and foster care and juvenile offenders. So we, our commissioners at the time provided—you know, all of them had and prepared a plan of saving money, moving more to community-based services, increasing child support, you know, for 80 percent of the children on AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] weren't receiving any support from their father, so we started an initiative on, you know, child support—most-wanted posters to collect child support. So we really tried to go into the prevention, but doing things differently.

And, you know, during that transition time, there were lots of budget needs, and she would meet the need in the House. I think we had a lot of Henry Helgerson, and a lot of advocates for children, Kathleen Sebelius, Joan Wagnon, a lot of leadership on both sides. A tremendous group of women in the Republican Caucus: Rochelle Chronister, Elizabeth Baker, Wanda Fuller, who would, you know, support that also.

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So, you know, it's really while she did not get along with the legislature, she certainly took care of the most—the elderly, the needy and the children.

EF: I'm interested in how she got along with you.

DW: Yes, yes, I got along well with her.

EF: When did that start?

DW: I've always gotten along with her. I think we both were somewhat populist, and the—

EF: Did you campaign with her at all?

DW: No, no, not at all. In fact, I was very surprised when she called me in and asked me if I wanted the job because I knew there were two other people in the House, Democrats, who were actively seeking the position, so—I wasn't seeking the position, but, you know, it was a one-time opportunity, and, you know, anybody who would have the opportunity to follow in Bob Harder, there for seventeen years, had a very efficient, effective organization, and—but, again, nursing home was driving the budget, and there was a foster care lawsuit going on.

EF: Did you—again, I'm trying to focus on *your* thinking. Did you have qualms—I mean, you have arrived at the number two legislative position. Did you have qualms about cutting the cord, so to speak, with the legislature, or did it just—it was an opportunity that just was compelling?

DW: It was compelling to me, because it was an area—all the areas that I was interested in over the years in the House. And it was an opportunity to make a difference and see the other side. I never had—it was not a goal of mine to be a cabinet-level secretary or to administer any state agency.

EF: Marvin. Did he try to talk you out of it?

DW: No.

EF: He said, "Do it?"

DW: No, it was one of those things where, you know, the history of Kansas is a Republican state, so the likelihood that the Democrats were going to remain in the majority for very long was not very—

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EF: You were looking ahead?

DW: I was looking ahead at the time, and it happened to be an area of interest of mine. But—and my goal—I mean, I had—even in the legislative process, my goal was never to be a committee chairman or to be—

EF: Speaker?

DW: Yeah. It really wasn't. I liked the committee work, the detail, the behind-the-scenes type. Never had a desire to be a committee chairman at all because you spend your focus on trying to build the coalition, in a sense, or move the bill along in the hearings. And being majority leader was great because I got to see the big picture and work with the chairmen to get the bills out of committee and worked the way through, and then worked with the Senate in the Conference Committee, so—but it was just an opportunity that I struggled a long time thinking about because I did enjoy my work in the House. I loved being in the House because it was such a dynamic learning process and you met such good, good people.

But I just thought it was time for me—I think the average length of stay in the House, you know, is usually seven to ten years, so—I never had to worry about opposition, though, or getting unseated. It was a very safe seat.

EF: Okay. I'll let that go.

Two really big issues were dealt with in '92, the next legislative session. I'm talking about school finance and then Children's Initiatives that many of your colleagues were involved in. I assume you didn't have—I mean, the school finance issue really started going that August or something like that, when the judge—

DW: Judge Bullock's decision.

EF: Yes. And I assume you were not engaged with that process to any degree.

DW: No, other than—I mean, with—I knew the players, and, I mean you had the judge, and then—part of, you know, all of that, I think, came together as a result of the '91 session, where there had to be more cooperation between the D's and the R's in the House to get anything done. But, you know, that's a result of the leadership of Rick Bowden, I think Kathleen Sebelius, Joan Wagnon were the primary—you had a lot of

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what I call "great racehorses" in the House at the time, who knew what needed to be done. They didn't know how to do it, but they put together the Study Committee and looked at it and worked at it, you know, from the get-go because they knew they had a mandate that session to get that done.

So the organization of it and keeping it on track I think is a tremendous attribute to, well, Rick Bowden who's deceased now, but the rest of the House and Senate committee mem and Senator [Nancy E.] Parrish, I remember—I was still involved and over here almost every day as secretary of SRS, dealing with more of the social issues, and I was involved in the Children's Initiatives, because, looking back, it was amazing to me that sort of after the '91 session and the foster care lawsuit, it sort of coalesced in the '92 session, where you had the focus on primarily helping children and families but also restructuring education to look at developmental needs. And then they were looking at the health needs of children, teen pregnancy, which was one of the things that we had.

So the initiatives that we came up with in SRS supported the children's agenda because they were looking at prevention, community-based care, health assessments, reducing teen pregnancy, more opportunities for families, support for families. And I believe, even at that time, there were five Republican women in the House, who, with all the Children's Initiatives going on, that we recommended at SRS and the Children's Initiative, they introduced about—a package of four or five bills about children's safety—you know, not riding in the back of trucks, safety, child car seats. And their package ended up being part of the Children's Initiative—I think that session there were fourteen bills introduced on children, supporting them long term, and all but three passed.

And it was a unique session, too, because people forget that in the '92 session, they did make $45 million cuts, but none of those cuts came from children's programs, so it was the session where I think people finally—it hit everybody that we need a long-term prevention plan. And between what was happening in the House and what SRS was proposing as prevention initiatives, that it's—you know, they put together I think

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the five-year plan with The Annie Casey Foundation and the Corporation for Change that really sealed services for children and family.

And I'm not sure that anything like that has ever happened before then or since then, that focus on the need to—you know, kids are our most important asset. We need to make sure they're well educated, they're well fed. The breakfast program came in then, the immunization programs, the health assessments. And it was just kind of the timing or things came together, that everybody was on the same page, that we can't do a lot, but we can do, you know, preventative service or do a better job with the services we're providing to children and families.

So it was—after all the struggling in the '91 session, the '92 session is the shining star of progressive activity. And that wouldn't have happened, I think, without that cooperative effort. I mean, I do remember—I remember—well, it had to be the '91 session, that Governor Hayden had reduced Aid for Dependent Children, that subsidy that they get monthly, by about nine dollars. In 1991, the Democrats came back and were able to restore that nine dollars and brought it up to eleven dollars and eighty cents. And then lo and behold, Tim Shallenburger, from southeast Kansas, a Republican, brought an amendment to the floor, and he added another two dollars and eighty cents to that, because of the population, and restored those kind of cuts. So it was that kind of, you know, coming together to help—we all have a common interest in people being fed and—you know, it all starts—education starts with being well fed and taken care of at home, so—

EF: Obviously, Marvin had great interest in this, but also Bob Miller.

DW: Yes.

EF: And they chaired and vice chaired some—an interim group of some kind. And Joan Wagnon was involved. Who from the administrative side, other than you,—I assume you were directly involved in some of this.

DW: Right. I would have been involved more on the—giving testimony about what was needed, based on social services, what we see as needed. But, yeah, that would have

been that children's—that—that interim committee. And I think basically Marvin put himself as chair, and then Bob—

EF: Quite unusual.

DW: Right, very unusual. And then they were—I think there were only two senators or three on it. Usually there's an equal number from the House and the Senate, but it was a House initiative, so—that was accomplished because of the votes.

EF: Did you have staff members that were working with that group, or—

DW: Right. They would—we would give them all sorts of information about what was needed, particularly in some of the teen pregnancy, some of the changes that we recommended. They would go through the Budget Committee because, in the House and the Senate, we would have the SRS budget, you know, being $1.1 billion at the time, had its own full subcommittee that pretty much operated throughout the session. But I would be working with the subcommittee, but then also filtering information to members of the House that this is what's needed, you know, if we're going to change the system.

And there were a number of changes in—in even the AFDC system that—in the teen—well, in one of the teen pregnancy prevention programs. The big initiative at the time was if a young lady had one child on AFDC, if they ended up having the second child, there is a 85 percent chance they'd never get off of it, so bringing in training, workforce development, education, giving them two years to complete a degree or get a job. So those types of support systems, we were able to get that accomplished to support families.

EF: I'm going to shift a little bit from legislative to your time as a department head. And you've commented on that already, and I don't want to retrace that. And I've talked to—Bob Knight [secretary of Commerce and Housing under Governor Finney] was probably a little unusual department head in that era. And some folks at Wichita State actually compiled the papers of the Finney years. Your comment is different than kind of what I've heard, and I'll just—in fact, the folks that put this book together—that doesn't mean it's accurate, but—said something like this—and it was kind of confirmed by

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Michael Johnston, Governor Finney was not engaged with department heads in policy making. Was SRS an exception to that?

DW: I think SRS or Social Services was an exception. We would have cabinet meetings. I remember we did have cabinet meetings. But I would deal with Mary Holladay [Joan Finney's daughter and chief of staff] every once in a while, but I would deal directly with Governor Finney, only because I think her focus is—was on social services. And I think she wanted to keep, you know, quality social services and help. I think it was part of her populism and appeal to the people. But she—I had great access to the governor any time I needed it. And I didn't know this going into it. I'm glad she, you know, was a very caring, compassionate person, but it certainly made my job a lot easier, particularly with Budget Director [Gloria] Timmer and others who were—

You know, and at the time, they were—budgets were tight, so they were probably squeezing everybody else to save and hold harmless social services. And I think if you go back and look at it, that's—although it was hard getting my budgets through the House, particularly with Phil Kline [legislator from Shawnee; chair of the Appropriations Committee], on the subcommittee. But once I would get the budget over to the Senate, "Gus" Bogina [senator from Shawnee; chair of the Ways and Means Committee, would—I mean, I think there are a number of senators over there who, you know, are very compassionate to and agreed with the governor.

So, yeah, I had a unique and different experience, I think, because of her focus and commitment, although I do tell one of the most hilarious stories about the governor, and everybody knows that she loves getting out and meeting—and she would show up at any state or, you know, any state facility in the state. So I got a call. I was in my office in Docking Building, and the governor was—had showed up at the Topeka State Hospital. She just shows up at the front and says, "I'm Governor Finney, and give me a tour."

So I jump in my car. I get out there, and we get ahead of her and pick—get up with her and meet her and take her on the tour. And we were—we'd go—she wants to see every detail. You don't show Governor Finney just the surface stuff. So we had to go

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into the food service, we had to go into the maintenance, and we walk into the maintenance department out at Topeka State Hospital, and there on the wall are all these girlie pictures, and I thought, Oh, no! I didn't say anything. Governor didn't say anything. I thought, you know, she didn't see them or she was just too engaged.

We end the tour. She was very pleased. I go back to my office. As soon as I get back to my office: "Secretary Whiteman, the governor would like to speak with you." I get on the phone with the governor, and she said, "Donna, those posters will come down." So she didn't miss that mark. And then when I delivered the message to my superintendent at Topeka State Hospital that we have to have these posters down because, you know, they're not—it's not appropriate in the workplace to have scantily clad calendar photos or pictures hanging on the wall.

Then we get the push-back from maintenance department. "Well, why can't we? Because, I mean, there are never any women who come through here." I said, "Well, the governor did, and that's all you need to"—but she was very—it was always—and I was with her once at the Larned State Hospital. She was the kind of governor that always wanted to reach out to people and wanted to be right where it was. I mean, she—you weren't going to show her just the nice stuff; she wanted to be right in there. And I just remember security guards, as we get into the secure unit at Larned State Hospital, where some of our most seriously mentally ill patients were, and, you know, she wants to go in and meet them, and the security, you know: "Well, no, they're behind bars." "No, no, I'm the governor. I *will* meet them." And we march—

But she was a very much a people person, although I think she at times had—you know, she had difficulty getting along with the legislature because not understanding, I think—she was new in her role, and then not understanding the legislative role. It's a different role.

EF: Do you think, I mean, you saw it up close and personal that first session with Finney as governor. How did she adjust? Did the legislature adjust? She had three more sessions.

DW: Right, right.

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EF: How did it get reconciled, or was this a standoff, or how would you

DW: I saw it as really the House and Senate working together. Probably I saw more cooperation behind the scenes, efforts to try to get something done for the good of the state.

EF: She roped the House and Senate together?

DW: And that could be one of the positive things about—she made them—you know, made them accountable and it was an opportunity, certainly for the House and Senate leadership, but I think when you look at the years of the Senate during that time, you will see—you will see a much more cohesive stepping up—and we often talk about the difference between the House and the Senate—you know, the two-year terms versus the four-year. But you—sometimes the House and Senate play off of each other, and then you'd go to the Conference Committee. But I think there appeared to me more common behind-the-scenes work among the leadership in both the House and the Senate.

And I spent a lot of time with the SRS budget over on the Senate also, but—and you had some great leaders in the Senate at the time, so it was a time when you had what I would consider, you know, some outstanding—you know, some sessions you have maybe three or four or five in each house who are really dynamic leaders. You probably, during that time—there were, you there, 25, 30 people in the House who—any one of them could have been speaker.

EF: She was vetoed more than any recent governor, maybe any governor but more recent governors. And what I picked up is she had a little different attitude. I mean, John Carlin, for example: "You're not gonna override my vetoes."

DW: Right, right.

EF: I mean—and Hayden, the same way. I mean, very fierce in protecting their vetoes. Finney seemed to say, "Well, if you want to veto me, just go right ahead and veto me. I can live with that." Have you ever heard her talk about it at all?

DW: Well, I think the record shows that she felt that the legislature had its role and she had her role to propose what she thought was the best, and she didn't seem to—it

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didn't bother her or stop her from what—you know, she was willing to lose over a matter of principle rather than compromise. So, yeah, she, as long as she was true to herself, I think she was fairly happy with what she had done.

And her leadership style was certainly—it was much different. It was not the top-down type of leadership or that control. She basically recognized that—she did, you know, recognize that they play a different role, but she didn't do anything to try to bring them together and, you know, bring her vision and the legislative vision together, which, I think, in prior governors you've seen. But, yeah, she—you know, "Let 'em do what they want to do, and I'll do what I want to do because I'm representing the people."

EF: She became the first and only governor not to seek a second term. Did you—did—well, first, just how did you see that? Did you see that coming, or were you consulted or anything like that?

DW: I think the—all the cabinet secretaries were just told at the same time, and, you know, it was just, I understood why she probably wouldn't want to run. People were concerned if she had any health issues, but--and she—it may not have been as much fun as—she didn't feel as successful as she had in other endeavors. But, yeah, she never talked about, you know, personal reasons why. It was just she just decided to—you know, she'd done it long enough.

EF: Moving on: We're getting toward the end.

DW: Well, that's good.

EF: We're moving along! You're quick! You served at an unusual time, and I told you we're trying to write a book that helps people understand what Kansas has gone through over forty years, basically mid-'70s through the present. As you look back—and you've had this ability, because you've been in Topeka and an observer of state politics for a good bit of time—you saw the activism of the '70s and—and '80s, really—to hard-charging—well, you take Bennett, Carlin and Hayden, legislative leaders who moved into the governor's office. Can—how do you put that? Can you put that in some perspective? The time you served and the time you've been a little less personally involved. I mean,—

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DW: I think you have a tendency to look back and think that those were the best of times, those were the worst of times. But the perspective I carried out was—and mine's probably a little more unique in the sense that I hadn't been involved in politics before coming to the House, so I saw that the process really works, but it does depend upon, you know, everybody—representatives, senators—listening to their constituents. And it's a hard job in the sense that, you know, if all they were expected to do was reflect what everybody in their community said or wants, then we could just give them, you know, all a keypad and they could all vote—like, an initiative and referendum.

But, you know, part of the process is that you represent your local constituents, but there is a time, if you grow and develop, that you become a statesman and you look out after what's in the best interest of every child in the state, not just the children in my part of south Hutchinson. And so the goal is that everybody, through facts and information and education and learning and hearing from people about the impact of a bill or legislation, that you are able to be in a much better position, and more informed, to make a better choice for the state so that our state continues to move ahead.

I mean, nothing stays the same. If you're doing everything the same way you did last year, you're falling behind; you're not moving ahead. So the process I think is geared towards developing the kind of statesman who will look at: Yes, I understand—yes, I understand why you don't want to wear a helmet on your motorcycle, but there's also the bigger issue of how much we're going to pay in health care if you get into an accident and end up on—in a hospital in intensive care. So it's a dynamic process.

You always want to make sure that the people are making decisions, though, and have all of the information, that the process is not cut short. And I think we have to be careful that we preserve the committee process and then the debate on the floor, looking from an institution perspective, because that's where you get different opinions, different ideas. You may have something that changes your mind, because it is the art of persuasion and convincing, you know. There are very few perfect answers. They're all solutions that take into consideration, you know, diversity, cultures, people, cost. So you want to—you know, you always—at least from my perspective—I hope that the House

and the Senate, the legislative process always keeps that—those checks and balances so that you are getting good debate, good facts, good information. If you get top-down leadership, sometimes that inhibits thinking. It inhibits information. It inhibits knowledge. So it's very important that I think the process be preserved, as it's meant to be: debate, discussion. And in this day and age, I think the issue of civil discourse is more important than it's ever been.

One of the things when I look back at the time I was in the House, we could disagree vehemently on the floor of the house, but after the session was over, there appeared to me more getting together, socializing, building the relationship, getting to know the person, getting to know their district, getting to know why they vote the way they do. And I think that's critically important that they not only work together during the day but they start to understand why someone votes the way they do. What are the key points that triggers the reason they vote one way or the other, that—more of an understanding a person and more being civil, and the fact that we can disagree without being disagreeable. And I love that about the House.

But at the time I was in the House, there were more attorneys who are used to doing that for a living, that you didn't take things personally. You didn't try to demonize one another. You know, there are times when you say the Republican position or the Democratic position, but you didn't demonize people. You respected them and, you know, they're all Kansans, so they're all good people. So those—I think we had an ideal time, when you had a right mixture of people who are—who are willing to look at and examine tough, tough issues.

And no matter how many times we voted on the death penalty, you know, you still talked to the person in the hallway if you saw them. No matter how many times you voted on abortion, you still talked to them. You didn't demonize them or try to destroy their character because you disagreed on what was the right thing to do. So I think the continuing public discourse and that civility is going to be key if we're going to overcome the challenges that we're going to have, you know, in the—in the next ten to twenty years.

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EF: You served your four years, most of four years, as secretary of SRS. In the '94 election, Democrats lose two congressional seats. There are fourteen House seats lost. Dramatic change there. I'm talking about the Kansas House. Republicans actually take the U.S. House as well. What was going on?

DW: It was just the—I think the change—time for a change. And then again, the national politics has its—many times influence upon what happens at the state level. I'm constantly amazed at how, when we run some of our state elections, people are running against what happens in Washington, D.C., and it's not an issue in Kansas, but, you know, they'll run against Nancy Pelosi and use her as a reason to vote one way or the other, so—but we always have to be cognizant of that.

The change—and, again, Kansas is a Republican state and predominantly so. It was expected that the Democrats would not maintain—particularly when you had a governor leaving also, and it was a one-term governor. Changes happening then, so—

And I think, even then, in 1992, there was a proviso in one of the SRS budget bills that the agency needed to start looking at how it could reduce our state number of employees by looking at privatizing some of those services, so I think the footprints were there already to look at some of the changes of privatization, which did happen: privatizing foster care after the new governor came in.

EF: The abortion issue obviously came up when Mike Hayden was governor. U.S. Supreme Court decision kind of pushed that toward the state, and obviously—I mean, the right to life folks viewed Mike as a pro-choice governor.

DW: Yes.

EF: And Finney won as a pro-life governor. But you would have had—do you recall how your caucus dealt with that? I'm kind of jumping back to that earlier time, but—

DW: Yeah, our caucus was—that was one of the votes that I believe on both sides of the aisle, the caucus didn't take a position because we had Democrats who were staunch—the right to life, and then we had Democrats who were pro-choice, and likewise Republicans, so it was an issue, I think, the change that occurred and has occurred probably since then, is that we continue to see, on a state and national level, people

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voting on one issue, realizing that those issues have very little impact on the day-to-day operation of, you know, the Department of Transportation or schools. So it's a narrowing of the focus, and the concern, I think, is that it—I don't know if it's a lack of education and not helping people to understand that voting on, you know, either the death penalty or the choice issues, or religion, generally are very narrow, small topics that—outside of one personal belief, state government doesn't have that much impact on either one of them, particularly.

But when I became secretary of SRS, the only people who opposed that were the right to life group, and we had to explain to them that SRS does not—Social Services has nothing to do with whether someone decides to have an abortion or not. In fact, by providing more supports for children and pregnant teenagers, you hope you can avoid them. So supporting children and families financially, you know, once they're born, is important for our future. But I think we will see and continue to see the one-issue voters, which will be to the detriment of all the other good things that government provides for people.

EF: Did you see at the time, looking back, that that was going to be a really divisive issue?

DW: It was always divisive in the House, in the sense that the vote—the debate was always long, and you knew that it was going to be—whether it's the death penalty or abortion—it'll be a five- to six-hour debate. And if the votes weren't there, then you didn't want to spend, you know, one of the precious ninety days, if you didn't have the votes to pass it, from a practical stand- —but I don't know that people anticipated that it would be that much of a deal breaking. I think people were expecting that—when people go to the voting booth, that they see the big picture and look at all the services and look at the representative or senator based on the totality of their votes and what they stand for—you know, their character, their expertise, their qualifications. So in a sense, it's really limiting if people vote on just that one issue or the death penalty, that they're limiting, I think, the quality, experience and the perspective of who they elect and send to make decisions.

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EF: Another issue that played into '94 was—I'm not sure how to characterize it. What has now emerged with Americans for Prosperity and the Kansas State Chamber and kind of the cut budgets, cut taxes approach to government. And the Kochs have emerged in state politics. Did you see any of that while you were in the legislature?

DW: No. We really were—I think most people were still interested in providing quality services to the people in need. And I think what has happened is that we, as a society, have gotten extremely selfish. We forget that someone paid the load, you know, for the quality education that you and I received, public, and that there's a responsibility as a citizen that—you know, part of our job is to pave the road for the next generation and give them the same opportunities, or better than we had.

So it takes a part of being unselfish and looking at the big picture. Now, sometimes with age we start to realize that, but I think it diminishes us all when we get to the point where we would say, "Well, you know, I'm doing well, and my children are doing well, and I'm not gonna worry about anybody else." I mean, that is totally opposite of what democracy and equal opportunity is all about. I mean, we—I always say that there are no native—the only Native Americans were the ones who were here when the Pilgrims came. The rest of us all were immigrants at one time or another, our families, so that—and that's what we're about. We're about a melting pot, bringing in new groups of people, assimilating them, giving them opportunities. And they all want to come here because of the opportunities, so we need to continue to make sure that we're providing and making those opportunities stronger and better. And that's not going to—it's never cheap.

EF: I'm going to—I've got kind of a couple closing areas. You've had the opportunity to see three governors fairly up close. I'm talking about Carlin, Hayden, Finney. You got to see a number of speakers of the House, and other legislative leaders. What political skills, leadership skills stand out? Are there some that you really feel, Wow, we should point with pride to their ability to make this whole thing work?

DW: Everybody has their own definition of what a leader is, and depending on who you read, you know, good leadership skills can make anywhere from a 15 to 25 percent

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difference in how an organization operates. But, you know, there are some general themes or characteristics that you always think of a leader. They certainly have to have some expertise and knowledge in the area, and that doesn't mean they have to have it before they come, but they have to be willing to learn from others.

The other thing is you certainly have to have is drive and persistence. You never get anywhere the first time. I often think of how many times I introduced a no-smoking bill and get it passed—you know, get it out of committee in the House, get it voted on the floor, send it over to the Senate; they kill it. If you stay around long enough, you can—that's—persistence is there. So that's an important part of it, too.

And I think you have to have a strong moral compass, and that's—I mean, leadership is about character. You don't follow somebody if you don't think that they walk the talk and they demonstrate the characteristics that, you know, they're trying to get you to do. So that kind of compassion. But, you know, having—you always respect somebody who does something because of principle versus for personal gain, so that—that moral compass is—I think a big part of leadership.

You have to be willing to compromise, and that's very—particularly—I worked with boards of education. There's only seven members on a local board of education, so four people have to agree before anything gets done. That is certainly a lot easier than 125 people in the House, you know, trying to get the sixty-three votes that you need. You have to be able to work with people and meet them halfway and compromise, because it is not all one way or the other; you've got to be willing to, you know, take half a loaf if it moves it ahead and incorporates—be willing to listen and bring others' ideas into it.

EF: That's pretty good. I like your summary of that.

After the—your tour with the Finney administration, you took a job with the Kansas Association of School Boards. I don't know if I said that right.

DW: Yeah, yeah.

EF: And did you—and I—to my knowledge, you didn't run for office again.

DW: No, I have not run for another office.

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EF: Did you kind of cut the cord on partisan engagement, or—in this new assignment, or how would you characterize it?

DW: My job now—as an attorney, I work with school boards and superintendents and principals. I give recommendations and legal advice to keep them out of legal trouble. But I don't vote on anything anymore, so—but it's certainly—my experience in the House has helped me understand public bodies, and, you know, when I came to the House, there were several people my first, second year I really admired because of their skills and how they conducted themselves. And I later found out that many of them had been former school board members, and they knew a lot more about school finance and local government and how to get things done, because they started working on a seven-person board, having to convince their other colleagues. And then they moved up to the House.

But, no, I see my role now as just—I mentor and support other people who would like to be involved in good government.

EF: You've kind of given observations on your thirty years of watching this. Anything—any concluding comments at all?

DW: Other than I think the legislative process does work as long as there's—I always want to see a good debate on the floor and a lively discussion of the issues, and I think once that occurs, that's a cornerstone, I think, of good government.

EF: Thank you, Donna Whiteman—

DW: Well, thank you for inviting me.

EF: —for spending time this afternoon. You've covered a lot of territory.

DW: You had excellent questions. I just—I kept thinking, How—I didn't know enough to do two hours, so you did a wonderful job. Thank you.

[End of interview.]

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