Interview of SUSAN WAGLE by Alan Conroy, December 18, 2020
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Alan Conroy: Good afternoon. The date is December 18, 2020 at 1:50, and we're in the Senate Chambers of the Kansas State House here in Topeka. I'm Alan Conroy, a forty-year-plus state employee currently with the Kansas Public Employees Retirement System, but a majority of the state service was working with the Kansas Legislative Research Department, the central nonpartisan research and budget staff for the legislature.

Today I'll be interviewing Senate President Susan Wagle who has served thirty years in the legislature. She served ten years in the House and just is finishing up her twentieth year in the Senate. She was first elected to the House in 1990, and then the Senate in 2000. She was Speaker Pro Tem for four sessions in the House in 1995, '96, '97, and '98, and then in 2013, she was elected Senate President, the first woman Senate President, a position that she has held for eight years. She has also been active in the American Legislative Exchange Council, ALEC, in Washington, DC.

I'll be conducting the interview on behalf of the Kansas Oral History Project, a not-for-profit corporation created for the purpose of interviewing legislators. The interviews will be made accessible for researchers and educators. These interviews are funded in part by a grant from The Humanities Kansas. The audio and video equipment is being operated by former Speaker Pro Tem David Heinemann.

President Wagle is from Wichita. She has business interests in real estate, real estate management, and leasing. She is married to Tom and has several children and several grandchildren. I just saw a delightful picture of some very cute grandchildren. As I said, she was elected to the Kansas House in 1990 and served in that Chamber then for over ten sessions. She represented District 99, which covers most of eastern Wichita, parts of the City of Andover, parts of Derby, and then at one point some of Butler County. While she was in the House, over that time, she was on numerous committees, Commercial and Financial Institutions; Pensions and Investments, a delightful committee; Public Health and Welfare; Labor and Industry; Taxation; Economic Development; Calendar and Printing; Interstate Cooperation; a Joint committee on Interstate Rules and Regs; and a Joint committee on claims against the state.

In 2000, she was elected to the Senate from District 30, which also includes eastern Wichita, Andover, Eastborough, Minneha Township, if I have the right township name there, and, of course, over her time in the Senate, she served on several committees, again Public Health and Welfare, Education, Reapportionment, Transportation, State Building Construction, Commerce, Utilities, Public Health and Welfare, a long list of committee service over those years including Ways and Means. She's been on Ways and Means for a while, too.

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As we start talking about your legislative experiences, kind of perspective, we might just sort of rewind a bit and just, you can tell us something about your life before entering the legislature, assuming there was life before the legislature. I noticed you were born in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

Susan Wagle: Yes.

AC: But I guess, do you consider yourself pretty much a native Kansan?

SW: My dad transferred here with Burroughs [an early computer technology company] when I was four years old. I was really raised in Wichita.

AC: I saw you'd gotten a degree from Wichita State University in education?

SW: Yes.

AC: An interest in that time, had you thought about maybe being a teacher?

SW: I met Tom at WSU, and he was in the Department of Education, and we were both becoming elementary school teachers. So we both enjoy children, and we enjoy family. We had a lot of common interests. Of course, I never, ever thought about running for office.

AC: Had anybody in your family been involved in politics before you ran?

SW: No. Tom came from a very strong Catholic Democrat family. He was the eldest of twelve kids. His father was precinct committeeman. Tom remembers knocking on doors for candidates as a child. My household was very Republican, but no one was ever elected in either family.

AC: When did you develop personally your interest in politics, starting out in education? When did that interest develop?

SW: It evolved over time. I had concerns when I was—actually Tom and I, it's a second marriage for both of us. But in my first marriage, there was a time when I was pregnant, and we were poor. We were putting ourselves through school, and there was a big sign on Kellogg [a main street in Wichita] that said, “Free pregnancy tests here,” and I walked into Dr. Tiller's clinic of all places. At the reception desk, there was a map of the world with yellow pins in it from all around the world. I said, “What does this represent?” They said, “We serve women all around

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the world." Then, when I was waiting for my test to be returned, this was before you could buy them over the counter, they counseled me and said, "You're too young to get pregnant," and they really tried to talk me into an abortion. Then later on I found out it was a facility for third trimester abortions. So that started to bother me.

Then my husband and I taught school. We started investing in real estate on the side. We got hit with some mammoth property tax bills back when they changed the way we tax properties in the late eighties. Then people started talking to me about running for office, but I was not interested at first, not interested. But I knew how important it was. I said, "I'll help."

AC: I didn't see any local elected service like City Council or School Board or anything like that.

SW: No.

AC: You jumped right into the state legislature.

SW: I had some elected officials ask me to run who were serving here in the legislature. I promised them that that wasn't for me, but I would find someone in my district. Then everyone would ask, "What's it pay?" (But truly,) It's a volunteer job.

AC: Full time.

SW: They'd said, "I cannot leave my job for this for three months." My husband kept saying, "Susan, you'd be good." My husband thought I should run.

AC: I guess in growing up or in adulthood, were there any local, state, sort of national political figures that sort of inspired you or kind of moved you in that direction of public service?

SW: I wasn't real political. I remember being in the fifth grade when we lost JFK [President John F. Kennedy], and he was shot. I remember it being very traumatic at school. My teacher was pulled out of the classroom and came back crying. I remember some historical events, but I never thought about being involved in politics. I just was not that political.

AC: So that decision to run with that encouragement, the property taxes, and I may have seen something, bingo issues—

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SW: Oh, yes. My husband and I were buying real estate, and a friend talked us into buying a bingo hall. He said, “This is just like your rentals, only you rent it out at one night a week to a nonprofit.“ He said he was buying an aircraft manufacturing plant. He wanted to sell the bingo halls. We got a good deal on them. He said, “Watch Topeka because there was a special tax we were paying on the bingo cards.” He said, “Make sure this bill gets through.” We came up to make sure that happened, and the bill got hijacked. The state shut the bingo halls down. We were open seven nights a week. They shut us down to three nights a week. That was hard to take, too.

So we understood the impact that government could have on a family, on a business. When they changed the way property taxes were evaluated, if you were a small business in Wichita, they tripled. Let's say if you're used to paying $5,000 a year, and it went to $15,000, and you're a small business, you can't gouge that out of your clientele back at that time in the eighties. It was just too much. In general, we were angry, which sometimes reflects how people even feel today towards their elected representatives.

AC: Perhaps you've experienced some of that anger through the years.

SW: Yes. So you come in, and you work to fix it.

AC: So you decided to run for the House in 1990. That very first campaign, did you have much insight or counsel or financial resources or advice on how to run a state House campaign?

SW: No, I was the outsider. There was a lady who was picked to take that seat by my leadership in the House. They had funded her. We threw some personal money into the campaign, and I went out and knocked on doors. Actually, I think it was a six-way race.

AC: It was, yes.

SW: Did you look at it?

AC: I did, yes. Mary Sykes.

SW: She was the lady who was picked to run by the establishment, and her daughter was dating our son.

AC: Small world.

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SW: It was a real small world. It all worked out. I won by a large margin. I didn't go to social events. I just knocked on doors every night. Sundays, I took off, but I met a lot of people, heard their concerns, and I ran an anti-establishment campaign.

AC: One of those things going door to door was the property tax issue. Did you hear an earful on that?

SW: Huge. It was the same year that Mike Hayden was the incumbent governor, and Nestor Weigand was running [against him] for governor from my community. It was a time of anger at the door. Mike Hayden lost in the general, and Joan Finney was elected. Actually it was the second time in history the Kansas House of Representatives went Democrat. So it was a "throw them out" year. I came in as a minority player in the minority party.

AC: That must have been an interesting time to sort of learn your way around the State House coming in as a minority party member.

SW: It's good. It's a good thing to serve in the minority before you hit the majority. You learn a lot. You learn how important it is. The public was angry, too, I would say. I could tell that at the doors.

AC: If I remember right, even though the Democratic Party had control, it was by a very slim margin.

SW: Oh, it was.

AC: Was it maybe one vote between the two parties?

SW: I think it was one vote. It was a slim margin. It was temporary. It lasted one term, and then Republicans came back by a slim margin two years later.

AC: Then I noticed in that 1990 general election, you ran against a Democrat, a gentleman by the name of David Hawley. 62 percent for you and 38 percent (for Hawley).

SW: And we were friends at church. Politics happens in your world with your relations. We went to the same church.

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AC: But clearly you were doing something right because you then got re-elected for five terms in the House before you moved. Your constituents must have agreed with your message and the efforts you were doing up here. I guess you must have been doing something right for your district. They must have agreed with you.

SW: Right. I believe in the power of the electorate. Most of them care about who's elected and how that person votes.

AC: Do you remember over in the House Chamber, the first time you went to the well, and you were standing at the podium, maybe to carry a bill or anything like that? I don't remember if they hazed back then the first time a freshman comes to the mic?

SW: Oh, they did. I remember that very well because Tim Shallenburger, who you've interviewed, who became Speaker, we were debating a budget bill. He knew they would forgive a freshman. He brought over this amendment to a budget bill that cut the travel. We had the travel for the legislature budget, and leadership controlled it, and they tended to spend most of it on themselves. So he wanted me to carry an amendment to have every House member have $1,000 in travel a year. It was a stab at the leadership team. He goes, “Now, Susan, can you do this?” I said, “Sure, this is the right thing to do. Let's be fair.” He goes, “Don't worry about it. I've got the votes. We're going to roll call it. It's going to be recorded, and it's going to help fix things.” I remember carrying that. I remember how upset my leadership team was.

AC: Did it get on?

SW: I don't think it did, but it sure was a recorded vote. Sometimes when you have that large of a body, 125 people, sometimes you can be a little bit rebellious. I was probably difficult to manage.

AC: As I mentioned, in the House, you certainly served on some interesting committees, Public Health and Welfare, Taxation, Federal and State Affairs, Education, Commerce, any of those that were maybe your favorite, or you thought you really made the most difference or impact on the House side?

SW: I loved Tax. I cared very much about Tax. I remember I chaired Tax after I was Speaker Pro Tem. It was the same year that our Attorney General had—we were in the national tobacco litigation, and she had given a contract to her law firm, her two-person law firm that she

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worked with before she became Attorney General. It was worth about 300 million dollars. It was all derived from taxes that were going to be implemented on cigarettes.

So that was my avenue. I remember looking into that because I felt like that contract should have been [competitively]bid to a law firm that probably had a specialty in health care. The whole basis of the lawsuit was that the manufacturers didn't put a label on the cigarettes that said, “This could be harmful to your health.” It did turn out to be harmful to health. The resolution was to put a big tax on cigarettes.

It's been a pet peeve of mine that people in power, when they get in office, they sometimes give those big contracts to their friends. My entire career, I've worked to bring transparency to that process. Probably the last big bill I passed with my minority leader here in the Senate was an ethics bill that requires people who are bringing a contract to any agency or to the government's administration that they report who they're working for and that they report that they're taking that contract and that they're looking for a bid on a contract. I think it's been good that we've become more transparent on contracting.

AC: I noticed one of your early bills in '91 after the Andover tornado, there was a bill in terms of storm shelters in mobile home parks and trying to make sure those were available.

SW: Yes. We lost a lot of people in the '91 Andover tornado in a trailer park. We lost our schools, lost our church, lost the trailer park. It hit the city, and I represented Andover. It was our response, and it's interesting to see that that's happened every time a tornado's hit in Kansas. The legislator from that area brings more legislation to try to make sure that the community can thrive through the devastation.

AC: I noticed, too, in your House service, you and Barbara Lawrence had some bills to reduce property taxes, increase the sales tax, but take it off of food from groceries, the sales tax. That must have been a lot of discussion around that in terms of certainly some people over the issue of sales tax on food, taking it off was important to some people, but lowering the property taxes—

SW: And it still is. I mean, food is still a problem. People still have tremendous angst over their property taxes on their homes.

AC: One of the articles I did see, it was in '91. Maybe you had just been elected or it was after that session, but it was a group, the Home Owners Trust in Wichita who was upset about

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property tax. Of course, it invited local, state, and elected officials to come, and you were there. I think the Kansas Realtors Association had organized the meeting. You were there. You addressed it, and plenty of anger was expressed. I think the lobbyist for them said, “Wait a second. Don't be mad at her. She's trying to solve the problem.”

SW: There was a lot of anger back at that time, tremendous anger regarding property taxes, and our community was hit harder because we were a manufacturing community.

AC: That's a good point. Certainly the internal politics I guess in the House Chamber within the caucus itself, Robert H. Miller was Speaker. I guess there was some discussion about his leadership ability and whether or not he should remain as Speaker. There was a lot of discussion in the Caucus of how to proceed. I saw some of your quotes in terms of it was just trying to get a sense of how things were going and set a course for the future. Of course, the goal at that time was to take the House back in '93 for the Republican Party.

Now that you've been in leadership in both Chambers, I guess was that a difficult time? Were you focused on making some changes that you thought were appropriate?

SW: That was before I was in leadership in the House. Certainly it was a time of transition. A new leadership team was evolving in the House. I don't think it would have happened if the electorate wasn't concerned. There were a lot of freshmen coming in just like myself who were running against incumbents. There were a lot of new faces. There was some anger in Kansas that elevated a new team.

AC: Again, particularly in the early part, the property tax proposals, I noticed that it was then Representative Yost and yourself and Barbara Lawrence I think had done a property tax proposal. I think there was analysis done by a CPA firm, Allen, Gibbs & Houlick, in certainly how your proposal would help lower property taxes, particularly in certain areas.

SW: Well, the bill never passed. We tried.

AC: I guess that's all part of the process. There's some successes, some not.

SW: Failures, right. And sometimes things take a while before they pass. A lot of times, a bill takes many years before it becomes law. That's just the process, and it's a healthy process.

AC: I noticed another debate was over casino gambling.

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SW: Yes.

AC: That was in the early nineties as well. Then it was Senator Tiahrt and Senator Mike Harris and yourself, you all had found a clip where you had addressed some articles that said evangelical pastors about the state's agenda sort of against what I think they considered traditional family values. I think trying to—

SW: I think at that time Eric Yost and Todd would have been in the Senate, and I was still in the House.

AC: That's right.

SW: I don't remember what the bill did. It might have just legalized casino gaming, which would have taken a Constitutional amendment to the Kansas Constitution. It would have taken a two-thirds vote and a vote of the people that was positive. I don't think it ever got anywhere near the votes at that time.

AC: I noticed you were a national delegate to the national Republican Party. That must have been—

SW: When Bob Dole was running against Bill Clinton. That was a fun time.

AC: So really over six years, you got elected in '90, by '96, you were a state delegate to the national Republic Party convention.

SW: It was in San Diego. If you're Kansas, Kansas was elevated because the nominee was Bob Dole. That was a wonderful experience.

AC: I bet. So then in '96, leadership in the House did change. That's when you became Speaker Pro Tem. Tim Shallenburger was elected.

SW: It was actually '94. Then we took over in '95, '96, '97, '98.

AC: So you were Speaker Pro Tem those years. Of course, on the Senate side, there was Bond and Harris were running for the Senate President.

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SW: A lot of negotiations between the Senate President and the House Speaker. They were both smokers. Towards the end of session, they were always outside, trying to figure out how to solve the problems to walk out the door.

AC: On the House side, you were Speaker Pro Tem. You would have worked with Bud Burke and Dick Bond. In those days, I guess when you were in the House, how were the relationships between the two Chambers, the two bodies?

SW: I think they were very respectful. We were very different in our politics. The House was very conservative. The Senate was very moderate, but we were very respectful. At the end of every session, there was a give and a take. If you have to have this, then you'd better pass this bill first. That's the way it's designed to be.

AC: So the process worked?

SW: I think it did.

AC: That's good. And then, too, just thinking of the relationship between the legislature, the House and Senate, your different roles and the Governor's Office, again as I look back, as you started, you mentioned Governor Finney and then Graves while you were Speaker Pro Tem, and then Sebelius, Parkinson, Brownback, Collier, and now Kelly. So relationships with the legislative branch with the executive branch through those year?

SW: I saw that as a question you might ask about, and I believe there is a natural tension between the legislature and the executive branch and actually the court. We have three branches of government. I believe there's a natural tension there, and the legislators, they're very grassroots. They're very involved in their smaller communities. They've knocked on doors. Some of them come from ag country, and some of them come from the city. They have all different backgrounds, and their election, that they just went through, is very different than a gubernatorial campaign where there's a lot of TV and radio and handshaking. There's just a natural tension, I don't care whether it's Democrat or Republican, between the goal of the legislature and what they want to accomplish in a given year compared to what a governor wants. So there's give and take there, too.

AC: I don't know if I want to put you on the spot, but out of those governors, was there one maybe that you had the best working relationship, or maybe that natural tension was less?

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SW: I think the natural tension was there with all of them. Of course, I preferred working with the Republicans. We just had very different roles to play in the process. You just need to respect the other branches and work with them and get as much of your agenda passed as possible, and they're trying to do the same thing.

AC: Right. I guess one of the things that I think about or maybe it's kind of backing up again on the House side, so in '98, Tim Shallenburger decided to run for State Treasurer, I believe, and you decided you were going to run for Speaker. And Robin Jennison did.

SW: He was the Majority Leader at the time.

AC: He was Majority [Leader and you were] Speaker Pro Tem. Again, just reading through the clips, it sounds like that was a close race.

SW: It was.

AC: I guess any surprises or lessons from that?

SW: There were some big lessons. I can tell you that Robin and his wife Colleen and Tom and I, we go out to dinner together. They moved to Wichita. So we're friends. At the time, when I was running for Speaker, I thought, “I don't want to go out and offer a bunch of Chairmanships to win this.” I wanted people to trust me. So when I went to bed at 3:00 in the morning the night before the election, I was just sure I had the votes. I noticed the next morning that a couple who had committed to me had changed, and they became Chairs.

So, again, it's a give-and-take process. The people who are electing you into that leadership position - I learned a lesson - they want surety on what role they're going to play if you're elected. But all's well now.

AC: It worked out.

SW: It sure did.

AC: I noticed in 1997, I believe it was, the Woman's Right to Know Act?

SW: Yes.

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AC: Certainly you were key and instrumental in it.

SW: That was the first pro-life legislation that Kansas ever passed. The Senate and the House at the time were a pro-choice majority; but they agreed to allowing women who were seeking an abortion to have information on fetal development. So it was an informative thing, and now we've signed informed consent for all procedures in healthcare. I negotiated that with Sandy Praeger. She was pro-choice; I was pro-life. We did the right thing. I think that was an example of passing a bill where pro-lifers would have wanted more, and the pro-choice community didn't want it at all, but we did what was right for the community. It was in the best interest of women's health care that we passed that.

AC: Was it a twenty-four-hour waiting period?

SW: It had a twenty-four-hour waiting period in between the time when you made the appointment and you learned about fetal development before the procedure could take place. We had women testify who had regrets. The bill is still law.

AC: I noticed, too, and, of course, sometimes about issues being local, but I noticed one of them was the City of Wichita wanted to construct a landfill near the town of Furley.

SW: It was in my district. We didn't want a landfill. So we had to stop it. It needed to go farther out. I got involved in that.

AC: I think one of the things was just that the Sedgwick County Commission had to also approve it.

SW: I don't think they approved it. They didn't approve it.

AC: But that was one of the additional steps before it—and I noticed, too, again, that you set up a political action committee, maybe more than one, Kansans for Republican Leadership, for selecting Republicans.

SW: And raise money for other candidates.

AC: That worked well. That was successful.

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SW: Right. Then we changed ethics laws. Ethics has improved over my entire career, accountability, transparency, ethics. Kansas is in a good place in that situation, I think.

AC: I noticed again in the clips on your Speaker Pro Tem position, you had said that one of your roles in that position was to provide communications between the GOP and the Democratic leaders in the House, between the House and the Senate, between the legislature and the Governor. You clearly must have stepped up to that role, fostering that communication in all the directions.

SW: It's a big goal to attain, but it's good to put your goals out there, to say, “This is what we need to improve our process.”

AC: I also noticed that Representative Tony Powell at the time called you a den mother to him and the other freshmen legislators, helping them sort of navigate the process.

SW: Well, they probably say that in the Senate, too. He's a judge now. Yes. I consider myself the grandma over here.

AC: I noticed, too, on your list of bills, corporate hog farming, large-scale hog operations. How did that representative from Wichita, if you want to go there?

SW: It was a big deal in western Kansas. I had friends out there. The corporate hog farms were ready to come in, and nobody wanted to own land by one. Everybody wanted, if we were going to have them, to make sure that they didn't contaminate the groundwater. Clean water and plenty of clean water is a big deal in western Kansas.

We passed a bill, and it became law, that said the County Commission had to vote on it, and people had a say. That's what they wanted. They wanted to have a say. They wanted some restrictions on the seepage from the hog farms into the ground. I think we did develop some hog farms after that. It was with approval of the county, and it was with some environmental regulations. So I think it was the right thing to do.

AC: So do you know a lot more about hog operations than you did before?

SW: You know what? They came into Kansas, but not in massive number. I did learn a little bit about it. Corporate farming's here, and they made a profit under those guidelines.

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AC: Then I noticed in 1998, the House had passed some legislation on some additional restrictions on late-term abortions. I think ultimately they banned most partial-birth abortions as well. Governor Graves though signed the bill. I think there was a lot of discussion about the mental health exemption. I guess the point of this is it's public policy, but it's always evolving or changing the interpretation. As policymakers, any issue I guess can be an area of continued focus.

SW: I think it was. The late-term abortions were an issue at the time still. There's been a number of pro-life bills that have passed. The Court now has struck most of them [by declaring that abortion is a fundamental right]. I think it was the will of the Kansas people to allow those bills to pass. They all met the Roe v. Wade standard. They said that the State has the right to regulate late-term abortions. They all fit within the Roe v. Wade standard.

AC: I know you're proud of being President of the Senate, as you should be. I think it's more beyond being the first woman Senate President, you're a very qualified and accomplished Senate president, period. You don't have to be male or female. You've done a lot. Clearly Kansas, as I was looking through, has a pretty strong history in terms of women in political process—the first state to allow local elections and school board elections. They had the first woman mayor, I think, in Kansas, the first woman sheriff in Kansas. Kansas, I guess, was the first to allow state-run universities to allow women to even attend university. Certainly you have been a trailblazer in that area, and that's got to be certainly a source of pride or accomplishment.

SW: I never ran because I was a female. I never said, “Vote for me because I'm female.” It has been an honor to be able to serve Kansans in this capacity, especially now, I'm retiring in the year of suffrage, our hundred-year celebration of a woman's right to vote. I think there's less of a stigma for women, for people of color. We're a diverse state, and we need the diversity in the legislature, too.

AC: That maybe, since we're on that subject, there is this one required question. The Oral History Project is asking all of the people that are being interviewed, but it's about personal identity. I'll just read it to make sure I get it right. “Personal identity is loosely defined as gender, age, race, class, sexual or gender orientation, marital status. In your public service, did you experience times where you believe your personal identity influenced your ability to pass policy work with fellow legislators or provide constituent services? Were you ever given committee assignments or tasks that you believe were functions of your personal identity?” Did

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you think because of your personal (identity) that that ever factored into I guess, life in the legislature?

SW: I really didn't. I didn't consider myself different than my colleagues or as having an advantage over them or a disadvantage. I felt like we're all Kansans. We were all elected by our constituents, and we all have the right to voice our concerns. That's how I've been Senate President, here in the Senate, it's that we treat everyone with respect. Even when they disagree with us, we treat them with respect, and we allow them a voice, and we allow them time to express concern. There's no time limit on debate. I've never felt like I've operated in a biased situation or that I was shortchanged. We try very hard to be respectful to all here.

AC: Very good. Thank you. One more question maybe back on your House days—that move after Speaker Shallenburger and you became Pro Tem, I guess that was sort of a movement by the conservatives, if that's the right terminology. How did that sort of develop? What was the timing? How did the dynamics of that shift maybe a little more further to the right than was currently in terms of that leadership and the issues that the House dealt with?

SW: It was through a coalition of Democrats working with conservative Republicans. Before I was elected, the Democrats joined with a faction of the Republican Party and changed the rules and made it easy to record votes. They brought transparency to the process. It was a bipartisan coalition that changed the rules in the House that affected people in their elections. We knew exactly how people were voting on the floor. That raised up a group of conservatives in the House. It all started with a bipartisan coalition for transparency to make the actions of the House very transparent in the journal and to make sure the public knew how everyone voted.

AC: So you thought that was a good thing?

SW: I thought it was a good thing, yes.

AC: I saw in that time period, '92 to '98, the term was a "conservative insurgency" within the Republican Party. Would you call it that? Is that too strong a word?

SW: An insurgency? I think it was the will of the electorate. I think that once constituents knew what the voting records were, and there was more transparency to the process, I think that the voters elected more conservatives. People care about how much money they keep in their pocket every month. They care about property taxes. Oh, my goodness. They care about sales tax on food. They want their senators to answer the phone when they call. They want a

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response. Back then, it was letters and stamps. Now it's email. So things have changed in the way we communicate, but the people care about how their elected legislator votes, and they care about what happens in government.

AC: I'm curious, just the personal dynamics then of that, not in leadership yet, but trying to steer things, to change course, just how did the dynamics of that play out?

SW: I remember coming up here and seeing a newspaper with the picture of twelve House Republicans. They were called the rebels against Governor Mike Hayden. They were called The Rebels. When I read about what they did, I thought, “Well, I kind of identify with them.” My goodness, Mike Hayden lost. He was an incumbent governor, and he lost. So it just evolved with transparency and with the high property tax bills.

AC: The personal relationships then I suppose between Shallenburger and yourself and those others that might have been—those twelve rebels or plus by then?

SW: Well, we were all friends. We became friends because you'd better have friends if you're going to take on the establishment. We would play poker at night. They taught me how to play poker. We would go through the calendar for the next day, and we'd look at all the bills, and we'd look at what amendments we could carry because we knew we had plenty of votes to catch on the record. Every amendment was roll called. We were organized.

AC: That's certainly a key, I guess. Did you become a good poker player during that time?

SW: It took a while, but I won a few times.

AC: It might have served you well through your career up here.

SW: It was a great way to sit and talk through the next day. The calendar is usually printed by 3:30 in the afternoon. Then you can look at the agenda, and you can say, “Wow, how can we make things better? What can we do to point out that my neighbor is not voting with his constituents?” There was a little rebel poker in there.

AC: That brings up the subject, you're a Republican elected official. You have your viewpoints and your thoughts. Some of your constituents may or may not agree with you. Whatever the subject is, do you think an elected official should vote your conscience or the will of your district, or does it just depend on the topic or the issue?

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SW: On taxation, you'd better listen. On things that affect our quality of life, on education, taxation, I think you really need to listen to your constituents. Then there's the moral issues. You make people angry, and you make people happy with every vote you cast. You have to have an overall general view about the direction you want to take Kansas and stay true to your word about how you advertised yourself in your campaign.

AC: You served in the House ten years, and in the Senate—

SW: Twenty.

AC: Twenty years. I know it's probably like picking your favorite child, but which one did you enjoy more, your time in the House or your time in the Senate? I know, of course, you're Senate President, although you were Speaker Pro Tem over there. Any preference between Chambers?

SW: They have very different personalities. A group of 125 is very different than a group of forty. The relationships are deeper in the Senate. It's a smaller group. You get to know each other a little better, and you can predict, knowing your colleagues, how they're going to feel about a bill or how they'll respond or what their district will think. It's a little more chaotic in the House, a little more fun, much more studious here, much more contemplative and deliberative. We're very careful before we pass a bill here. We read everything.

AC: And not so much on the House side?

SW: It's just a little more chaotic over there, a lot more voices. The committees are much bigger over there. It's harder to be very involved in your committees. Over here, every person is necessary in the committee process, on the floor. Everyone has a voice, and you get to know your colleagues here very well, and you get to know their districts. They're very different. Johnson County is quite opposite from western Kansas. It's okay to be young in the House and a little older over here in the Senate.

AC: Maybe just looking back over your legislative career, is there one session that really perhaps in terms of difficulty, whatever the issue was, but just in terms of the public policy of trying to develop it or maybe not develop it, but just that public policy that was really challenging that, as you look back now over thirty years, boy, that session of '95 or whatever year—

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SW: There's no question. It was this past year. It was the COVID pandemic. It was our emergency order laws that allow a governor to react to a problem were really geared towards a tornado or maybe a fire. They were very short term. We never expected a pandemic that could come in and reach its arms into our own body, right here, and hurt our colleagues. We just lost a newly-elected senator's husband to COVID just two days ago. It shortened our session. It changed the way we related socially. We wanted to wear masks. We had to rewrite emergency orders because we knew this was going to be a long-term problem.

This session was horrific, horrific for me personally because I had announced last summer I was going to run for the US Senate. I [had] talked to my family. They said, “Mom, you'd be great.” Then my daughter who had been battling multiple myeloma, a young physician here in Topeka, thirty-eight years old, four children; she relapsed, and she had to go to transplant. Back last November, we knew she was going to have to go to transplant. In December, we were told the transplant wasn't going to work, and she relapsed. So, I came into session in January, and my husband came up here to live with me essentially for the first time because we were helping our daughter through chemo[therapy] and trying to save her life. We lost her in March.

At the same time, we had to shut down session early because of COVID. It was just a terrible, terrible session, and COVID has in many ways shut down our ability to debate and relate to each other and solve problems. Our meetings are on Zoom - of all things. They're hard. Our kids, our parents are having problems with kids out of school. It's been a very difficult year for many, many people. People have lost jobs. I'd say trying to allow our kids to be interactive and enjoy life during COVID has been exceptionally hard on children. I've talked to some people, some sports directors in Johnson County, who deal with junior high students. Kids are articulating suicidal thoughts. They're depressed, just like adults are right now.

This pandemic has been very disruptive to communications, to family support, to our networking, to going to church. I'll never forget when Governor Kelly came down with her first order. She said she limited gatherings to I think it might have been ten people. It was a very small number. I said to her, “You can't do this. I just lost my daughter, and all my grandkids are coming to my house this weekend. We need to be together, and we're a lot more than ten people.” I have sixteen grandchildren. I said, “Please don't do this,” and she agreed with me. She said, “You're right. I can't do that in a private setting, in a home.” There are large families out there with six or eight kids. I said, “You just can't do that to large families. Please allow us to be together,” and she amended her order, very thankfully. I'm very thankful for that.

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It's just been hard to carry on business in the midst of a pandemic that seems to spread easily, quickly, and in an unpredictable manner. It's just been terrible. So the next session is going to be difficult. It's going to be difficult for everyone here in the Capitol.

AC: Although is there hope as an institution that the legislature will be able to navigate that? I guess you got through it this last year.

SW: We did. You know, they met last Monday—I think it was last Monday—to elect new leaders, and then someone came down with COVID. I think they're still navigating through, "How are we going to hold committee meetings?" We've already decided interns aren't going to come in. That's a lost opportunity for college students. They used to come in and enjoy being a part of the process. They could watch it. They could stay until midnight when we're debating. So we've lost our interns.

AC: The pages?

SW: Pages. They aren't even going to allow pages in. And kids would come up and learn about government and see the beautiful, restored Capitol. It's just been very difficult. We do have elderly in the legislature who are concerned. They don't have it yet. They don't want to get it. They don't want to give it to their family. All this is being balanced out. It's going to be very hard on the new teams, the new leadership teams.

AC: Maybe just a little bit here, since we're looking at the clock, so you came to the Senate, and I think, was Dick Bond—

SW: Dave Kerr was. He was Senate President.

AC: Then was it Dick Bond, I believe?

SW: No, it was Dick Bond, Dave Kerr, and then Steve Morris, I think.

AC: That's right. And then you. The relationships there, in terms of—

SW: They're good. They're very good. I think Steve lost a race. He was running again for a third term. That was difficult on him. I do see Dave. I've been to events with Dave. I'm sorry we lost Bud. I went to his funeral. So we've all had a shared experience.

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AC: That's right. I guess maybe Speakers or Senate Presidents, any leadership qualities that maybe helped you when you became Senate President, some role models or good methods there, I guess, in terms of leadership that maybe assisted you over the last eight years?

SW: The one thing I learned in the House, and I really learned it from Tim Shallenburger is that everyone has a voice. Don't ever cut off debate. Always work across the aisle. There's things we all agree on. We all care about Kansas. You need to build a big coalition because you're going to lose people on every vote. Sometimes you have to find new friends. Always make the tent bigger, not smaller, and always allow everyone to express their opinions and allow every voice to speak, and that solves a lot of problems.

AC: I guess again your experience here over thirty years, has the legislature as an institution changed from when you arrived in 1991, that first session, until now?

SW: I think it is more transparent. We've passed a lot of ethics bills, and truly the salary has not increased. It is a labor of love to run for the legislature. Everyone runs because they want to solve a problem. They had an incident in their life. They run because they see a need. You have to respect where all these different voices are coming from and the fact that districts are very different in personality. My husband told me when I was driving in today that in Dodge City, they're suing the County Commission over masks. My goodness, in Johnson County, if you don't wear a mask, look out!

The personalities of the different communities in Kansas are very different. You just need to respect each individual who's been elected, and you need to hear what they have to say, even though they have a different perspective. The majority always wins, and that's a good, healthy process that we live by. This representative democracy is the right thing. It's elevated America. We've brought people out of poverty. We've brought people out of poverty around the world. So it's a healthy process. It's a good process to rule by an elected representative majority.

AC: As you look back over these last thirty years, is there one area that perhaps in terms of the proudest accomplishment, one or maybe a couple of things that you really feel—I don't know whether legacy is the right word, but that you've left your mark. You've made a difference. You've made a contribution, and Kansas is better off for it.

SW: That first pro-life bill, the Woman's Right to Know, I'm very proud because, as I said, the legislature tended to be pro-choice, and Dr. Tiller was Doctor of the Day still at that time. He used to come up and treat legislators. We have a doctor that we can go to if we get the flu or

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have a cough. He had a lot of influence. I thought it was the right thing to do. I'm very proud of that moment.

I'm very proud of being in leadership in the House, [and] leadership in the Senate. I actually feel good about moving on and leaving it in other hands. That's part of the process, to pass it on to people who may disagree with me, who are different than me, who have different leadership styles. It's healthy to bring up new people in leadership.

I feel good about the reforms I've made. I remember the board of Healing Arts, I was Chair of Public Health. You can actually do more as a chairman than you can as a leader. I was Health Care Chair, and I had a number of people express concern about physicians to the board of Healing Arts. Nothing was done. I had a large number of deaths due to an opioid clinic, a pill mill down in Haysville. I think I had sixty-seven deaths that were directly affiliated to one pill mill when I started looking into things. Then as it turned out, there were a lot of complaints going to the board of the Healing Arts. They weren't doing their job. They weren't overseeing physicians.

I remember I passed a resolution here, 40-0 and 125-0 in the House after exposing what they were doing to protect the public, to fire the director of the Board of Healing Arts and to fire his attorney so that people's voices would be heard. You can't have unethical health care practitioners. That was a helping moment.

I've passed a lot of reforms, the Kansas Bioscience Authority. I was chair of Commerce. I looked at their books. I had some people call from inside the agency. They were spending a whole lot of money on travel and fine wine. They were promoting the biosciences in Kansas, and they had spent 232 million dollars of Kansas taxpayer dollars when we finally sold it. It wasn't attracting jobs to Kansas. We only sold it for 14 [million].

I feel like I've, in my areas of expertise when I was a chair, I've accomplished some great things for Kansas. Then as a leader, you don't really get into the weeds. You have to just bring people together and help them work together and get a majority and do the best you can do. It's always not my will but the will of the body if you're in leadership. What's best for the state? How do we get there? There’s compromise along the way.

AC: So certainly some success there. Again, as you look back over thirty years, any disappointment, if that's the right term, or something that you wish would have gotten done but just didn't quite get across the finish line?

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SW: Oh, property tax is still a problem in Kansas. People still consider it high. It's become more of a problem now that they can't deduct it on their federal taxes. I wish we could decouple from the federal tax code. The taxes are still a problem. Sales tax on food is still a problem. Right now, in the last ten years, that's evolved because we have an activist Supreme Court that mandates how much money we spend on education. Taxes are high in Kansas. I think that caused us to have people leave Kansas or not settle here just because they can go to states where they're much lower. I wish we could have done more there, but that would take a change in the way we appoint our justices, which I've supported in the past.

AC: Discussions on that through the years?

SW: Yes. Right now our Supreme Court justices are appointed by the governor. A nominating committee gives the governor names. The governor chooses, and there's no secondary confirmation from the Senate. I've supported that. I also support the election of judges. I think that would help balance the budget ultimately. If the people could elect the justices, I think that would be a very healthy thing rather than have them appointed solely by a governor to a lifetime appointment.

AC: It works in Sedgwick County, I believe.

SW: Yes, we elect. There's quite a few counties that elect their judges.

AC: Of course, being in the legislature thirty years, you've got to live through, work through reapportionment a couple of times.

SW: Yes. That's coming up again.

AC: Any thoughts or reflection on that? Did 2000 work better than 2010, the process there?

SW: Unfortunately, in the Senate, the Senate President wouldn't run any maps. So we did have a problem. The House sent over a bipartisan map that was supported by Democrats and Republicans. It had a large vote. He didn't even run that. Our Congressman gave us a map. He didn't run that map. He certainly didn't run the Senate map because he heard some House members were running against Senators.

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So the last reapportionment went to court, and I pray the next one doesn't. I think it's best if it's a compromise and drawn in accordance to the law by the people who are elected. So they're about to hit that one again.

AC: It was an interesting time, reapportionment time.

SW: It was hard. It did go to court. I remember, I think the new maps came out a day or two before the filing deadline. So things were—that was a difficult election year.

AC: One other quick question, of course, this process, lobbyists are a part of the process, provide information, different things. Do you see value or issues or does that get you some of that transparency? Just kind of how the lobbying process I guess works, House or Senate, or just here in the building.

SW: There's a lot more ethic rules that have passed regarding ethics that require transparency since I've started. Many years ago, a lobbyist could walk in and slide a check over the desk. Now we require reporting. You can only donate to a candidate when session is not in session. If a lobbyist takes somebody out to dinner, it's reported how much is spent. So I think we have a healthy relationship with the private sector, and all of it is transparent. They help us understand the impact of legislation or potential legislation on their interests.

AC: If a person came to you and said, “You know, President Wagle, I'm thinking about running for the legislature. House or Senate?” What advice would you give them? Would you tell them to go for it, or take a deep breath and think twice?

SW: I think it's a very enriching experience. You get to meet a lot of people. I would encourage people to run. It's a way to improve the quality of life for your family, for your community. It's a way to meet new people. To me, it's been a very rewarding and enriching experience. I think all of my colleagues say that. Sure, you have wins and losses, but most people walk away and say, “This was a great experience for me, for my family. My children used to come up and page (and take a tour) right up to the top of the Dome. They were always very involved.” So I would encourage people to run from all walks of life.

AC: That was one of the clippings, I think it was in '98, one of the coaches from Andover High School, Dick Tatro, was an opponent, but he was also the coach at the high school where your kids went?

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SW: Yes, that was a hard year for my daughter that was taking a history class from him. He was giving out extra credit to people that helped him knock on doors at night. I did have to call the principal. You know what? It all turned out. It's good that we have a choice. It's good that people step up to the plate and put their name on the ballot. It's a healthy thing.

AC: I keep thinking of another thing, the whole Brownback tax policy, some people call it an experiment, the tax policy. As you reflect on that—

SW: Oh, that was a difficult time. It was too much, too fast. We needed to make adjustments. We needed to—the economy was down, and the money wasn't coming in. We had the schools requiring a specific amount, and we needed to make adjustments to that plan. I worked very hard to ask my colleagues to help me make adjustments, and everybody was fearful of voting for a small tax increase. In the end, they put it right back where it was. We would have been far better off if we had just adjusted the plan.

But the governor didn't want to adjust it. He was invested. There were a number of us that, if he would have worked with us, we would have come up with a mediocre increase and survived and paid our bills. Right now we are the high tax place in the Midwest as far as income, sales, property. It's not good for our kids. We lose a lot of kids. They move to other higher growth areas. So I wish we could have fixed that.

AC: So now, like you said, this chapter in your career is coming to an end. Maybe in politics you've learned never to say never. Would there ever be a possibility of another elected office or serve in state government in some capacity or federal government or some other type of public service?

SW: I just got a new puppy. He just turned four months yesterday. I'm really enjoying life. It was kind of fun last night. We didn't want to go out to eat. It's hard to go out to eat with COVID. We could throw a frozen pizza in the oven and open a bottle of wine on a Thursday night. I go, “I kind of like this.”

And then today to come here, I had to put on heels and hose. I think I'm going to like relaxing and spending time with family, especially my children that this spring, just lost their mom. We're very engaged with our family. I think I want to enjoy no responsibility right now. I want to relax and be with family and have a wonderful Christmas. I'm not good at predicting the future, but I've enjoyed my time here. I know my family is all excited about having me back.

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AC: Well, thirty years of tremendous public service, certainly a career touching both sides of this building, the House and the Senate. Leadership in both Chambers. Clearly much to be proud of in terms of your public service. Thank you for your time today.

SW: Thank you, Alan. I was so glad that you and Dave and Joan put this together, and you're documenting history. It's a healthy thing.

AC: It is. I think the institution, as you know, is such a unique institution, the legislative branch, the House and Senate in Kansas. To have that recorded I think will serve well. Thank you for your time and thank you for your public service.

SW: Thank you, Alan. Thank you, Dave Heinemann and Joan Wagnon. They are here with me in the Senate gallery. Joan was my first Tax Chair that I got to serve under. Dave and I shared an office in the House back when we had these tin orange and green desks, and you can walk in any time of night. The world was very different. I remember the property tax problem first got dumped on Joan when she was Chair of Tax in '91. It was hard, hard to resolve because of all the diverse interests of Kansas.

AC: And, it still is.

SW: It still is. Some things repeat themselves. Thank you.

AC: Thank you.

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