Interview with MARGE PETTY by Patty Clark, September 11, 2020
Kansas Oral History Project, Inc.

Patty Clark: The date is September 11, 2020, at 3:00 p.m. We are in the Senate Chamber of the Kansas State House. I am Patty Clark, and I will be interviewing Marge Petty, former state senator representing Senate District 18.

This interview is created on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, Incorporated, which is a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing former legislators, particularly those that served from the 1960s to 2000. These interviews will be made accessible for researching and for educational purposes. These interviews are funded in part by a grant from the Kansas Humanities Council. The audio and video portion is being operated by Dave Heinemann.

Marge Petty first served as an elected official on the Topeka City Council from 1985 to 1988, including as deputy mayor. In 1988, she was elected to the Kansas Senate and served as a citizen legislator until 2000. We'll explore her time as an elected official a little bit later in the interview, but, first, Marge, let's talk a little bit about your background. Where were you born? Where were you raised? What's your educational background? A little bit about yourself.

Marge Petty: I was actually born in Indiana. When I was living in Topeka, what I learned was that I was actually conceived in Topeka, and I had not known that, but my father was at Forbes Field, a head supply officer at Forbes Field. He and my mother lived here and then moved to Indiana, which is where I was born.

I grew up and was educated in Texas. I grew up in Midland and educated in the DFW area at TCU, Texas Christian University. I moved to Chicago and then came to Topeka from Chicago and then rediscovered my roots, which was very exciting. That happened when I threw a 40th birthday party right after I had been elected to the Topeka City Council. It was at the Jayhawk Hotel, and my mother looked around and she said, “I've been here before.” I said, “Really?” It turned out that that was where the officers used to come, the Jayhawk Hotel.

Anyway, it was a great discovery. Then I ran for City Council after I'd lived in Topeka for fifteen years. That was a terrific opportunity and learned from there the value really of a bipartisan or nonpartisan opportunity.

PC: So talk a little bit more about your family. Were they involved politically or public servants? When did you become interested in public service?

MP: I think probably growing up, I had three siblings. Probably growing up, I was the more vocal activist kid. My dad was a Republican, an oil man. My mother grew up in Chicago, and her dad was head of—a member of the electrical union and did all the electrical work for the Catholic diocese in Chicago. I had sort of the melding of two perspectives in west Texas. That's been really valuable. Mother was very good at reading people and very mission driven, and my dad understood economics, commerce, the oil field. I really valued both of their influences.

PC: When you think back to your time in Texas, Chicago, Topeka, Kansas, who were the political leaders that you admired, that you looked up to, that you respected, whether they were local or state or national?

MP: That's a great question. I first voted when we were living in Chicago. That's when I first registered as a Democrat. LBJ spoke at my graduation from TCU. Of course, I was in Midland. I was a senior in Midland when Kennedy was killed in Dallas and remember very well exactly where I was sitting when that happened. Certainly some of those early Democrats influenced me, and quite frankly, in Texas, it was mostly Democrat. As you remember, John Connally was the governor at the time and then changed parties after Kennedy was shot.

There were a lot of early people that I had followed and been inspired by. I'll have to say I think some of my inspiration, I remember, eight years old, reading autobiographies of women like Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony and some of the people that did a lot of social service work in Chicago and the Hull House and some of those things, and thinking when I was eight years old, “Oh, this is really interesting and exciting.”

I think all my life I've been committed to public service, not just from elected officials but also other people that have committed their lives to those kinds of projects and programs.

PC: Let's move now, let's bridge to your time in elected office. What led you to run for the Topeka City Council? Was there an issue? Was there a priority? Was it just simply the aspiration of public service or all of the above?

MP: Actually, I think there were three things, Patty. One would be some aspiration to public service. I'd always noted the opportunity that public servants had to make a commitment and a contribution, and that it always appealed to me. Then I was asked by a couple of people, well-known names. Both of them have been elected officials. One was a Democrat, and one was a Republican, asking if I'd ever think of public service, and would I consider running for City Council. That got me thinking, but I remember at one point being in a Women's Political Caucus meeting and having people say, “We need to find really good women candidates,” and I consciously thought to myself, “Who in the world would do that?” and then probably five years later, people came to me and asked if I would be interested. It just got me thinking and maybe back on track I think is what I felt. It was an aha.

PC: It was time.

MP: Yes.

PC: After four years of serving on the Topeka City Council, the local unit of government, you ran for and won the Senate seat from the 18th Senate District. What prompted you to make the leap from local government to state government as a politically elected official?

 

MP: Well, again, I think the party was looking for someone to run against the incumbent. A lot of it I think for me came from growing up in west Texas. I'd grown up with a lot of risk-takers, not necessarily financially risky kinds of things, but people whose mindset was—it's sort of like a frontier. You have to be tough, and you have to be willing to take some risks. I think that's a lot of what politics is about, is thinking ahead, weighing the risks, and deciding if the opportunity to contribute is worth it.

That was what the big leap was, and then they came to me and asked. I was always considerate about the fact that there were people in the House that actually had been in the House prior to my being—I guess maybe commensurate to my being elected to the City Council. Maybe that's some of the Southern tradition, to be respectful and not necessarily take your turn but just not usurp other people's roles.

It just seemed like the time was right. I was the one who was willing to take the risk, and it was an interesting challenge. The woman I ran against, I liked very much. I think we were very similar in ways. We had similar friends. So the onus was on me to be able to make the argument. Because I had been on City Council, I had a record, and she had a record. It was very important to me to compare records and not compare personalities. I had a great team, and again I think some of it on my part, I have to be honest, was a little bit of naivete' about what I was getting into.

PC: That leads to another question, Marge. When you walked into the Chamber, to this Chamber as a newly elected senator, what were you most looking forward to? What were you most nervous about?

MP: I think I was most looking forward to the new opportunity. I'd had such an incredible chance to meet—there were 60,000 people, registered voters in the Senate district. I had been on the doorstep of probably two-thirds of the homes of all those folks. It was such a humbling experience. For me, the metaphor of being a public servant is just how you develop your life. To be invited, just for a moment, on somebody's doorstep and have them let you into their life was such an expanding experience for me. I realized how much of a smaller box I lived in until the opportunity—this district was very diverse. It was very rural. There were some really low-income areas, very high-income areas. It was interesting to be able to be truly exposed, to hear people's stories.

I remember one person inviting me in. I was trying to register her to vote, and she was just recovering from surgery. "Honey, I haven't voted since John Kennedy was killed." This is 1989. I sat with her at the kitchen table, and I registered her to vote. Now I have no idea whether she voted for me or not, but I felt like that was a real accomplishment. I think people that love public service don't ever forget some of those stories.

PC: They stay with you a really long time.

 

MP: Yes. I was encouraged by the people, I think, that I met. In terms of the mission, it was as much as anything really to try to do my best to serve the people. It wasn't a specific issue, but I felt very lucky to have had the City Council experience because that gave me a great foundation for a lot of things like taxes and watching development—businesses develop, buildings develop, downtowns develop, and it also gave me a real sensitivity to a lot of the health and human services issues, and how critical local government is because it's so much closer to the people.

That, Patty, was one of my missions, I think, while I was serving, that I did the best I could to stay in touch, to keep access and not end up shifting. This building can be pretty overwhelming, and you can get pretty heady about forgetting what you're there for. Having the building impress you and your role impress you.

I always looked forward to public hearings. One of the things that was critical to me was that my public hearings were not perfunctory. I remember clearly on the City Council having a public hearing about an annexation issue, and the crowd was just angry as they could be. Somebody stood up and said, “What makes you think you all have the right to do this?” I remember the mayor at the time saying, “Well, Statue KSA . . .,” and he was quoting statute, which was not the point of the question at all.

I remember having the opportunity to say, “Just so you know, our decision has not been made. We're here to find out whether or not it's proper.” I remember you could actually feel the tension go down in the room. That is what's important to me about public service, is that you don't separate yourself from the public, and you're always accessible.

PC: Let's talk a little bit more about the issues of the time and the twelve years of service in the Senate. What were some of the marked issues? Where did you align on those issues? How did you navigate the different perspectives and opinions and actions to get to the point of good public policy?

MP: A big question. I was very lucky. The year that I was elected, there was a large influx of new people. About 25 percent of the Senate was female. It was closer in number in terms of the parties. I think those two elements, and the third thing was, we had a couple of leaders, the majority and minority leader were good friends. They were very collegial. They were very civil. They were gentlemen. They set the tone. I can remember clearly, I can even remember the dress I had on when I walked in to the Chambers. The spirit really in the Chamber was a very respectful and collegial group. I think that was a huge impact on setting the tone for the next four years.

Now the issues were in the context of that kind of climate. I felt like I can name you right now by name most of the members that I served with. I have some funny stories about running into them later in life. Issues like, for example, KPERS became a bipartisan, collaborative issue. I had learned about the problem while I was in law school. One of the people I was doing estates and trusts with was a CPA. She was going for her law degree, and the other person had been a journalist in Kansas City and was going to law school. Here we were in Estates and Trusts, and

 

we got to talking about investments and all the—the CPA's husband was a teacher, and he was a member of KPERS. I was a senator at the time while I was still in law school.

We started talking about how this particular—she brought in an annual report one time and went through all of it with me. What evolved was a collaboration between the three of us where we found a KBI representative that would come and meet with us. We pulled files that were public information about a lot of the small businesses that had been failing that the KPERS board had been investing in, and that was right on the crest of some of the federal investigation that was going on with Frank Morgan and Kansas City, Home Savings, and 65 million dollars that was put into his bank in order to offset some of the losses.

I had two great people who understood all the level of detail and some history behind it. I had the access. What was also interesting to me, and this is part of the legislative process that people will understand, I was the new kid on the block. I hadn't proved myself.

PC: Tackling a pretty big issue.

MP: Exactly. I had not proven myself. I partnered with a fellow from southeast Kansas who was also new, but he was an older guy. He had developed some reputation. He and I sponsored some legislation. Right on the heels of that, the other party came out with some legislation and appointed a committee.

I did not get appointed on the committee. I had a notebook this thick because my law training had taught me, you don't ask the questions until you know all the answers. I had all the answers in this notebook, and I met with the executive director for KPERS with my senator friend that was partnering with me now. The executive director said, “I've just been worried about this. I've been wondering when somebody would finally ask about this,” but he was pale, completely.

We had all the answers. They appointed an investigative committee, and I was not appointed. My friend from southeast Kansas said, “I'm not going to do this unless Marge Petty is also on the committee.” I was the only woman serving on that committee. Dick Rock was the other freshman. He was my partner in crime on this.

That was really a great introduction, and Wint Winter chaired the committee. We were so intent on solving this problem, making it more transparent, and not creating the rift that had occurred in people that were accessing money easily and not being held accountable. I remember Meredith Williams at the time, who was head of the Legislative Post-audit committee. He said, “I'm so glad that somebody has finally raised these questions.”

Now the idea was great to begin with, but what happened over time was that people didn't do the due diligence and didn't pay close attention so that it was the venture capital investment that it should have been originally. Conceptually, it was a great idea, but it had just gotten

 

misused. That was a great introduction as a freshman. It was truly bipartisan. Then they appointed House members. I served with some great people that were really diligent.

Another one of the issues that was, of course, very impactful that first four years was the education funding in '92. Nancy Parrish sat right behind me. She was a wonderful mentor. That was an incredible opportunity. But what made a big difference was that you had the House that was balancing the Senate in terms of parties. You also had a Senate where the numbers were close. All this was, I think, feeding into better public policy because you were not leaving segments out. You weren't leaving segments of the population out, nor were you leaving segments of the legislature out.

PC: Marge, talk a little bit about how that early experience in process, in collaboration, in bipartisan work served you for the remainder of your term as a senator until 2001.

MP: Some of that climate began to change. I have to say that the memory of that first four years, maybe of six years, was very helpful through that time. I remember clearly sitting on the Judiciary Committee between two Republicans. I felt like we were developing friendships, which I think we were. Then toward the end, I do recall one of these same folks and I—he was majority; I was minority leader on Ways and Means, and it wasn't as collaborative.

I think some of that just stems from the numbers were fewer. The numbers in the Democrat and the Republicans weren't as close. Everybody didn't have the leverage to encourage some of that collaboration. It got easier for people to be more arbitrary.

PC: You mentioned Ways and Means. You were the ranking minority member of that committee, correct?

MP: Yes.

PC: Talk a little bit about your experience with wrangling the state budget and the ups and downs of revenues and collections. What was your experience like as that ranking minority member on that committee?

MP: Well, that would mean, of course, that there were three of us doing some of the joint work that ended up being done. Oftentimes, it was House versus Senate. But not unlike—I'm going back to when Nancy negotiated some of the education bills, and some of it just required some patience to just continually come back to the table. I remember first being surprised that things sometimes ended up being more Senate versus House as opposed to party division or rural versus urban, not necessarily parties.

The Ways and Means experience was just incredibly enlightening. It was an eight-billion-dollar budget at the time. I don’t know how much it is now. I certainly had different views as a Democrat, what I thought the priorities were. There were always opportunities, particularly amendments on the floor that might occur, when there could be surprises. I think my role as

 

much as anything was to know enough about the detail that I could alert people to amendments that might be to our advantage or not or tip off the whole Democratic Caucus as to what more could occur. Again, education comes to my mind. I remember Dale Dennis being such an important player and factor in a lot of that discussion. That was the big money -- education and, of course, the SRS budget as well.

I think, to carry it a little further, some of the health and SRS issues were certainly of major interest to Democrats. It was always interesting to me when you looked out, and you saw all the people who were testifying on specific issues, how important it was to really listen to what they were talking about regarding needs. The elected officials can read all the facts that they want, but they're not in the trenches like the folks that are out in the audience. It's so critical to be sure that we're on target with real needs.

PC: Let's dive a little deeper into what you were just talking about, that committee process of testimony and hearing those firsthand perspectives from the trenches, as you mentioned. How and why is that so important versus just moving through those rather robotic way and doing all the action on the floor? Why is that committee process so integral and so important to the legislative process?

MP: I'll give an example. I recall the issue of foster care and how important legislative research was in a lot of those issues. There have been all sorts—like, for example, the Kellogg Foundation was looking at foster care nationwide. Some of the best practices, some of the things that were missing. There was an opportunity for each state to provide some input on some reform, really.

I care about it, but I'm not the expert on foster care, and I'm not the expert on what that family separation does, and how it affects children. What was happening at the time was that there was not a time certain when there had to be some commitment and movement back into a family, a permanent family. Those kinds of things are things that you only learn sometimes if you're listening to the people that are providing the services. You can draft a lot of legislation that misses the mark because you don't know what it's like on the ground level.

But, foster care, we had some wonderful hearings on the foster care, and I remember clearly that came up in the Judiciary Committee, and that was a bipartisan issue. I had some language drafted. The current SRS director right now was in Legislative Research, and she and I worked together on the development of some reform language. I remember a later president of the Senate sitting next to me, bipartisan, saying, “Who have you worked with on this?” and I justified it. I told him, and he helped get it through the committee. It's so important to have the pieces right in terms of the credibility, not only individually as a legislator, but the credibility out in the community when the laws get passed.

PC: While you served in the Senate, you were also involved in the State Council for Legislators, NCSL.

 

MP: Yes.

PC: And you were a Toll Fellow, correct?

MP: Right.

PC: Talk a little about that experience, and how it altered or didn't alter your approach to being a state legislator.

MP: NCSL, of course, is located in Denver. The Toll Fellowship was the Council of State Governments. Their focus is a little bit more focused on states' rights and so forth. That opportunity gave me—in fact, I made some great friends that I am still in touch with in New Mexico, in Wisconsin. That opportunity to hear best practices, what other states are doing, some of the mistakes that they made that you can prevent because you can say, “No, there's probably a better way to do this because So and So made some earlier mistakes.”

That was another broadening experience that probably was at the other end of the spectrum. When I mentioned the broadening experience of being on the front doorstep, that was in the opposite direction with people who had a lot of experience and were respected for the contributions that they had made in the legislature. That was just wonderful.

The NCSL ended up being an international experience, which was even more amazing.

PC: One of the common threads I'm hearing you speak to in all of these experiences of relationships that the work is built on relational aspects as much as technical aspects. Is that a fair assessment?

MP: Very much so. In fact, two favorite stories, probably two years ago I was at a basketball game. I turned around, and I hope it's all right to mention names. I turned around, and in 45,000 people, I'm sitting right in front of Dave Kerr. It was so exciting. It was like Old Home Week. I have to say that I think—my experience of this was like family. You've got siblings that you spar with at times, and you have people you can always get along with. Dave and I had our experiences in sparring because we both served as leaders on Ways and Means. But he went on to tell me that night about how hard he was working for Medicaid expansion, which of course—I mean, we were on exactly the same page. It was like I was sitting right next to my brother again. Do you know what I mean? It was such a delightful opportunity to see that we can come full circle on a lot of things and be right back where I was as a freshman legislator sitting next to him in Judiciary Committee and being good friends.

PC: That's a great story. Thank you for sharing that. Let's talk a little bit, you mentioned earlier the senator from southeast Kansas, the man that helped the woman with the KPERS issues. Personal identity. We're going to loosely define personal identity as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, marital status, etc. Did you experience times in the legislature when you believe your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy, to work with

 

your fellow legislators, or to provide constituent services in that very varied constituent base that you served.

MP: I think, of course, it always makes a difference.

PC: How so?

MP: I can remember clearly when I walked from the City Council into this doorway. There was this separation because City Council is nonpartisan. It was more issue focused. All of a sudden, there was this demarcation, and it was sort of startling. I realized early on that what was—one of the first things, of course, I learned in City Council was "Can't you count, Marge? You need the votes." I looked around, and we were close. It was 18 to 22. If it was going to be partisan, relationships made a huge difference. But it was important to me to do what I could to be consistent, to be responsible, to not mislead people, to keep my word with them so that when things came around another time, and I needed them, rather than them needing me, I wanted them to be able to trust me.

I think that's true in any relationship, including being on people's doorstep. One of my favorite mentors said one time, "You have a course you chart, but you need to be able to change it 180 degrees at any one moment," and that was true. You have to be true to yourself. I think probably maybe a better answer to your question, Patty, would be that I think the two most important things to a legislator is to define themselves, what the space is in their boundaries, and secondly to stay connected.

I have to say that was my experience in the Senate. I can think of one legislator who ended up going to Congress—well, I served with three people who ended up going to Congress. One of them in particular, I remember when he was first elected. I said, "You know, we couldn't be farther apart on this particular issue, but I respect the fact that you care passionately about something, and I'll always support your right to state what you think."

He and I found things we could agree on. They weren't necessarily the headline things or the really exciting things that a lot of people follow, but to this day, if I saw him, we could embrace each other as having partnered on things that—maybe it was administrative stuff, but I would consider him a friend now. We couldn't be farther apart on some issues.

I think to me that's what good government and a democracy is about is that you listen. You care. There may be five thousand points of view, and everybody is sure they're right, but the elected official has the responsibility of trying to craft something in the greater good, but considering the relationships that you've built as well.

PC: We're going to take a little detour now. We're going to talk a little bit about your post-Senate career. Then we're going to circle back for some additional personal recollections from your time in the Senate. From 2003 to 2009, you served as the Director of Public Affairs and Consumer Protection at the Kansas Corporation Commission. My first question is, "How was the

 

transition from being an elected lawmaker to being a part of bureaucracy of a regulatory agency?" How was that transition?

MP: A great question. I guess my view has always been good public policy is good politics. So I was able to serve under a Democratic governor and had the great opportunity to work with a good staff whose job was public service. They took 15,000 calls during the time I was there and managed all these complaints and concerns.

The transition was interesting, and part of what I gained I think from being a legislator is some sense of taking the risks was okay. For example, there was a utility issue where they had made major computer changes, and the complaints were off the charts. I partnered with one of the technical people in KCC and basically invited the utility CEO and his staff to come and talk with me.

I probably didn't follow the right protocol. I should have checked with the commissioners first, but what was so interesting—I had already done all the charting. I had the support of—they were over the line in terms of what was acceptable, and all the commissioners—I said, "I'd love for you to join us." The CEO was funny. He came in and he said, "I do have something. I'll be here for just a short period of time, probably for about thirty minutes. I probably won't stay for the whole meeting." I said, "That's fine."

He did not leave. He stayed the entire time. All the commissioners were there. We made a dramatic change, and I wonder if I—I was willing to take that risk, I think, because I had had public policy commitments for sixteen years.

PC: Imagine for just a second conversely if you were to have left KCC and returned to elective office. How would that regulatory agency experience perhaps informed your second go-around? Imagine for just a little bit.

MP: Oh, very definitely.

PC: How?

MP: Again, it was back in the trenches in terms of connecting with the public and the expectation that there be public hearings on everything that ever comes up. That was something I embraced, but it gave me another six years to really sit in that space and probably advocate even more so for maintaining access and that those kinds of opportunities should be not perfunctory, but they need to be real.

PC: You also spent a good part of your career in health advocacy. Talk a little bit about the positions that you held in the Department of Health and Human Services. Talk a little bit about what you learned from them, lessons you can share with the audience that's going to be reviewing and listening to these recordings.

 

MP: I had the great opportunity when Obama was elected, I was working certainly at the KCC at the time, and I was working for Governor Sebelius. I knew the time would be limited. I had been keeping my ears open for a long time, and when he was elected, I inquired of the governor who at the time was governor. I said, “I'm interested in pursuing this.” I'd gotten the Plum Book, as they refer to it, to find out what might be available because I was interested in going back to Texas. I still had family there, and my kids had grown. It was another opportunity. I had lots of friends and a very, very close, dear friend.

I said, “How do I do this?” Well, nobody had a blueprint. That was so interesting to me. The governor's advice was basically, “I don't know who your champions are. You're changing regions, so I don't know who your champions are.” Well, I really just took that as a challenge. I need to develop my champions here.

My brother lived in Dallas, and he said—he's a younger brother, but he's a great guy, and he said, “I think you need to go to Washington, and you need to talk with every single Democrat in the six states”—this was a position that represented six states, Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, New Mexico, Arkansas—who did I leave out? I think I got them all—and sixty-eight Native American tribes that were in that geography, which was one of the best privileges ever. He said, “You need to talk with everybody.”

So I set three days aside, and I headed to Washington. I was at everybody's doorstep, and I was asking everybody, introducing myself, telling them I was interested in this specific position. Who did I need to meet with? My husband actually happened to have known somebody who knew somebody in Waco. I said, “I don't know that person.” They said, “It doesn't matter. He would love to meet you.”

Well, this was a wonderful Democrat from Texas who was ninety-four years old. I walked in. I had not had an appointment with him, and he picked up the phone and talked with—he had started an insurance company. He picked up the phone, called the member of the House in Congress from Waco, said, “Chet, I've got a young woman sitting here.” Well, I was not young at the time, but compared to him I was.

PC: It's relative.

MP: It's all relative. He said, “I think you'd really be interested.” So that was my opening to the Texas Democrats. Then I was in an airport leaving DFW, and I hear somebody yell, “Marge Petty!” Well, I grew up there. I grew up in that area. It was my college roommate. She said, “What are you doing here?” I said, “Well, I am working on interviewing for a position in DC,” and she said, “Can I do something to help you?” I said, “Yes, do you know anybody that's in Congress?” She said, “Yes, Lloyd Doggett is a good friend,” and I said, “Great.”

I am in Washington, DC. I am at Kinko's Xeroxing my résumé, and I get a call from my college roommate who says, “Where are you?” I said, “I'm in DC,” and she says, “Perfect. One o'clock,

 

all the Democrats in Texas are having a caucus, and they want you there." Now what are the chances of that?

So I'm beginning to feel this is meant to be. This is meant to be. And it was so funny because later the guy that was the appointments chairman for President Obama said they got more letters of recommendation for me than anyone that was to be appointed. It was like scorched earth.

If I were to give recommendations to anybody, when there's something you want, you go after it, no stone unturned. You mentioned CSG, Council of State Governments, David Atkins. He sent me a letter of recommendation. The Bushes are my friends from Midland. Laura sent me a recommendation.

I was on point, not to be deterred. I have to tell you, seven years, I had the opportunity to work in Texas in an area that I knew, and I had ties in Missouri, New Mexico. I knew that region. I loved the people. I loved working with the local governments who are stalwarts in getting services. So one of my major jobs was getting enrollment for the ACA in a region that's not very friendly to Democrats. In fact, when I was looking for the initial job with the Obama administration, my husband said, "I hate to tell you, but nobody in Texas cares much about a Democrat," and I found that position in the Plum Book and said, "Somebody's going to care about that, and it's going to be me."

I had the opportunity to work with some of the most incredibly committed public servants that you would not believe. Their focus was always on the people they were serving. Party didn't matter. They were committed to the programs. They were committed to the mission, and they knew I was as well because one of the things I do remember when I think back on the point about Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony, that I really remember thinking at some point, administration is probably my forte. I loved working with the people, but I didn't love the fights. I remember saying, "One of these days, I'm going to be an administrator."

I had seven wonderful years of working with programs that are set up to make people's lives better. Everybody I worked with was on the same page. It was wonderful.

PC: That's a gift.

MP: It is a gift.

PC: Let's circle back to your time in the state Senate, personal and professional. First question: What was your proudest moment in the twelve years that you served?

MP: It wasn't necessarily a vote. One of my proudest moments was the relationship that I had with Rip Gooch.

PC: Who is a legislator from—

 

MP: He was a senator from Wichita, an amazing man, very humble. You would never guess—my guess is he could probably have bought everybody in the Senate. He never once talked about himself. He was really the conscience of the Senate, I think. He would remind people. He owned a bank. He had flown planes for the CEO of one of the airplane entities in Wichita. He started a job training program. He had done some remarkable things. I think one of the things that just came to mind when you said that was conversations that he had that I knew he trusted me.

PC: That's great. It's not necessarily what you do but the relationships you built. How did you balance life as a state senator with all the demands of mother and wife? It's tough during the ninety-day session. Those days are long and very, very busy. But you're also having weekends and evenings out of session where you're meeting with your constituents. How did you balance all of that?

MP: Well, it was not easy. It becomes something that becomes part of the family, I think. I can remember my kids recognizing some constituent voice and saying, “Mom, it's So and So again.” I think maybe it's like anything else. It's one day at a time. What's the next best step at hand?

PC: Do what you have to do.

MP: What's the priority today?

PC: Do your children have any desire to be in public service? Are they in public service?

MP: They are not in public service, but they are very passionate about their views, and I have to say that I've raised two really good Democrats.

PC: Very good. You mentioned very early in the interview and then again when we were talking about your transition from the City Council to the State Senate, the apolitical, nonpolitical environment of the City Council versus a more political environment. Talk a little bit about how you made that transition, assuming that that first experience at the City Council really helped inform the State Senate experience. Talk a little bit about that.

MP: It helped me inform the Senate experience because I had a comfort level with a lot of issues, and as much as anything, I also had a comfort level in watching how these things progress. I was able at one point to watch an issue bounce from person to person. I knew they were making a phone call. I knew who was triggering it. That was from a City Council experience. The person that offered the motion, I'm not sure he knew who had originated it. Some of that maybe just comes with being older and seeing more.

PC: Seasoned.

 

MP: Just being able to observe and watch. That was always helpful, I think. Again, I think that there are ways when you can find agreement that aren't partisan issues, particularly if you've got some numbers then it's a more Democratic process. I think of the passing of the Education Bill that's in existence today. I mean, that was I think an incredible—

PC: Talk a little more about that one very, very critical issue in the state of Kansas, and how far apart initially the positions were. What were those very distant positions, and how did they come together to compromise?

MP: Education funding, of course, was on the table. There was disparity in terms of school districts and the amount that was available to each one of them. There'd been a formula. I think it was Dale Dennis that said, “Any formula will work. You've just got to fund it.”

PC: That's an interesting statement.

MP: What evolved was you had rural versus urban. Many of the urban areas had special ed needs that were again separate, but the numbers were larger. In some of the rural area, you had a higher number of people that had free and reduced lunch. All of these things were colliding, but there was disparity in terms of the funding. What evolved because the Senate was 18-22, the House was Democrat, and the Senate was Republican, there was a lot of movement that was going on, and a lot of negotiation.

I know you're going to be talking with Nancy. I give Nancy the credit because I've never seen anybody—it was such a privilege to watch her work. She had the kind of respect in this whole body that was separate from partisanship that she continued to go back to the table, I think it was eight different times, trying to find something that was going to work, but that was going to be fair to those underserved school districts.

It was just remarkable, and it went on and on. You thought it was never going to end, and yet she never got upset. She kept coming back. Finally there was agreement. Patty, I believe a lot of it was, it was really a democratic process at work because of the numbers and the balance, and everybody knew they had to give something.

PC: A couple more questions before we end the interview. One is you've had a rather distinguished and diverse career from being a locally elected official, a state senator. You've worked for a federal agency. You've worked for a state regulatory agency. You are now chair of the board of directors of Delta Dental. So you've got some private sector experience as well. Will you ever consider running for public office again, amalgamating all of that experience?

MP: I don't think so. But I have to say, my mother was a great example. She worked until she was seventy-five. She went back to school when she was sixty. She is a great example of “You can continue to contribute. You don't have to step back.”

I think right now I really appreciate my privacy and my private relationship.

 

PC: What advice would you give to those, particularly women, who might be interested in running for public office? What would you tell them to pave their way a bit, make the road a little less rock-strewn?

MP: I think you have to have a passion about it. You have to have a mission. Mine as much as anything was if I could leave office or leave public service feeling like I had contributed in a way that had made life easier and better for the largest number of people possible, then I would have felt like I had done my work. I think you need that kind of commitment and passion, that it needs to make a difference to you about that. That's what keeps you going. That's what helps you find the connections with other people who share that same passion. That's what keeps you young.

PC: One last question. Is there anything we didn't ask you today that we should have asked you?

MP: Maybe if I had to do it over again, would I do anything differently?

PC: So answer your own question.

MP: I have to say no. I'll tell you, one of my best lessons was losing the Senate race. I didn't work hard enough. I take full responsibility for that. I think in anything we do, there's kind of two parallel things, two parallel issues. One is the process, and the other piece has to do with facts or issues or whatever. They've got to collide. I think that there are many things that I am so grateful for and feel so privileged to have had the opportunity to serve, and I think maybe it was time for me to take on another role and do something different.

I have to say, the other thing that I'd like to just mention is that I had a wonderful opportunity to come again full circle, like I did with Dave Kerr, with the woman that I beat for Senate. She was in Dallas, and it was a meeting for Washburn. I represented Washburn. I thought, “Oh, golly. I haven't seen her, and I know I'm going to run into her.”

What was interesting when I was serving was that there was still a lot of anger in the body, I think, that I beat her. She was lovely. I loved her. I liked her very much. I happened to feel like my issues were closer to the district and that I needed to give people a reason to replace her, but I didn't want to do it by negating her. I wanted to do it by comparing my City Council record and her record and so forth.

So here I am at this meeting, and there she is. It was the greatest meeting. I just can't tell you how much it meant to me. I hope you can cut that part, Dave. It was so amazing. We found so much we could agree on. Both of us, I don't want to speak for her, but I have such great respect for her, for the job she did, and I felt from her that she felt the same. We had experienced so many of the same ups and downs that you do going through a family setting like that that can

 

get so intense and at times so mean. It just was this great coming full circle. I'm just very grateful for that.

PC: Marge, thank you for being a part of this project, for sharing your perspective, your history, your wonderful stories about your public service. Are there any final thoughts you want to leave with that audience that's going to be viewing these videos, these messages?

MP: I think two things. If there are people out there who want to run for office, which I hope there will be, I think it was key to me to remember two things, that (1) it was my journey, not someone else's. Nobody owed me anything. I needed to want it badly enough to make it happen, but (2) you can never do it alone. So you have to be truly grateful to everybody who steps up to help and is part of the gift, and you owe a lot back because of that.

So that would be something, but I am encouraged by, I think, many of the younger generation that I see stepping forward, so bright, so energetic, new ideas, and I am glad that I don't hear myself saying, “We've already tried that.” I'm so glad that they're doing new things and that they're willing to take the risks.

PC: Thank you very, very much on behalf of the project and on behalf of Kansas for your leadership and your service. We appreciate it.

MP: It's been a wonderful life, as Jimmy Stewart would say.

[End of File]

 