



*Kathleen Sebelius, governor of Kansas, 2003-2009.*

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# “Find a Way to Find Common Ground”: A Conversation with Former Governor Kathleen Sebelius

*edited by Bob Beatty and Linsey Modellmog*

**K**athleen Mary (Gilligan) Sebelius, born May 15, 1948, in Cincinnati, Ohio, served as the State of Kansas’s forty-fourth chief executive from January 13, 2003, to April 28, 2009, when she resigned to serve in President Barack Obama’s cabinet as secretary for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Sebelius rose to the governorship after serving in the Kansas House of Representatives from 1987 to 1995 and serving two terms as Kansas insurance commissioner from 1995 to 2003. She was the first insurance commissioner from the Democratic Party in Kansas history, defeating Republican incumbent Ron Todd in 1994, 58.6 percent to 41.4 percent. She ran for reelection in 1998 and easily defeated Republican challenger Bryan Riley, 59.9 to 40.1 percent. In the 2002 gubernatorial race, Sebelius defeated Republican state treasurer Tim Shallenburger, 52.9 to 45.1 percent. She won reelection in 2006 by a vote of 57.9 to 40.4 percent against her Republican challenger, state senator Jim Barnett.<sup>1</sup> Sebelius never lost an election to public office in Kansas.<sup>2</sup>

Sebelius’s 2002 gubernatorial victory marked the first and only father-daughter pair to serve as governors in the United States. Her father, John Gilligan, was Democratic governor of Ohio from 1971 to 1975.

Sebelius’s gubernatorial leadership style was one of bipartisanship, as her Democratic Party was always in the minority in the state legislature. By design, Sebelius sought common ground with moderate Republicans to pass legislation, including selecting two former Republicans, John Moore and Mark Parkinson, to serve as her lieutenant governors.

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1. The Kansas Insurance Department began in 1871 with an elected superintendent of insurance. In 1927, the office changed to commissioner of insurance. Sebelius defeated Todd in 1994, 469,564 to 331,489, and bested Riley in 1998, 430,541 to 295,683. In the 2002 gubernatorial race, Sebelius tallied 441,858 votes to Shallenburger’s 376,830. In 2006, Sebelius beat Barnett, 491,993 to 343,586. All election statistics in this article are from the Kansas Office of the Secretary of State, “Election Statistics,” [http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections\\_statistics.html](http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_statistics.html), unless otherwise noted.

2. Running as a Democrat in Kansas is always a challenge, given the Republican voter registration advantage. In October 2006, 26.6 percent of registered voters in Kansas were Democrats, 46.1 percent were Republicans, and 26.7 percent were unaffiliated. “Election Statistics,” [http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections\\_registration\\_voterreg.asp](http://www.kssos.org/elections/elections_registration_voterreg.asp).



*As a popular Democratic governor in a Republican state, Sebelius became a prominent national figure. She served as the first female chair of the Democratic Governors Association in 2007, delivered the Democratic response to President George W. Bush's State of the Union in 2008, and was on Barack Obama's "short list" for vice-president. Courtesy of Kathleen Sebelius.*

*Her first term in office was marked by the key issues of balancing the budget and funding education.<sup>3</sup> In 2005, Governor Sebelius helped broker a successful compromise on education funding after calling for a special legislative session following the state supreme court's order that the legislature increase school funding by \$285 million or risk shutting school*

*doors. That same year, Sebelius made Time magazine's list of the top five governors in the United States, selected because she had reduced the state debt by \$1.1 billion and balanced the state budget while simultaneously increasing education funding.<sup>4</sup> Kansans seemed to approve. She was reelected by a massive margin in 2006, and her approval rating climbed to 70 percent by April 2007. Her twelve-month average approval rating from that year was a remarkable 67 percent.<sup>5</sup>*

3. Burdett Loomis, Sebelius's director of administrative communication in 2005, said of Sebelius's first year in office, "GOP legislators were confident that, contrary to her campaign promises, she would be forced to raise taxes. But with a veteran budget director and a combination of political and administrative skills, the governor shuffled funds, deferred some payments, while speeding the collection of various receipts. The result? No tax hikes and the ultimate judgment that none were necessary." Burdett Loomis, "How Kathleen Sebelius Got Lucky," *Daily Beast*, March 4, 2009.

4. "Time Names the Five Best Governors in America," *Time* magazine, November 13, 2005.

5. When asked about her 70 percent approval rating, Sebelius joked, "If you're not dead, it's really impressive." Sebelius is the first Kansas governor for whom regular, nonpartisan public approval data is available. Her average approval ratings from 2005 onward were 2005: 56.7 percent; 2006: 62 percent; 2007: 67 percent; 2008: 60.7 percent;

Sebelius's second term was marked by her administration's rejection of a permit application to build two coal-fired power plants in Holcomb, Kansas, an act that received national attention and enraged the Republican majority in the legislature. Sebelius vetoed the legislature's attempts to overturn that decision. Other issues on which Sebelius used her veto included laws easing gun restrictions, increasing abortion regulations, and cutting income taxes.<sup>6</sup>

Sebelius was described as a "hands-on" governor who was not afraid to lobby, cajole, and importune legislators and was adept at recognizing when coalitions of Democrats and moderate Republicans could be assembled to either pass legislation or sustain a veto. Her critics, usually conservative Republicans, complained that she was "too political" and that she often left them out of policy discussions.

As a popular Democratic governor in a Republican state, Sebelius became a prominent national figure. She served as the first female chair of the Democratic Governors Association in 2007, delivered the Democratic response to President George W. Bush's State of the Union in 2008, and was on Barack Obama's short list for vice president. On Thanksgiving Day in 2008, she turned down an offer from President-elect Obama to serve in his administration, but when Senator Tom Daschle withdrew his name from consideration for secretary of HHS, Obama came calling again; this time, Sebelius said yes.

When asked what made Sebelius an effective governor, John Moore, Sebelius's lieutenant governor from 2003 to 2007, said, "Integrity. That enables those who work with her to be comfortable, to be confident that they can present different ideas. Intellect. She is terribly bright, and that just makes so many things easier for her than they might be otherwise. Work ethic. Sometimes I feel put upon by the hours that I keep, and then I look across the hall and realize that there is at least one person in state government that works longer and harder than I do."<sup>7</sup>

This article is excerpted from a lengthy interview conducted with Kathleen Sebelius in 2016 and two shorter interviews in 2004 and 2008. The interviewers' questions have been omitted, and footnotes have been added. The overall project that gave rise to the interviews was an initiative by Bob Beatty and Mark



Kathleen Mary Gilligan (center) was one of four children born to Mary Kathryn (Dixon) and John J. Gilligan of Cincinnati, Ohio. Mother was an educator and high school teacher; father a World War II veteran and successful Democratic politician who served on the city council from 1953-1963 and in the U.S. House of Representatives for one term, 1965-1967. Also pictured in this 1953 family portrait are Sebelius's brothers, Donald and John, and sister, Ellen. Courtesy of Kathleen Sebelius.

Peterson of the Political Science Department at Washburn University to capture on video the histories of Kansas governors John Anderson, William Avery, John Carlin, Mike Hayden, Bill Graves, Kathleen Sebelius, and Mark Parkinson. "Find a Way to Find Common Ground": A Conversation with Former Governor Kathleen Sebelius" is the sixth in a series based on those interviews.<sup>8</sup>

## BACKGROUND AND SCHOOL DAYS

I was born [on May 15, 1948] in Cincinnati, Ohio, one of four children in an Irish Catholic family. I went to one

8. For this published version, the four interviews have been merged and passages omitted and reordered in some instances for clarity and narrative effect. The words are the governor's, however, and the editors have not altered the meaning or original intent in any way. See also Bob Beatty, ed., "For the Benefit of the People': A Conversation with Former Governor John Anderson, Jr.," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 30 (Winter 2007-2008): 252-69; Bob Beatty, ed., "You Have to Like People': A Conversation with Former Governor William H. Avery," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 31 (Spring 2008): 48-67; Bob Beatty, ed., "Be Willing to Take Some Risks to Make Things Happen': A Conversation with Former Governor John Carlin," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 31 (Summer 2008): 114-40; Bob Beatty, ed., "Being Close to the People': A Conversation with Former Governor Mike Hayden," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 32 (Spring 2009): 46-74; and Bob Beatty and Virgil W. Dean, eds., "Doing What Needed to Get Done, When It Needed to Get Done': A Conversation with Former Governor Bill Graves," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 36 (Autumn 2013): 172-97.

2009: 53.5 percent. When Sebelius became more involved in national Democratic Party politics in 2008, her approval ratings went down. Data from SurveyUSA, "Job Approval Numbers," <http://www.surveyusa.com/50StateTracking.html>.

6. "Stamp Left on Education, Environment," *Lawrence* (Kansas) *Journal-World*, April 29, 2009.

7. Interview with Lieutenant Governor John Moore by Bob Beatty and Mark Peterson, August 24, 2004, Kansas Statehouse, Topeka; transcript available at <http://www.washburn.edu/reference/cks/politics/ksgovs.html>.



*At Summit Country Day School, which she attended from kindergarten through twelfth grade, Kathleen Gilligan (number “21” on the left) was a “jock.” She competed in the team sports of soccer, field hockey, and basketball—the latter still used “the old girl’s rules, which was really the stupidest game on the face of the planet.” Courtesy of Kathleen Sebelius.*

school from kindergarten through my senior year in high school: the Summit Country Day School, a Catholic private school. I think there’s no doubt that going to an all-girls school shaped me in very positive ways, because I was raised in an era where girls had definite limitations. If you were a girl past the seventh grade, the sports basically stopped for girls. You could be elected treasurer of the class, but you were unlikely to be president. I had friends who if they raised their hand too often in math class learned the hard way that they weren’t going to be invited to the parties over the weekends, so they had to pick and choose. But I never was in that world. My world was girls did everything. We had the smartest in the class, and we had the dumbest in the class. We had the jocks and the ballerinas. We had the presidents and the dunces. My world was wide open. Nobody ever told me that girls couldn’t do everything because I lived in a world where they did. I think that had an indelible etching on me growing up in the 1950s.

I was a good student but not terribly serious about school, much to my parents’ dismay. I wasn’t trying to get into trouble, but I seemed to on a regular basis. I was actually the school president in the eighth grade and was impeached. My conduct grade wasn’t high enough to carry the flag in the May procession because I had acted

out a little too much. I talked a lot, and I always cooked up things to do. We had teachers who got locked out of classrooms. I don’t have any idea how that happened! I did things like that. They weren’t terribly bad. I never wanted to hurt anybody. I just wanted to kind of create a little bit of chaos.

I was a jock. I played sports all the way through high school and then through college. That was a great competitive outlet, but it also helped me to learn about team sports and encouraging people. I played everything, but for the team sports, it was basketball, soccer, and field hockey. There were very few girls who played sports during their school years then.

I played basketball mostly when there were the old girls’ rules, which was really the stupidest game on the face of the planet, invented, I am sure, by men who thought that women couldn’t run down the court. There were six players on the team, three forwards and three defense players, and only two players—called rovers—could cross the court. It was three dribbles, and then you had to pass or shoot. So literally you could never bring the ball down the court! There were lots of fouls called when you would dribble three times and then take an extra step; that was “traveling.” It was ridiculous. I was a rover and a pretty good outside shooter. I developed that in large part because my brothers were always taller than me, so I learned to shoot over their heads and shoot from anywhere. So that was my specialty. Little did I know that that should have counted extra [for three points]. It didn’t really occur to me that there could be different rules until they began to break it open, and then I thought, why in the world did we play this stupid game for this long?<sup>9</sup>

#### **JOHN GILLIGAN: CITY COUNCIL, CONGRESSMAN, AND GOVERNOR**

My father got involved in politics when I was five. He ran for city council, he served in Congress, and he ultimately was governor of Ohio.<sup>10</sup> I like to say that I never thought that political involvement was a voluntary

9. Six-on-six girls’ basketball started being phased out in 1958, with the last state, Oklahoma, ending it in 1995. It was especially popular in Iowa, where the six-on-six girls’ high school tournament was televised statewide. See Max McElwain, *The Only Dance in Iowa: A History of Six Player Girls’ Basketball* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2004).

10. John J. Gilligan (1921–2013) was a remarkable man. He received the Silver Star for his actions in Okinawa in World War II; served on the Cincinnati City Council from 1953 to 1963; was in the U.S. House of Representatives for one term (1965–1967); was governor of Ohio from 1971 to 1975; and at age seventy-eight was elected to the Cincinnati Board



*On January 11, 1971, Kathleen Gilligan looked on as her father was sworn in as the sixty-second governor of Ohio. A Democrat, Governor Gilligan lost his bid for reelection in 1974, but he taught his oldest daughter “that it’s important to have a moral compass. It’s important to have courage enough to take a stand on issues that are serious and defining,” explained Sebelius. “And even if you lose, it’s not the end of the world.” Almost thirty years later, when she took the oath and assumed the Kansas governorship, Governor Sebelius (pictured here with her husband and two sons in January 2003) and former Governor Gilligan became the only father and daughter ever elected as governors. Photographs courtesy of Kathleen Sebelius (left) and the Lawrence Journal-World (right).*

activity in our family—it was sort of mandatory. We went door-to-door and put up yard signs. I thought that’s what everybody did in the fall, and it only came to me later in life that there were people who actually went out to picnics and went to football games and didn’t spend their time in call rooms and phone banks! From a very early age, we were around my father’s campaigns, so there was a lot of full-contact sport in our family. That actually turned out to be very lucky for me because when I began to run for office, you could bring my siblings in, drop them at any vicinity in the state, any room at any place, and they could run a call bank, they could go door-to-door; I had these wonderfully trained and skilled volunteers. Other people had to go hire people—I just called my family.

Both my parents were very interested in the community, interested in issues, involved, and felt strongly that we,

of Education, where he served until he retired at age eighty-six. Gilligan was comfortable taking rather unpopular positions and considered running for president in 1976. He was strongly against segregation and was an early advocate against the war in Vietnam. See “Former Gov. John Gilligan, Who Died Monday at Age 92, Is Remembered as Champion for Ohio’s Poor,” *Cleveland.com*, August 26, 2013, [http://www.cleveland.com/open/index.ssf/2013/08/former\\_gov\\_john\\_gilligan\\_who\\_d.html](http://www.cleveland.com/open/index.ssf/2013/08/former_gov_john_gilligan_who_d.html); and “John J. Gilligan, 1970s Governor of Ohio, Dies at 92,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2013.

their children, needed to know what was happening and what was going on. At our table, every night when my father came home, we did talk about issues and about politics and what he was involved in at the city level. So my class could do a field trip every year and go down to the city council and watch the council work. In some ways, politics is a pretty easy job for a kid to understand. You can watch them in what they do. Most of my friends had no idea what their fathers did. They would disappear for hours in the day, and what happened in those hours, they didn’t know. But we could watch him sit in the council chamber, vote on issues; we could follow it in the newspaper. Politics is a very tangible profession for a child to learn about.

Politics also comes with its bruises. My father was always in the minority in a nine-person city council. He was often on the losing side of issues or on the side of issues that got wildly criticized by some of the business leaders. So I learned early on that what was said in the newspaper may not be exactly accurate. The downside as a child is that he was out a lot. He was always a public person when we were out. There were always people who wanted to talk to him and wanted to be with him, so that was a little difficult. If you were out to dinner, he was likely to be up shaking hands as opposed to being with the family. But I think my mother was great about making

sure we knew what he was doing and how important it was. She was his best cheerleader.<sup>11</sup> I think there was a feeling not that we were being neglected but that we were sharing him with other people, and they needed him as much as we did.

My father felt it was really important for us to understand what he believed in and would arm us with the information that we could use in our conversations with kids. So when somebody would say to me, "My father would never vote for your father" or "We think he's crazy," I would be able to respond with some focus on the issue, which I knew my friends had no idea about. They would just repeat something that they had heard. I was the issue person. I learned from a very early age to be able to explain myself, defend myself, and even if they began with a different point of view, often you could bring them around; you could educate them. That was really my father's view of leadership: that you often could be out ahead of people, but then you needed to explain to them why it was that you saw the world differently than they did and see if you could bridge that gap.

I think certainly my father's political career and feelings about public service have helped to shape my life and my views. Most of all, I think I learned that it's important to have a moral compass. It's important to have courage enough to take a stand on issues that are serious and defining. And even if you lose, it's not the end of the world. I learned that it's much more important to have a vision and a viewpoint: know what it is that you can contribute, know why it is that you're running and what you want to do, and then have the courage to stand by those convictions. I watched him do that time and time again.

When I was a child, we dropped out of the country club, where I happily was swimming on the swim team and all my friends went. We dropped out because my father tried to go with a council colleague to lunch in the grill, and they wouldn't seat the council colleague. He was African American, and my dad said, "That's it. We're out." As a child, I thought, can you wait until the fall when the club closes to actually drop out? Those were life lessons. I learned the value of moral courage and the

importance of being that kind of leader. I used to say it's really difficult to be a rebel in my family since my father is out ahead of us. It's like, how can I be more radical than him? It's hard.

## **TRINITY UNIVERSITY IN D.C. AND THE VIETNAM WAR**

I was in college in Washington, D.C., from 1966 to 1970. I [majored] in political science with a minor in history. The most searing experiences I had during that time were first in 1968 with Bobby Kennedy's assassination and Martin Luther King's assassination, and Washington was really burned to the ground, riots all over the city. I stood on the roof of one of our college dorms and watched fires be set the night that King was killed.

Then the peace marches started. My junior and senior years in college were spent with kids coming from all over the country to Washington, onto our campus. We had sleeping bags everywhere. We opened up a lot of the campus dorms for people who were there over the weekends. I spent a lot of my time as a volunteer at peace marches. You really felt like you were on the edge of the earth because the war was broiling and the young people were really kind of in charge, making it clear that the government's position was totally unacceptable. So college almost became secondary to being really politically active, politically engaged in these world events.

It was a very difficult time as there were people who felt you were being unpatriotic if you opposed the war. The notion that people and young, privileged kids who were in college campuses would somehow suggest that their government was wrong and that we should not be involved in the war and that you shouldn't go into the armed services when your government called you was really untenable to a lot of older Americans. Kent State really highlighted some of that tension, when you had eighteen-year-old guardsmen shooting eighteen-year-olds on a college campus.<sup>12</sup> It seemed just like the world had gone crazy. I think Vietnam is still one of those wounds that there's nothing like it before or after, and it still is amazingly tough for people.

## **COMING TO KANSAS**

My husband, Gary, is a Kansan, grew up in Norton in northwest Kansas, went to K-State, and then came to D.C.

11. Mary Kathryn (Dixon) Sebelius was an educator and high school teacher. She passed away in 1996. Of her mother, Sebelius said, "She really felt honesty and hard work and straightforward thinking were important. She really gave that sense to all of us how important it was to be involved in public life." Paul Eakins, "Born to Run," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, July 29, 2002.

12. On May 4, 1970, members of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on unarmed college students at Kent State University who were protesting the Vietnam War, killing four students and wounding nine.

to go to Georgetown Law School. His dad [Keith Sebelius] also was a politician.<sup>13</sup> We got married, and I arrived in January of 1975 in Topeka, Kansas. The first couple of months were difficult for me: new friendships, figuring out sort of where I was, getting established, finding a job.

My first job in Kansas was [special assistant to the Kansas secretary of corrections] at the Kansas Department of Corrections. When I got to the office, I learned that I was the first woman in the central office who wasn't a secretary that they'd ever hired. There were lots of men in that office who found my hiring to be very distasteful and made it clear the whole time I was there. The only anecdotal payback I got to enjoy later on was [that] I shared an office with a colleague who was great. He was very friendly. But there was another man on the floor who every day came into our office, greeted my officemate, asked him to go to coffee or lunch, and never, ever, acknowledged my presence. Never said hello. Never. I would often just—back to my chaos days in grade school—greet him effusively: “How are you?” Whereupon he would continue to just ignore me and go about his business. And it was sort of lovely years later when he applied to me for a job, and I got to decide that maybe somebody else was really better suited for that particular position. So there are things that go around and come around.

### THE FIRST CAMPAIGN: STATE LEGISLATURE

I never really saw myself as a candidate. The state legislature was really a timing issue. I had a neighbor and a friend [Judy Runnels] who was the Democratic representative who lived a block away from me. I had been involved in her campaigns, was involved in Democratic politics from the day I got here, trying to find my people in Kansas. I was like the helper bee; I could do a lot of things.

In 1986, Judy decided not to run again. Judy came to me and said, “Why don't you run?” I thought, well, that's interesting. It was going to be an open seat. There had been a Democratic woman from our neighborhood for a long time in that seat. So the profile was there; it wasn't

like taking a wild jump off the top of the Empire State Building. But two things were curious about it. One, it was very appealing to me because I had a two-year-old and five-year-old, and I was working sixty-five hours a week and traveling a lot. My husband was a very busy trial lawyer. And our home situation was sort of fraying at the edges. It was too busy and too tumultuous; I was really feeling the pressure. So the legislature actually appealed to me as a way to go home—be busy for three and a half months a year and be much more flexible during the summer months. It was an opportunity to spend more time with my kids, which is sort of ironic because a lot of times, people read my résumé and say, “Oh, you ran for the legislature to be governor.” I say, “Well, no; I actually ran for the legislature to go home.”

Gary was not at all enthusiastic about me running. His experience growing up as a political son was different than mine as a political daughter. His dad lived in very northwest Kansas, and during his service in the legislature, he would leave home on Sunday nights and be gone until Friday night, and when he would come home, he would often do meetings all over. So Gary really saw his father as kind of leaving. He felt that he knew what that felt like, and this would be the start of me leaving, of me being disengaged, and he did not really want me to make this race. I finally convinced him that I really wasn't his father, that I was doing this in part to actually have something I love to do and thought I would be pretty good at, and [to] actually have more time with the family. And that decisions about future races we would make together, and I wasn't going to use this as a stepping-stone to then go disappear from them from the face of the earth. So he finally took a deep breath and said, “OK, let's do this.”

[The legislature] is very retail [campaigning], and I took that very seriously. It became a full diet of walking and visiting neighborhoods. It was also very difficult. My husband's law firm was involved in the relitigation of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and he basically could have been in China, because he would leave for work at 4 o'clock in the morning and not be home until 11 or 12 at night. I was working full-time.<sup>14</sup> My husband was gone,

13. Keith Sebelius (1916–1981) served from 1969 to 1981 in the U.S. House of Representatives from Kansas's First Congressional District. Before that, he served in the Kansas Senate from 1962 to 1968. Kathleen Sebelius said of Keith Sebelius, “He was really widely respected and liked. He carried the human rights legislation on the floor of the Kansas Senate. He believed in fair housing legislation. So he had kind of a populist, progressive mix of social issues and, being fiscally conservative, was very popular.” For more, see “Keith George Sebelius,” Kansapedia, <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/keith-george-sebelius/17010>.

14. In 1977, Sebelius earned a master's in public administration from the University of Kansas. From 1978 to 1986, she was executive director of the Kansas Trial Lawyers Association. She said, “I spent a lot of time when the legislature was in session at the legislature. At that point, not only were there very few women legislators, but there weren't more than a handful of women lobbyists, women who represented any kind of association or groups. So it was a pretty rarified group to be part of, to try and influence policy and to be involved in policy initiatives from that point of view.”



Soon after her marriage to Gary Sebelius in December 1974, the couple moved back to his home state of Kansas and settled in Topeka, where she first worked in the Kansas Department of Corrections. Elected to the Kansas legislature in 1986 and three subsequent elections, Sebelius served as a member of the Federal and State Affairs Committee, a committee she chaired after Democrats captured the majority in 1990. Courtesy of The Topeka Capital-Journal.

and I would leave work, change into door-to-door clothes, and walk until it got dark, sometimes with volunteers, sometimes all by myself. We had two shifts of babysitters. It was pretty miserable. I remember when my parents came in for the last week of the campaign, and they came to stay and be supportive, and I spent the first night they were there just weeping. I just said, "I don't know that I can do it." I was exhausted. I thought, I have made the worst mistake of my life.

My parents' presence there was really helpful. My mom took me out to a great little dress store a couple days before the election. She said, "Let's go; you need a new dress for election night." The person who ran the dress store greeted us and said, "So, Kathleen, are we planning to win or lose, because that will [impact] what you buy?" I thought, great question! I said, "Uh, win." It was the first time somebody said that. I was like, "Yeah, well, I'm planning to win, so let's get the winning dress." No campaign physically or emotionally was actually that difficult again. That was a pretty tough and grinding race.<sup>15</sup>

My sister ended up coming to town, and she looks a lot like me, and we did a thing where she would be on one

side of the street and I would be on the other, and we both would introduce ourselves as Kathleen Sebelius. She said, "Well, what if they ask a question?" I said, "Then call me over and just say you were [really] saying, 'I'm Kathleen's sister.'"

My dad and I did a couple of things that were very fun. One of the things I knew I could do was sort of rely on—well, you know, every candidate likes free press, right? I knew Nancy Kassebaum a bit, so my dad and I went with a TV crew and sat and chatted with Alf Landon about five days before the election, both former governors talking about their daughters running for office.<sup>16</sup> That was very cool. [My dad] was always very supportive. He thought, I think, I was kind of following the family business.

## THE LEGISLATURE

Democrats were in the minority when I got elected to the legislature, and we had a Republican governor, so there wasn't the notion that you could command an agenda. It was really learning the ropes and figuring out how to work the system and how to get some things done. I was interested in a lot of childcare issues, a lot of family issues. I was always interested in health. I served also on the Federal and State Affairs Committee, which tended to have this broad, bizarre portfolio. It had all the sin issues, if you will; anything that was hot might be dumped into the Federal and State Affairs. That turned out to be a great committee to be on because it was just lots of learning. My first term particularly was a real learning experience.

I was officed with a very seasoned legislator, Jack Shriver, who came from southeast Kansas. It was a wonderful partnership. He thought I was just crazy as a loon, the way I operated and worked, and he would say, "Just slow down, calm down; you got plenty of time." His legislative clock worked very differently than mine. I actually thought he was going to divorce me as an officemate in our first week. We made an interesting pair. He taught me a lot about how strategically to get things done, how to work with Republicans, how to figure out if you wanted a line item in an appropriation bill, who it was that you had to talk to, how to get a lead sponsor

15. Sebelius defeated Republican Peggy Boggs and won reelection in 1988, 1990, and 1992.

16. Alf Landon (1887–1987) was governor of Kansas from 1933 to 1937 and the Republican nominee for president in 1936, a race he lost to Franklin Roosevelt. See Peter Fearon, "Alf Landon: Budget Balancer," in *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History*, ed. Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 204–16. His daughter, Nancy Landon Kassebaum (now Kassebaum Baker), served as a Republican in the U.S. Senate from 1978 to 1997.

who was a Republican—things that were not necessarily obvious but very effective.

One of the first things I did in those first two years in office, which actually made some of my Democratic colleagues very unhappy, was I quickly identified that Bob Miller, a Republican legislator from Wellington who served on the Federal and State Affairs Committee with me, had children about my kids' age.<sup>17</sup> I had a series of ideas around childcare and child support that I thought were pretty good, but I knew they were unlikely to go anywhere unless I had a Republican sponsor, so I went to Bob and said, "OK, here's the deal. Here are the issues. You take a look at them. But if we do this, your name has to be first, and my name will be second. They have to be your issues," knowing that if they came in as my issues, they'd never even get a hearing. He was a very thoughtful guy, and he said, "Well, that's not fair. These are your ideas." I said, "Bob, they are my ideas, that's fine, you and I know that. I would actually like them to get passed and not to sit in some dustbin." I had lots of Democratic colleagues who said, "I'd like to sign on to that bill." I said, "Not going to happen." I knew that if we got lopsided Democratic signatures, it wouldn't [go through]. So if you find common ground, it's amazing what you can get done.

### GOVERNOR MIKE HAYDEN AND COUNTING VOTES

I didn't interact with Governor Hayden a lot, but I kind of watched him work a bit. It became clear that he was really struggling. There was a growing division in the Kansas legislature, and some of the most conservative Republicans, led by Kerry Patrick and others, became real adversaries to Mike Hayden.<sup>18</sup> That became somewhat of the dynamic of my first two years in office that included a massive highway plan that Governor Hayden [in 1987] called a special session to propose.

What I learned that really helped me when I ended up with the special session for school finance is that you better damn well count votes before you bring legislators

in. I knew by personal experience that [Hayden] hadn't counted votes because I had been part of a Shawnee County delegation meeting where he brought a number of the Democrats in. We talked for an hour about highway issues, about projects, about whatever else. He never asked any of us how we were going to vote. We left that meeting, and I remember [Democratic legislator] Anthony Hensley saying, "He probably thinks he's got all our votes." I said, "Well, I don't think any of us were intending to vote for the plan that he was putting forward, but since he didn't ask us, why should we volunteer?" We were in the special session for almost eight days, and nothing passed except a tribute to Alf Landon's 100th birthday. I think watching that was a very instructive experience. It taught me that around the issues, there are no permanent friends and there are no permanent enemies; you can actually reshape [coalitions]. But you better know where the sixty-three votes are at any point in time or you can really be blindsided.<sup>19</sup>

### GOVERNOR JOAN FINNEY

Governor Finney was a very interesting experience. She had one of the most uncanny abilities: identify somebody in a crowd, remember that fifteen years ago they had met you, remember exactly where they had met you, and then talk about their wife and kids by name. She could do that all over the state. She would pick people out. It was unbelievable how much interest she had in people and their stories. People loved her.

She was also an incredibly courageous woman who started out as a Republican, and Republicans wouldn't give her the time of day. They didn't want her to be a congressional candidate. They didn't want her to represent the party. They basically shunned her, driving her into the Democratic Party, and she became this wildly popular officeholder.<sup>20</sup>

We did have the majority in the house for the first two years Governor Finney served. It actually was a little

17. Robert H. "Bob" Miller, a Republican from Wellington, served twenty-six years in the Kansas House from 1971 to 1997, including terms as majority leader (1989–1990) and speaker of the house (1993–1994). See <https://www.pcca.com/article/after-26-years-in-state-legislature-kansas-cotton-farmer-takes-on-new-leadership-role>.

18. Kerry Patrick was a Republican, businessman, and attorney from Leewood, Johnson County. See "Kansas Legislators Past and Present," Kansas State Library, <https://kslib.info/400/Legislators>; and Beatty, ed., "Being Close to the People."

19. Republican Mike Hayden served as governor from 1987 to 1991, losing his bid for reelection to State Treasurer Joan Finney, a Democrat. Hayden's attempt to pass a highway plan with the 1987 special session failed, but he ultimately did get an \$8 billion plan passed in 1989. For an in-depth analysis of the 1988 Kansas legislative session and Hayden's governorship, see Burdett Loomis, *A Legislative Year: Time, Politics, and Policies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).

20. Joan Finney (1925–2001) was elected Kansas's first female governor and served one term, from 1991 to 1995, opting not to run for reelection in 1994. She switched parties from Republican to Democrat in 1974 to run for state treasurer and won four consecutive terms, all after losing the 1972 Republican nomination for the Second Congressional

easier when we were not in the majority because it was easier to try and be helpful from a different position. I do remember that one of her earliest goals was to have a bill on initiative and referendum pass in Kansas. I felt very strongly that this would be a terrible idea. Initiative and referendum, while it started as a populist movement to try and break up the moneyed interests, had turned into really a moneyed interest in and of itself and forced things onto the ballot that should never [have been there]. I felt that the legislature actually was a pretty good check and balance, particularly a part-time legislature.

Yet I was the chairman [of the Federal and State Committee] with a sitting governor [of the same party], and I was supposed to make sure this happened. It was one of the most difficult sessions because it was an amendment to the constitution, so it had to get two-thirds of the vote in the house. That was our good fortune [that Bob Miller] felt equally strongly that this was a really bad idea. So we had to design a scheme that, first of all, added all of the possible restrictions to this measure that we possibly could think of and then get the bill out of committee. It had to be tied down so tightly that hopefully it could never work. Then, once we got it out of committee, the goal was to not have it pass on a floor vote. And I had to carry it on the floor! So I had some very interesting conversations with my colleagues. We'd let a few Democrats off the hook, but I basically would say to them, "Pay no attention to what I'm going to say on the floor, none; if you vote for this bill, I will find you and kill you! I mean, this is really not a good idea. So I'm going to say some things on the floor, knowing that on the second floor, the governor was tuned in." So Democrats are going to have to vote for it except for a few who could get off the hook. And then we had to hang on to the Republicans. Miller's goal was to have the Republicans, even the populist Republicans, say they would not vote for it. So we got a majority but missed that constitutional majority, and it was a terrible disappointment [laughs]. The goal was not to have a big fight with [Governor Finney]. It was also not to embarrass her. She believed in this so strongly. What I needed to try and do as one of her key lieutenants was make sure at

least that bad things didn't happen and at the same time preserve her ability to say, "I really tried, I really did."

I think that things were not going terribly well [for Finney]. I'm not sure she loved the job the way that she loved being state treasurer. I think it was a lot about the office of governor that she just didn't like. It was very policy-oriented. It was very driven by numbers and budgets. I would watch her in those meetings and realized that this wasn't her thing. I mean, she wasn't a policy nerd. I was the real policy nerd. I could have sat in those rooms forever and, you know, talked about nuances and all the meanings of budget bills. She wanted to go out and talk to people, have a lot more personal contact. I'm not sure the job was one that she loved.

### **RUNNING FOR INSURANCE COMMISSIONER**

Health care was becoming more and more of a major issue in terms of accessibility and affordability. People were worried about insurance coverage. There had been only two commissioners in the [many] years before Ron Todd, the incumbent in 1994.<sup>21</sup> I knew that the Kansas insurance commissioner had never been a woman and had never been a Democrat, so it wasn't a real likely office to pick out. But I thought it might have something to do with health [laughs]. There was an opportunity really to change the office from sort of an insider club where the industry provided all the money for the candidate to a consumer look. It was kind of a leap of faith to make that run. I decided that the timing was right, and it was time for me to do something other than being a state representative. That was the craziest election I've ever done in my life.

What I learned very quickly is that nobody knew anything about the insurance commissioner's office; very few people knew what the office did. So it was a bit of a puzzle with interesting possibilities—a statewide office that had a financial platform but was a little bit of a mystery. Most people thought I was totally crazy. My friends said, "Why would you ever do this? You can be in the legislature as long as you want, then run for governor or run for something else. Why would you want to be in this office?" I just had this feeling that this was likely a good place to be and that there was a possibility to run as an outsider, to run as a consumer advocate as opposed to a company advocate.

District. Jim Parrish, Kansas Democratic Party chair from 1985 to 1991, said Finney told him she switched parties because state Republican Party officials told her they weren't "ready for a woman" in high office. Finney returned to politics in 1996 to run for the U.S. Senate but lost in the Democratic primary to Jill Docketing. She passed away on July 28, 2001. See Roger Myers, "Trailblazer Did It Her Way," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, July 29, 2001.

21. Before Todd was elected in 1990, there indeed had been only two Kansas insurance commissioners in forty-four years: Frank Sullivan, 1947 to 1971, and Fletcher Bell, 1971 to 1991. Todd himself had worked in the insurance office since 1956.



*Pictured here at the Topeka YMCA day-care center behind and to the left of two-term Republican governor Bill Graves (1999-2007), who was signing a bill that created a new health insurance program for low income children, Kathleen Sebelius decided to run for insurance commissioner in 1994. She won and sought from the beginning to make the department more the representative of the consumer than the industry and significantly turned back a proposed takeover of Kansas Blue Cross Blue Shield by WellPoint, now Anthem. To the left of Commissioner Sebelius is Representative Nancy Kirk of Topeka and to the right are Janet Schalansky, Social Rehabilitation Services Deputy Secretary, and Senator Marge Petty of Topeka.*

We in the state legislature had tried to get a bill passed that would have prohibited the commissioner from accepting [campaign donation] money from companies that were licensed by the office or anybody regulated by the office. That didn't pass, and I thought, there may be an angle here. If [people] really knew that the companies gave money to the commissioner and that the commissioner really didn't work for them, that might prove to be helpful.

I decided that I would take the test to be an insurance agent. I would never be an agent if I was elected, but I wanted to be able to say I had the credentials; that would give me some level of credibility. That was a pretty terrifying experience because I went to take the exam when I was already involved in the race. It was one of the first computerized tests I had ever taken, and at the bottom of the screen, the text indicated that the results would be sent to me and to the Kansas Insurance Department. I thought, well, this could be a very short campaign, because in spite of the fact that this was supposed to be very private, I knew since I was running against the

incumbent that if I flunked the insurance test, it would take about twenty-six seconds for the incumbent to get that news and potentially to end my campaign. I saw this as a real test of whether I was going to get a sign from on high: Should I continue this race or not? I took a deep breath and hit send. Luckily, I passed with flying colors, so that was hurdle number one.

Ron Todd [had] been a longtime assistant of Fletcher Bell and had been in the office for a very long time. His [controversial] issue—where he decided to take his full pension and his full salary—happened during his first term in office. I was part of that legislature that passed the law saying [a state employee] could come back to work if you retired for a limited number of hours, but you could not work full-time and draw down a pension full-time. The day before that law went into effect, Insurance Commissioner Ron Todd decided, because he was eligible by age to retire, that he would take advantage of the old rules. So we could say this man knew that the rules were changing, but in spite of that, he still did it, and he is now

one of the highest-paid employees of the state of Kansas, and he doesn't work for you. I really felt from the outset that the consumer issues could be the strongest claim, but you needed some demonstration that there were things gone awry in the office, and this certainly helped to build that case.<sup>22</sup>

I did make a pledge [not to take insurance company donations]. I said [I tried] to get a bill passed in the legislature that would have changed the practices. The bill didn't pass, so I decided to make a public pledge, in large part to give information to the Kansas public that this was going on, that this is the way insurance commissioners always raise their money: get a couple hundred thousand dollars from the people whose business you regulate and go on your merry way and then represent the companies and not the consumers. I didn't think it was really likely they were going to give me much money anyway, so in some ways, the pledge was easier to make than if I had been staring at a huge possible contribution. I thought it was the right thing to do, but I also strongly thought that it was a way to demonstrate that I was different, that I was going to be a consumer representative, not a company rep. Every time I said that, I could drive it home, saying, "I'm not taking any money. I think it's wrong to take money." It was a way to begin to let the public understand what had been the longtime practice.<sup>23</sup>

### **"YOUR CHEATIN' HEART" TELEVISION COMMERCIAL**

One of the trickiest issues being a woman candidate is how to go negative without losing a large part of the audience, how to be tough enough but not too tough. A lot of men don't have to deal with this at all, but it's an issue that comes up constantly in polling around women

22. John Marshall, writing in the *Salina Journal*, presciently wrote on October 16, 1993, "Her campaign may ultimately have more impact on government and politics in Kansas" than any other race in 1994. Marshall said of Ron Todd, "[He] rules an agency infamous for its cozy relationship with the industry it is supposed to regulate." John Marshall, "Kathleen Sebelius to Take on Good Ol' Boys," *Salina Journal*, October 16, 1993. For more on the controversies in the insurance commissioner's office and the 1994 race, see Dave Ranney, "Incumbent Todd's Ethics Have Become Main Issue in Kansas' Insurance Race," *Wichita Eagle*, July 18, 1994, and John Dvorak, "Todd Faulted for Taking Insurers' Funds," *Kansas City Star*, July 26, 1994.

23. The 1994 race brought out a combative and confrontational side of Sebelius. This was best exemplified in a September 8, 1994, campaign debate with Todd in Wichita during which Sebelius dramatically opened her purse and pulled out a campaign donation letter sent out by Todd, which she said implied she was corrupt. She said, "The bottom line of this letter is that I'm for sale. I'm here to tell you I'm not for sale." She then lambasted Todd for calling her "Kathy" in the letter: "I'm reminded

candidates. If you are too strident, it turns off voters. People will let men say horrible things, and they are not so forgiving about women. So how to be as negative as possible, [still] accurate, but not cross the line?

Running against the incumbent is always a race about whether that incumbent should be hired or fired. It's really never about the challengers. The challenger has to establish a credibility level: Are you a reasonable alternative? If you can't establish that credibility level, then you're really sunk. Me taking the insurance exam, having some validators from the industry, established a lot. Having had years of experience on the legislative committee dealing with insurance issues and insurance law gave me a level of credibility. People could say, "Oh, you know, she knows enough about this that that's reasonable; she didn't just walk out of her kitchen and thought this was a good idea." Then the whole race is about the incumbent.

It's then a situation of how to demonstrate that the incumbent should be fired. How do you do that without losing enough credibility with the general public that they say, "Oh, my gosh, she's a witch; I'll never vote for her." It's not an easy balance. So we needed one killer negative [TV] ad, and we needed to be able to play it five weeks out and have it be an end-of-the-race ad that just makes the difference.<sup>24</sup> By that point, there were a series of headlines about the scandals in the office. That could be the lead. It wasn't me talking about the incumbent; it was the *Wichita Eagle*, the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, and the *Kansas City Star*. Deno [Seder] came up with the idea that you play in the background "Your Cheatin' Heart." He actually had a son who recorded the song specifically for this ad.<sup>25</sup>

I knew when we had exactly what we needed: a friend said he was in his house at the end of the day, reading

of the country and western song that goes something like, 'You don't have to call me darlin', Darlin', but you don't even call me that.' I've asked the commissioner to call me Kathleen. It doesn't happen. For future reference, it's Kathleen." Dave Ranney, "No Common Ground Here," *Wichita Eagle*, September 9, 1994.

24. Sebelius's concerns about being too negative were not shared by the editors of the *Hutchinson News* newspaper. In its October 23 endorsement of Sebelius, the paper wrote, "You couldn't make a TV commercial nasty enough to show the people what Todd and his ilk are doing to them, year in and year out, in Topeka by not operating in our best interests."

25. Deno Seder is an award-winning documentary film and TV commercial producer. In the ad, a black-and-white photo of Todd is shown along with the negative press headlines, "Your Cheatin' Heart" is sung, and a narrator says, "This is the Ron Todd story. It's a story of fraud, deception, and abuse of public trust. Let's end this shameful chapter of Kansas politics." To view the ad, along with ads from Kathleen Sebelius's 2002 and 2006 gubernatorial campaigns, go to "Kansas

the newspaper; the TV was on, but he was paying no attention. The ad came on. He heard the song. He put the paper down and thought, oh, my God, this race is over. He called me up and said, "That's an amazing ad." And so I was like, OK!

For insurance commissioner, it was a real challenge to think about how to get people to focus on a down-ballot race, get people to pay attention to an office that they didn't know anything about. I think the only way to do that was to make it more interesting. You know, tell a story about that office, about scandals and about cleanup and about what was happening. Our national folks would tell me over and over again, "You have to stay out of the national jet stream. You have to stay on the ground and try to make this very Kansas and very localized. If you become part of the national story, you could get swept out." So this element of advertising was very different than any of the other campaigns that I ran because being governor, you are at the top of the ticket. I was not at the top of the ticket in 1994. The goal was to essentially be a very small island moving along with a very packaged race that only dealt with Ron Todd, only dealt with this office, only dealt with real cleanup.<sup>26</sup>

## INSURANCE COMMISSIONER

The first six months in the office were as terrifying as any experience I've ever had! Not only did I not know exactly what went on in the office; no one else did either. And we had a refrigerator box full of résumés for people who needed jobs. I determined pretty quickly that would not be terribly helpful. I didn't want to make any massive shifts until I really knew more. So I did a number of interviews with all the key division heads prior to going into the office. The interviews were about meeting people, introducing myself, getting their names, and then basically saying, "What do you do, and do you do it very well?" and then listening to them as they talked. So I made some gut-level reactions.

The other thing that happened, which was also pretty terrifying, was the former commissioner did not take

well to the loss. When I got into the office, every single piece of paper related to the commissioner's office was gone. There wasn't a single letter waiting to be answered, there wasn't a file, there wasn't a document of any kind. I initially thought they had been misplaced or moved somewhere only to find out that no one had any idea where they were, or if they did, they weren't telling me. What terrified me was the thought of decisions pending and deadlines that we might miss, court cases that have been filed, or any other number of things.

The second week I was in office, I did date and sign a letter and send it to [Attorney General] Carla [Stovall], and I said, "I'm looking for the—I don't even know what I'm looking for—but I just need to make it very clear to the commissioner, I'm serious about this." There was never any box of files that was brought back in. So that was a rocky way to start, I would say.<sup>27</sup>

One of the funds that was run by the insurance commissioner's office was the Worker's Compensation Fund, and claims were filed on a regular basis. There was always some issue about a couple of attorneys who were paid by the insurance department who basically were the representatives on every case of the fund. It was a very lucrative spot to be if you were picked as one of those two or three attorneys. It became apparent to me as my race went on in the fall how popular it was because I had lots of people standing in line saying, "Pick me, pick me; we've never had a chance at this, and this is great."

As I began to look at the filings, I realized that the amount of money that particularly a lawyer named Chris Miller was charging seemed extraordinary. Several hundreds of thousands of dollars a year at a state-rated billing, which would require extraordinary 24/7 casework and practices. I knew enough about Mr. Miller that he was clearly not in court all the time, that he had plenty of time to do lots of other things. So I began a bit of an audit on this file that looked odd; I mean, it was hundreds of thousands of dollars.

It just didn't look quite right to me. As we did the forensic audit, we realized that chiefly Mr. Miller, but also

Political Ads," Kansas Institute for Politics, Washburn University, <http://www.washburn.edu/reference/cks/politics/ads.html>.

26. Sebelius received the endorsements of the major newspapers in the state, including the *Kansas City Star*, *Wichita Eagle*, *Topeka Capital-Journal*, and *Hutchinson News*. The *Kansas City Star* wrote on October 20, 1994, "Sebelius would be a consumer-oriented commissioner"; "Needless to say, she is not the darling of the insurance industry"; and "She would open wide the doors of the office." The *Hays Daily News* endorsement read, "Sebelius has integrity. It's a quality that Ron Todd lacks" (October 27, 1994).

27. After her election, Sebelius traveled statewide and held meetings with people to hear their views on insurance issues. During her first one hundred days as insurance commissioner, Sebelius reduced workers' compensation rates by 7.5 percent, created an agents and brokers advisory council, and opened a fraud unit. She also "let in the sunshine" by opening the office drapes. "I don't think the windows or blinds had ever been opened," she said. "I literally hauled down the drapes and said, 'It's time.'" Roger Myers, "Putting a New Face on Insurance," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, May 28, 1995.

a couple of the other attorneys, were literally double and triple billing for cases. It was not at all uncommon to have more than twenty-four hours of billing in a day and more than seven days of billing a week. Once I could document that very thoroughly, we did a very public firing as part of the cleanup demonstration, as I had pledged to go into the office and clean things up. And there was a huge outcry. People suggested that this was very partisan; Mr. Miller certainly suggested it was very partisan. A number of his colleagues immediately stood by his side and said, "This is outrageous; he is a well-known, well-liked attorney; this is part of a witch hunt." I knew that there was going to be the likely pushback, which is why we had gone through two different, very independent firms and five years of audits of his files, and we were able to put those in a very transparent way out to the public and say, "You know, maybe the Kansas taxpayers think this is a good idea, but I sure don't." He later lost his license.<sup>28</sup>

#### **BLUE CROSS DECISION AS INSURANCE COMMISSIONER**

WellPoint—it's now Anthem—had made a bid to take over the Kansas Blue Cross Blue Shield Company and have Kansas become part of their portfolio of the national Blue Cross companies. The board of directors of Kansas Blue Cross Blue Shield had overwhelmingly approved the merger. There was a notice sent to shareholders all over the state, and the shareholder vote came back overwhelmingly approving the merger. WellPoint had already taken over eight Blue Cross Blue Shield plans, so nowhere in the country had this been challenged. The last step in the puzzle was the ability of the Kansas insurance commissioner to either approve or deny. Everyone assumed that this was a done deal. I felt in my gut that this was not a great decision for Kansas to not have a Kansas-based board of directors, to not have those relationships with providers.

I'd worked closely with Blue Cross as the insurance commissioner. Sixty percent of the Kansas public had policies with Blue Cross Blue Shield. So what happened to

Blue Cross affected the majority of the state. I was troubled by the information put out by the company suggesting that they could have great efficiencies of scale and that it would be beneficial to Kansas policy holders. I was troubled by the fact that people across the state knew very little about this and seemed to be happily going along.

We put together a very diligent process of fact gathering. We put up a sort of Chinese wall on the office where I appointed an individual to represent consumers and providers and really to have no contact with me so that at the hearing, which I would eventually chair, she would be the voice of individuals who weren't there, knowing that the company would have plenty of representatives. Then I began to look at and digest the information.

The other thing that we did, which nobody really had ever done before, was have a series of hearings across the state as a way to educate the public and ask people to come forward—health care providers, hospital executives, consumer advocates—and give them an opportunity to weigh in before we got into the company-versus-consumer public hearing. We started in Garden City and had a hearing in wintry weather. This was 2001, and I had really no idea how many people would come. I would have thought fifty was a good crowd; there were seven hundred people who showed up, and people had been in line when we got there for two hours in the snow. I thought, OK, we have touched a nerve here. We proceeded from west to east across the state, and at our last hearing prior to the hearing in Topeka, we had over a thousand people who showed up.

What became very clear was that health care providers thought this was a terrible idea. Doctors and hospital leaders were really not at all enthusiastic about losing this relationship. A number of the business owners who began to think about what it might do to their policies didn't like it, and then loads of consumers came forward. They said, "We don't want to be taken over by somebody else. We don't want to be part of some big conglomerate. We don't want this to happen."

We had a trial, a four-day hearing, where all of the big shots from WellPoint came in and sat on folding chairs

28. Sebelius held a press conference on September 15, 1995, to announce that she had banned attorneys Chris Miller and Robert Anderson from handling any more workers' compensation cases, saying their "practices amount to a betrayal of public trust." She lambasted one of Anderson's billing statements in which he had billed thirty-seven hours for one calendar day, saying, "He runs on a clock that's different than anything I've seen." Miller, who had been Ron Todd's campaign manager, said, "Quite frankly, it's political." The Kansas Supreme

Court disagreed. Miller's law license was suspended in 2006 for his overbilling, and in 2010, he was disbarred for continuing to practice law while he was suspended. See Roger Myers, "I Think It's Outrageous: Insurance Commissioner Sebelius Fires Two Attorneys," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, September 16, 1995, and George Diepenbrock, "Kansas Supreme Court Disbars Lawrence Attorney Chris Miller," *Lawrence Journal-World*, August 13, 2010.

in the Ramada Inn. I used to laugh and say, “I’m sure they thought they’d died and gone to hell,” because they couldn’t figure out what in the world they were doing in Topeka, Kansas, for four days trying to defend what had been a slam-dunk business decision across the country. The real issue pivoted on their assertion that there would be efficiencies of scale based on being part of a bigger group and that their administrative cost would go down if Kansas became part of this operation. Because absent that, you would either cut rates on providers, docs, and hospitals—which they clearly didn’t want to happen—or you would cut benefits for individuals, which consumers didn’t want to happen. That’s the third piece of the puzzle; the way insurance companies make money is to cut out the administrative cost. The difficulty that WellPoint had is that the Kansas Blue Cross Blue Shield administrative rate was four points lower than the national company’s administrative rate. So it became one of those difficult math issues of how bringing this company—which actually operated far more efficiently in terms of overhead cost than the national company—how did bringing them into the fold actually improve the look for Kansas? How does that work?

That became an impossible question for them to answer. I said, “OK, you promised your shareholders you will make money on this deal. How do you make money for shareholders without hurting the beneficiaries in Kansas? Show me the math. Show me what that looks like.” I felt they were not able to demonstrate that in any kind of effective way. So I turned down the merger and two days later declared for governor. And then I was sued. We won in the Supreme Court ultimately.<sup>29</sup>

### DECIDING TO RUN FOR GOVERNOR

I didn’t have an epiphany. I’ve always felt that there was an opportunity really to make a big difference at the state level, and there certainly is no office better to do that than the office of governor. When I became insurance commissioner, [Bill Graves] became governor, and we had a great working relationship, a Republican governor



*As Sebelius approached the end of her second term as insurance commissioner, her Democratic Party appeared to have a better than average chance to overtake the Republicans in the gubernatorial race. The moderate-conservative split in the Kansas Republican Party was pronounced by 2002, and Sebelius had proven state-wide appeal. During the campaign that year, she took in the Tall Corn Festival in Rossville, where this image was made of Sebelius carrying a baby and Nancy Strasburg holding a teachers’ report card. In November, Sebelius captured nearly 53 percent of the vote and defeated Republican state treasurer Tim Shallenburger. Courtesy of Kathleen Sebelius.*

and a Democratic insurance commissioner. I knew that as he was leaving office, that may create an opportunity to run, although Democrats had not elected a governor in an open seat in years. So it wasn’t a great history, but having just won an office where they had never elected a Democrat, I figured, well what’s [a few] decades, you know, give or take.<sup>30</sup>

One of the things that my father taught me early on is, first of all, you have to have some reason for running and something that you feel you can contribute but also that you never have the luxury of picking your opponent and that you have to believe it’s the time for you to run and focus on your own race. Then the chips sort of fall

29. Anthem and Blue Cross proposed the sale on May 31, 2001. Sebelius denied Anthem’s takeover bid on February 11, 2002. Anthem sued, and on June 7, 2002, Shawnee County District Judge Terry Bullock overturned Sebelius’s decision. On August 6, 2003, the Kansas Supreme Court reversed Bullock’s decision and affirmed that Sebelius had the power to block the sale and that her decision was adequately supported by evidence, as required by state law. See Michael Hooper, “BCBS to Stand on Its Own,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 7, 2003.

30. It was more than a few decades since a Democrat had won in a truly open seat—it was sixty-six years! In 1936, Democrat Walter A. Huxman defeated Republican Will West, and in the last year of his second two-year term, Republican incumbent governor Alf Landon accepted the Republican nomination for president and unsuccessfully challenged Franklin Roosevelt in November. In 1956, Democrat George Docking beat Republican Warren Shaw in a race with no incumbent, but incumbent Republican governor Fred Hall ran in the primary and lost, so it wasn’t a truly open seat. See Homer Socolofsky, *Kansas Governors* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990).

where they might. So I entered the race at a time where Carla [Stovall] and a number of other Republicans were in the primary, and Carla ended up within four months dropping out. So it changed dramatically. Carla was in and then out.<sup>31</sup>

### FIRST GOVERNOR'S RACE

There were moderates in the [GOP] primary race; they just were not successful. I think having an opportunity in Kansas to have the most conservative candidate win the Republican primary always opened up a middle ground for Democrats, and that's how Democrats, who are very underrepresented in voter registration, can actually be successful. If you get all the Democrats and then a big slice of independents and some more moderate Republicans, you can then put together a winning coalition.<sup>32</sup>

Tim Shallenburger and I were elected to the legislature together in 1986. We actually sat next to each other. Tim I knew well. He came out of a very Democratic district in southeast Kansas, and he had a very interesting legislative record where he voted pro-union 90 percent of the time; he voted for school finance most of the time. I mean, his legislative record and mine don't look very different. Tim had embraced a lot of conservative ideas as he became the state treasurer and ran statewide.

Bill Graves was not a fan of Tim Shallenburger, and in his years in the legislature, one of the things that Shallenburger had done was sort of torture Bill Graves. He started a lot of that animosity about the "country-club Republicans," and he definitely saw Graves in that camp. By the time the governor's race came around in 2002, there was a real split in the Kansas Republican Party.

One of the things that happened shortly after the primary was not only did Tim Shallenburger win but he went in three different times to try and get the sitting

governor, Graves, to endorse him. Each meeting ended without an endorsement. That sent a very powerful message. Governor Graves called me close to Labor Day and said, "You know, Kathleen, I have to do this. I'm going to endorse him." I said, "I understand, but every day has been an amazing gift." By his silence, he sent a very strong message across his voter base—who were people I really needed—that this was not his favorite choice. So that was quite helpful.<sup>33</sup>

The message that was central was "I'll work hard on your behalf; I'm not tied to special interests or a particular ideology." And I could back up those promises by a record. I had been, for eight years, their insurance commissioner and had really turned around that office and not only delivered a lot of services and consumer protection but cut the budget by 20 percent. It was a series of issues that I was interested in—education for all kids, health care reform, cutting back on waste and inefficiencies in state government. I was able to back that up by saying, "I've been there and done that; look at the record. You know this is not just an idle campaign promise; look what I've done." I think that tends to be pretty effective.

I think the final result was very close to where we thought it was going to be. There was a pivotal point in the election campaign when Tim Shallenburger said at one point in a public forum that he would be willing to cut schools as part of a cost-saving measure. That's the sentence that we needed to come out of his mouth because I knew that for the constituents I needed to move, it was all about schools. For moderate Republican women, for a lot of the independents, the school issue was paramount. The school finance issue was absolutely the number-one, -two and -three issue in Johnson County, and I needed him to say that. And God bless him, he certainly did. And at that point, my only message from then until November was "Whatever else happens, we will never cut schools."<sup>34</sup>

31. Carla Stovall (Steckline), a Republican from Marion, Kansas, served as attorney general from 1995 to 2003. She entered the race for governor in November 2001 as the preferred choice of the moderate wing of the Kansas GOP. She dropped out of the race on April 15, 2002, saying, "I could not muster the passion to run statewide for a third time nor could I envision pleasure in service as governor." Scott Rothschild, "Stovall Drops Out," *Lawrence Journal-World*, April 15, 2002. While rumors circulated of Stovall's impending departure, Governor Bill Graves met with moderate Republican leaders to try to recruit and unite behind one moderate Republican primary candidate, an effort that ultimately failed. See Beatty and Dean, ed., "Doing What Needed to Get Done, When It Needed to Get Done," 172–97.

32. In the 2002 Republican gubernatorial primary, the conservative Tim Shallenburger tallied 122,141 votes. The three moderate candidates were former Wichita mayor Bob Knight (77,642 votes), Senate president Dave Kerr (86,995), and educator Dan Bloom (7,726).

33. The day after his primary victory, Shallenburger said that a united Republican Party was critical to his beating Sebelius: "If the party is divided in the general election, then we'll never be successful." Chris Grenz, "Shallenburger Followed Game Plan to Get GOP Win," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, August 11, 2002. Graves's tepid "non-endorsement" of Shallenburger signaled to Republican moderates that it was okay to vote for Sebelius. Opined the *Salina Journal*, "His non-endorsement echoes among other moderate Republicans. Many won't say it publicly, but they agree that Democrat Kathleen Sebelius is a better candidate in this race. They fear the harm Shallenburger and his faction will do to state government" (August 29, 2002). See also Beatty and Dean, ed., "Doing What Needed to Get Done, When It Needed to Get Done," 194–95.

34. The day after the GOP primary, Shallenburger said that schools could handle a cut of up to 3 percent if the alternative was raising taxes. For the rest of the campaign, he said he would never cut school funding,



*Governor Sebelius' first term in office was marked by the key issues of balancing the budget and funding education. In 2005, following the state Supreme Court's order that the legislature increase school funding or risk shutting schoolhouse doors, the governor helped broker a compromise during a special legislative session. "I was raised in a family valuing education," said Sebelius, who posed for this photograph at Topeka's Lowman Hill Elementary School. "I found it really welcoming that in Kansas, voters, regardless of their party affiliation, felt public school funding was fundamental." Courtesy of Kathleen Sebelius.*

## SCHOOL FUNDING ISSUE

I do believe that people live in Kansas for the quality of life, and that includes the excellence of public schools. I'm the daughter of two teachers and a proponent of education as a doorway to opportunity. I was raised in a family valuing education. I found it really welcoming that in Kansas, voters, regardless of their party affiliation, felt public school funding was fundamental. I knew that it was one of the key issues that allowed me to be elected governor.

There was a school finance court case that had been filed in the late 1990s that had been just lying dormant during the Graves years. It began to have rumbles again as soon as I was elected. The [lawyers] said, "We really didn't feel anything would be done in a dramatic fashion until we had a governor who is willing to act, and your election

gave us the opportunity." So the court [case] became active once again, and the decision was pending. What I really hoped to do was get out ahead of a court decision—try and convince the legislature that we needed to look at whether we were adequately and equitably funding education in Kansas, which was in our constitution and our responsibility, and then have a school finance plan that could be passed and hopefully get rid of the court case. That isn't quite what happened.

In 2003, the economy was not looking good. We were losing jobs, and we didn't have any additional tax revenue. In fact, we were looking at kind of shrinking the budget around the commitment that we would not cut schools. So we had a big chunk of money that was off the table, and we needed to look at other ways to get budget money. In 2003, it was mostly conversations and budget cuts that didn't touch schools. We left school funding flat, knowing we were digging an even deeper hole but feeling that was the way to go.

In 2004, we tried to put forward some proposals around additional funding. We put into the legislature a big economic development proposal with the bioscience authority, a new tax incentive. We were trying to really

but Sebelius had the rope that she needed to hang him. During their last of five debates, when Shallenburger said Sebelius was misrepresenting his position on the issue, Sebelius said, "We can play the tape for you." Steve Painter, "Nominees Still Avoid Specifics on Budget," *Wichita Eagle*, October 23, 2002.



*In November 2005, Governor Sebelius visited Kansas National Guard troops in Iraq and Kuwait where she enjoyed two Thanksgiving dinners—one with the 891st Engineering Unit, which was based in Kansas. She traveled to the Middle East as part of a small delegation of governors sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense. The others were Haley Barbour of Mississippi, Jennifer Granholm of Michigan, and Sonny Perdue of Georgia. Courtesy of Kathleen Sebelius.*

stimulate the economy on one hand but knew that school funding was important, and it would take some new revenue. That was not successful and didn't get through the legislature in 2004. Then we had a decision by a Topeka judge, Terry Bullock, in 2005 where he found the funding formula unconstitutional and urged that the legislature take it very seriously and look at funding and ask for an expedited review at the Supreme Court level. So he kicked the case up pretty quickly. But he also threatened that if the legislature didn't act fairly promptly, schools might not open in the fall of 2005. That was a pretty significant wake-up call for a lot of legislators.

The [legislature] passed a bill that I felt was not adequate to fund the schools. I also felt that this should be a conversation between the Supreme Court and

the legislature, not the Supreme Court and me. So I decided not to veto the bill, not to stop it and cut off the conversation. I just sent it to the court and said, "What do you think about this?" They immediately responded that it was not going to meet court muster and the case would still be pending. That provided additional pressure for the special session. I decided that we needed a special session in 2005 to actually resolve this issue once and for all. I brought legislators back in the summertime before school was due to open. We had a coalition in the Senate that passed a bill, and we needed a bill that could get through the House, and it was successful.

We did a two-step school finance bill. Part of the funding was [for] 2005 to get us through so schools could open in September, and we threw in a commitment that

in the 2006 session, we would deal with the multiyear funding. So we did a short-term funding fix in the special session in 2005 that was successful and then a longer-term funding fix.<sup>35</sup>

It was difficult, and I was really not only proud that we were able to do it but really proud of the individual legislators who stood up and became their own heroes. Bill Kassebaum, Nancy's son, was part of the coalition leadership on the House side. He ended up suffering for that in future elections.<sup>36</sup> There were others who defied their party leadership and said, "No, we really need to do this, and it's the right thing to do." They put their careers on the line, saying, "This is about the kids and the future of the state."

I was very up close and personal [with legislators]. There were a lot of discussions. The House became the focus, and we had to put together a coalition of House members. I spent most of the time in the special session with House Republicans in my office, potential House Republican votes, much to the dismay of Democrats. They were furious and said, "We need to be in on those meetings. You never meet with us. You never call us. You don't love us anymore!" I said, "Look, I don't need to spend time with you. I need to spend time with these folks." It was really a person-by-person conversation, vote by vote. There were pockets of rural legislators who needed something, Johnson County legislators who needed other things, and how to make a bill work for all the constituencies in very diverse parts of Kansas was complicated. I did anything it took. I called them on the phone. I would have mowed their lawns, you know, driven them around. We had a terrific legislative team who lived and breathed that vote. We paid very little attention to the Democrats and lots of attention to the Republicans.

I did not go to the Republican caucus, which they invited me to do a couple of times. There were active

35. The initial lawsuit against the state for more school funding was filed in 1999, with a district court ruling for the plaintiffs in 2003. Sebelius subsequently proposed a three-year, \$300 million annual increase in education funding, with tax increases and, later, expanded gambling to finance it. The Kansas legislature failed to act, and in 2005, the Kansas Supreme Court intervened. The special session in 2005 increased spending on schools by \$290 million. See John Hanna, "Some Potential Bumps Shouldn't Derail Sebelius in '06," *Kansas City Star*, December 31, 2005.

36. William A. "Bill" Kassebaum, a Republican, lawyer, and rancher from Burdick, Morris County, served a single term in the Kansas House, 2003–2005. See "Kansas Legislators Past and Present," <https://kslib.info/400/Legislators>.



*Governor Sebelius, seen here announcing her candidacy for a second term on the statehouse steps, won reelection in November 2006 by a vote of 57.9 to 40.4 percent against her Republican challenger, state senator Jim Barnett, a physician from Emporia. Three months after the start of her second term, the popular Democratic governor enjoyed an approval rating of 70 percent. Courtesy of Kathleen Sebelius.*

wars going on within the Republican caucus. People were being threatened. People were being told they were being disloyal. The chamber [Chamber of Commerce] folks were going to come after them. We had an attorney general, Phill Kline, who was giving advice to the House Republicans that they didn't really have to follow anything that the court said, that they should just pay no attention to it. So there was no shortage of advice for traditional Republicans. And I did try to stay a bit out of that fray. But I knew the potential twenty people who could come up with the ten, eleven, twelve votes we needed. That's why I spent my time with them.

The resolution of the school finance issue felt terrific when we finally brought together this coalition, when we finally got the bill passed so I could sign it into law, and the court said, "This is good." That felt great because that had been something that had been part of my entire first term. And there were times I thought, we're never going to get this done.

#### **RUNNING FOR A SECOND TERM IN 2006**

It was not a difficult decision to run for reelection. There were a lot of things we still needed to get done. Being governor, I still believe, is the best political job in America because you actually can do things, and you can watch what you do happen in real time. It's being the CEO of the state. So I had no interest in giving up my service early and not running again. I was hopeful that I



Governor Sebelius was sworn in for a second term on January 8, 2007, with husband Gary Sebelius, whose father served as a Republican member of Congress from western Kansas from 1969 to 1981. The governor's sons, John and Ned Sebelius, looked on as she had done when her father took the oath as Ohio governor thirty-six years before. Courtesy of The Topeka Capital-Journal.

could win, particularly since we were able to accomplish the school finance battle and I had delivered on what I had said I would do. That put me in pretty good shape to be reelected. Running as a Democrat in Kansas, it's always part of the equation that you don't take anything for granted. I think the most challenging possibility in 2006 was that Jerry Moran would run against me. There were lots of conversations and lots of rumors that he was in, he was out.<sup>37</sup> Once that decision was finally made, and he made it very clear that he was not going to run for governor, I think it settled into a more positive operation for our team.<sup>38</sup>

### A SURPRISE LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

It was clear [Lieutenant Governor] John Moore wanted to really retire. So I began to look around for

37. Then First District U.S. Congressman Jerry Moran had also flirted with the idea of running for governor in 2002. Moran announced on August 2, 2005, that he wouldn't run, saying, "This is a sacrifice our family has decided that we cannot manage at this time." "Moran Won't Oppose Sebelius," *Lawrence Journal-World*, August 3, 2005. Moran served as congressman for seven terms, from 1997 to 2011. He is currently serving his second term in the U.S. Senate after winning an open-seat election in 2010 and winning reelection in 2016.

38. State Senator Jim Barnett won the GOP gubernatorial primary with 36 percent of the vote in a seven-person field, besting his two main competitors, former Kansas House Speaker Robin Jennison (22 percent) and author Ken Canfield (26.4 percent). Barnett had a near-impossible task though, as polls throughout 2006 showed Sebelius with consistent double-digit leads, and she had \$4 million more in campaign money than he did, outraising him \$5.2 million to \$1.2 million. See John

who might be an interesting choice. I wanted something a little bit different, you know, not the typical let's have a Democratic legislator who would like to do this. I was open to all kinds of ideas. There was a brief conversation with Bill Snyder, who I liked a lot and had convinced to run a mentoring program statewide.<sup>39</sup> He had become a close friend, and he's just a wonderful human being. Bill did not have a very enthusiastic view of running for office himself. In the conversation, it was never to the point that I asked him to make this leap. I really explored if he had any appetite for it, and he pretty much indicated that he did not. But we did have that preliminary conversation because I thought there's almost no more beloved person in Kansas than Bill Snyder.

I was actually recruiting a candidate to run against Phill Kline, the attorney general, who I felt was not very good. I still find it very interesting that Kansans elected me and elected Phill Kline the same year to statewide office. Carla Stovall and I would have been logical; yes, you could vote for both. But I'm not quite sure how the same people voted for Phill and me. I was looking for somebody who could run for attorney general and kind of clean up the office, restore its professional look.

I had done a bunch of work with Paul Morrison. When he was the Johnson County DA and I was in the insurance office, we had a number of really bad actors who were scamming people with insurance policies, and Paul had been incredibly helpful in putting some bad guys away. I thought, you know, if you had to design a candidate for AG, it should be Paul Morrison. He had this great background, but he was a Republican. So I asked him to come and meet with me. We did a kind of secret meeting in the basement of a hotel. He came into the room, and with him was Mark Parkinson, who I knew because Mark had been a state senator when I'd been in the House. So we went through this meeting, and I was pitching Paul. I said, "You need to become a Democrat if you're going to do this. But I can help raise money. I think I am in good shape to win; that means we can help carry a down-ballot race. We can do this together. Would you think about

Hanna, "Barnett Wins GOP Nod to Become Underdog against Sebelius," *Manhattan Mercury*, August 2, 2006, and "Sebelius Spending on Broadcast Ads Almost Nine Times Barnett's," *Kansas City Star*, October 31, 2006.

39. Bill Snyder served as the head football coach at Kansas State University from 1989 to 2005 and returned in 2009, compiling an overall record of 210-110-1. Snyder said in a 2009 interview that one of the reasons he didn't run was that if Sebelius left office, he would become governor. "Sebelius Considered Snyder as Lt. Gov.," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, June 12, 2009.

this?" And he seemed to be intrigued.<sup>40</sup> Then I turned to Mark and said, "What are you doing here?" You know, just out of curiosity. "Why are you in this room?" He explained to me that he was one of Paul's best friends: "I'm going to do anything I can to help him. If he's in, I'm in." He said, "Stacy and I have been looking at the possibility of changing parties for a while. The Republican Party is moving too far right, and that isn't us anymore. So, actually, we would change our parties right away." I said, "Don't change your party yet. Just stay where you are because we need some Republicans right now."

So we left the meeting, and I said to [Kansas Democratic Party Chairman] Larry Gates, "What about Mark?" Mark had also been the chairman of the Kansas Republican Party as well as a successful state senator. And Johnson County was clearly a fertile territory for votes. I had known him, I had worked with him, I liked him. I felt, whoa, now that's an interesting person. So we ended up with Paul Morrison saying he would indeed make a race for AG. And Mark I went back to and said, "Would you ever think about being lieutenant governor?" He said, "You know, I might just do that." So we ended up with a twofer out of that meeting in Kansas City. That was a shock to a lot of people. That really sent a very strong signal.<sup>41</sup>

## ENERGY AND THE HOLCOMB COAL-FIRED POWER PLANT

I would say that the energy issue for Kansas started early in my administration. There was an initial debate going on in the state in 2003 and 2004 about the possible expansion of wind farms in Kansas. What quickly began to happen was a number of the local residents of the Flint Hills area, particularly people who had farms and ranches as second homes and who bought land in that area because of the pristine beauty, were very opposed to wind farms marring the landscape.

40. Morrison was so intrigued that he switched parties and ran for attorney general as a Democrat, beating Kline 57 percent to 41 percent. Kline had won the attorney general job in 2002 and had generated controversy with his antiabortion activities in office. Neither Kline nor Morrison fared well politically after the contentious 2006 election. Kline lost his 2008 election for Johnson County district attorney and in 2013 also lost his law license, which the Kansas Supreme Court indefinitely suspended for not keeping medical records private during his abortion investigations as attorney general. Morrison—who had been the Johnson County district attorney from 1990 to 2007—resigned as Kansas attorney general on January 31, 2008, after revelations of an extramarital affair.

41. Mark Parkinson, as a Republican, had served in the Kansas House from 1991 to 1993 and the Kansas Senate from 1993 to 1997. He was chair of the Kansas Republican Party from 1999 to 2003. On May

On the other hand, there was community involvement where they really felt like this is a potential economic boom. I used to always say, "Whether the legislature is in town or not, we're the third-windiest state in the country." This was a natural resource that was beginning to appear as an alternative to carbon nationally. Why not in Kansas? Why shouldn't we step up and take advantage of it? So we started in 2004. I worked with Nancy Kassebaum to secure the land that had been a national park. We put together the Kansas Park Trust and gave that land to the Nature Conservancy to make sure that that would never be tampered with. I tried to get a bill through the legislature, which would actually have had a resource portfolio that would have included alternative energy sources. The legislature was really not interested. But the power companies were open to conversation, and they made it clear that they were potentially interested in investing, particularly in wind power. Solar didn't seem to have as much appetite here, but wind power was something that KCP&L [Kansas City Power and Light Company] and Westar [Energy] said they would definitely include in their portfolio.

We began to have conversations about trying to have a boundary area around the most pristine part of the Flint Hills, a voluntary area, drew it on a map and had town meetings. We were saying to the energy companies, "If you buy wind power, would you agree not to purchase that power within the heart of the Flint Hills but look to the outward areas?"

Then I had lots of meetings with local leaders saying economic development can be very real. The last thing you want is for us to be tied up in court for years with landowners who try to block any kind of development. If we all could agree that this is important, we could do wind farms in Kansas but do it outside this [boundary] area. So we actually had that pretty well in place at the end of my first term.

Sunflower [Electric Power Corporation] came in 2007 with a major proposal to build three new coal-fired plants in the state. I had spent time looking at wind energy and looking at what was happening nationally. The debate was already under way about carbon and carbon footprints to know that this could be a real battle, and a couple of

31, 2006, he switched parties to run with Sebelius. See David Klepper, "Sebelius-Parkinson Ticket Talk of Two Parties," *Kansas City Star*, June 1, 2006, and Fred Mann, "A Party Switch Took Parkinson Back to His Roots," *Wichita Eagle*, November 2, 2006. Parkinson later served as the forty-fifth governor of Kansas from April 28, 2009, to January 10, 2011.

things became clear. First, Kansas didn't need the extra power. We had plenty of power. These plants were not being built to provide Kansans with electric power that was needed. The proposal was to ship the power to Colorado. We would get the carbon; Colorado would get the electricity generated. That did not seem to be a great trade-off.

I also learned along the way that we had the tenth-highest carbon footprint per capita in the country. So we were already in a state where we were heavily contributing to greenhouse gases. We were polluting. The Kansas City area particularly often came under EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] watch as a cityscape that had too much carbon in the air. I knew how much of that carbon footprint was power plants, and particularly coal-fired power plants. So I really felt this was bad. It went directly against what seemed to be a logical place for Kansas to be in terms of power generation. Let's generate wind power. Let's build wind turbines here. Let's figure out a way that we could be out ahead of this curve. Why in the world would we open new coal-fired plants?

So Secretary [of Health and Environment] Rod Bremby began a process to look at what these three power plants would do and what a huge influx of new carbon would mean to the health of Kansans. He decided that it would be very harmful and contribute to the deterioration of health of not only this generation but our future generations. He became the first secretary in the country to actually turn down a coal permit using health as a basis for the decision.

And then all hell breaks loose! Lots of jobs were promised as part of the construction of the plant and economic development in a part of the state that no question needed economic development. So the legislature determined that they would do everything possible to override the decision. That battle continued in the '07 and into the '08 session, where a series of bills were passed stripping the secretary of the authority to make decisions. I vetoed [those bills]. I think the most outrageous bill was one that would have barred the secretary of health and environment [from] considering health when looking at a permit; that I vetoed. Another one that I did not sign: stripping me of my executive authority from having a determination about vetoing future bills. We were able to sustain the vetoes along the way.

It's ironic that what we did here in Kansas in 2007, finally the EPA did in their rules issued in 2013. So we were a little bit ahead of the curve. But it was clearly coming where people were reevaluating how much carbon we should have in this country, what coal-fired plants should [be able to emit carbon]. The terminology of "clean coal"

was interesting, but it didn't really exist, and it became clear that there was no filtering mechanism for a new coal plant that would keep that carbon out of the atmosphere.

## FRUSTRATION OVER GUN LEGISLATION

I feel so strongly that more guns are not the answer to anything and felt very proud of the fact that Kansas did not have a conceal and carry law and that we were more restrained, even though we had this great background with hunters. So when the legislature finally mobilized a supermajority to override my veto, I felt pretty deflated. I thought it was a real loss in terms of where the state was going to go and potentially a loss of lives with more violence, more people having access to guns, more opportunities in a domestic violence situation to have really bad things occur. So that felt pretty awful, and there was nothing I could do about it. I'd given it my best shot. I used my veto, and then it just happened anyway. I felt pretty helpless.<sup>42</sup>

## 2008 PRESIDENTIAL RACE AND BARACK OBAMA

I met Barack Obama when he was running for the U.S. Senate in 2004. I think his life journey is not only a wonderful story to tell but gives him this incredibly interesting balance of attributes where he really set some high goals, one would say almost unrealistically high goals for a mixed-race kid raised in Hawaii and Indonesia who along the way said, "I could be the president of the United States."

We quickly established a Kansas connection. He told me about his mother and his grandmother being Kansans and about his grandfather. We had sort of a running joke when I would see him: I would tell him that I needed a U.S. senator because I didn't feel like either of the Kansas senators necessarily spoke for me, and he said, "Well, I don't like our governor much, so you can be my governor and I'll be your senator." We sort of had that pact.

When he started thinking about running, we had a couple of conversations about it. I had already determined within my own mind that if he was going to run, I would be with him. I thought he was a unique candidate for

42. Sebelius vetoed, and the legislature overrode, a bill in 2006 allowing Kansans who meet certain state requirements to obtain permits to carry a concealed gun. In 2007, her veto again was overridden by the legislature on a gun law that prevented local governments from imposing restrictions on Kansans carrying concealed guns. See Carl Manning, "Sebelius' Concealed Carry Veto Overridden," *Lawrence Journal-World*, April 27, 2007.

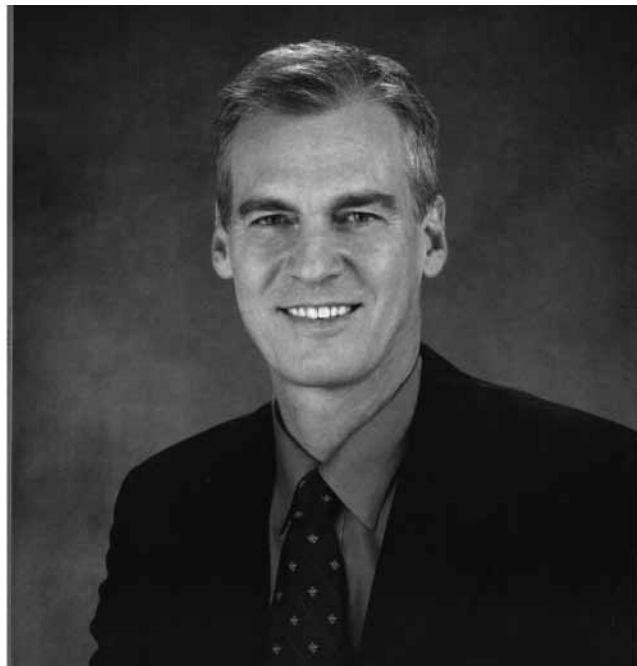
what I saw might be a very unique time. I remember a conversation I had with then Senator Obama, and he said, "So what do I do? Do I run? Do I not run?" And I said, "I think you run." He said, "Just like that?" I said, "Yeah, pretty much just like that, because you're in one of two positions. Either this is a very different year and you can put together a coalition unlike anything that we have seen and you can run as an outsider and be successful. Or you get in line, and I think that line is pretty long. It's either your time or it's not." And he said to me at that point—and that was somewhere in 2006—"If I go, are you with me?" I said, "Yeah, I'll be with you." So we sort of knew that. But he got very impatient with me about endorsing. "It's time. You're going to miss this!" I kept saying, "I'm not going to miss a thing. I promise you, I will be there."<sup>43</sup>

### VICE PRESIDENT CONSIDERATION IN 2008

I did go through the vetting process for vice president in 2008. It is something that no one wants to live through. I got a call in the winter from Senator Obama saying, "Would you be willing to be vetted?" I [said], "I don't really think I'm what you need, but yes, if you want me to, I will do this." Whereupon he said, "Well, there's someone downstairs [to meet with you]." I was at a meeting in Virginia, and I'm on a cell phone. I thought, "OK, this is a little weird."

It was the most intense oversight and scrutiny process that I've seen in my life. It involved all of my family, my kids, my husband, and my friends. Every sort of financial file, tax information, all of Gary's clients, websites that my kids had put up, any kind of issue that they'd ever been involved with. They did tons of independent interviews with everybody from college roommates to people we had dated. If there's anything there, if there's anything anybody is going to say down the road, they want to be out ahead of it, and they want to know what it is. Even if you say, "There's nothing, and I can't think of anything," they want to look at all the people who knew you twenty-five years ago or may have shared an apartment with you or dated you or whatever and say, "Is there anything you

43. Sebelius's endorsement was delayed, as she had to give a nationwide, prime-time TV speech on January 28, 2008, to deliver the Democratic response to President Bush's State of the Union. She said, "It's a pretty nerve-racking speech. I guess I didn't faint or throw up or do a variety of things, but I'm not sure how you have a home run in that kind of situation. But I got through it, and I went out the next day and made an endorsement." Obama flew to El Dorado, Kansas, on January 29 to appear with Sebelius at her endorsement announcement.



*When it became clear that her first lieutenant governor, John Moore, was not interested in a second term, Governor Sebelius had to find a new running mate. She finally settled on Mark Parkinson, an Olathe attorney who as a Republican served in the Kansas House (1991-1993) and the Kansas Senate (1993-1997). He was state chair of the Republican Party from 1999-2003. On May 31, 2006, Parkinson switched parties to run with Sebelius and became the state's forty-fifth governor when Sebelius resigned to join President Barack Obama's cabinet in April 2009.*

know about; what is this person like?" It is a very deep dive in a very personal way. It's excruciating.

They didn't find some terrible thing. I think President [Obama] was very wise. He said to me, you know, at the end of the process, "This is not about your strengths and weaknesses, it's about my strengths and weaknesses." I have some real gaps. I have no foreign policy experience, and neither did he. So, I mean, there were real gaps in résumés that would not have made us at all a good fit. I knew him well enough that I could talk to him about that. But I felt very good about where he ended up [with Joe Biden]. I thought it was a very smart, good choice. They became the best friends and partners, and it was a great match for their skill sets.

### OBAMA'S CABINET AND AT FIRST A NO

It was a difficult choice to say I was not going to leave early and be part of the Obama administration. It was right around Thanksgiving [that I decided]. I was always ambivalent. I loved being governor, and so the notion that



*Sebelius resigned the governorship on April 28, 2009, after being confirmed as secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and “retired” from elective politics with a perfect record--she never lost an election to public office in her adopted state of Kansas.*

I would leave the governor’s office to do anything was always difficult for me to get my hands around.

I knew that the two issue areas that I was pretty excited about were energy and health care. [President Obama] made it clear along the way that he really felt the energy office should be headed by somebody with a nuclear science background, and so that clearly was one that I was not going to qualify for. Then it was clear pretty soon after the election victory that [South Dakota senator Tom Daschle] would be asked to be the HHS secretary. So although we’d had a number of conversations about cabinet positions, I wasn’t really wildly excited about anything else. He basically said, “You can do anything, you know? I really want you to come. I want you to be part of this team.” I finally decided not to. At that point, the Kansas economy was beginning to really take a downward turn, and we were just at the very beginning of what turned out to be one of the worst recessions since the Great Depression. I said to him, “I think it’s better to just take my name out of the mix. I’ll finish my term, I can catch up later, you’re going to be president for two terms, and you’re going to need some people on the ground to

help carry out and implement policies. I should stay here to focus on Kansas, and then we’ll see what the scene looks like in 2011 and 2012.” That did not seem like at all an implausible scenario.

#### FROM KANSAS TO THE CABINET

[On February 3, 2009,] I got two calls, fairly quickly. The first call came from Senator Dole, who was in the law firm with Tom Daschle.<sup>44</sup> When Daschle withdrew his name from consideration for HHS secretary, Dole called me and said, “Kathleen, did you hear the news?<sup>45</sup> I won’t do anything unless you tell me, but I’d like to help you be the next choice. But I need to know, if you’re offered this job, would you take this job?” And I said, “I don’t think I will be offered the job.” He said, “That’s not what I’m asking you. I am asking you, would you take a look at this job?” And I said, “Yes, I probably would.” This is one that I just think would be hard with this president to turn down this opportunity. Then, in a relatively short period of time, probably the next day or two, I got a call from the president, who said, “I’m not offering you the job. But if I offered you this job, would you take this job?” And I said, “Yes, I think I would.” And so it started. Luckily I’d already been vetted like a thousand times [laughs].

First of all, everything that happened from the time that Senator Daschle stepped down until the time the president nominated me was all totally secret. Nobody can be told, nobody can be talked to. You can’t confide in anybody. It’s the same with the vice presidency vetting but has an additional painful layer where you’re not to talk to anyone beyond the people who are also being tortured along with you.

I was doing a couple things simultaneously. I was still very much focused on trying to be a governor, and at that point, we were really in the midst of this economic downturn, and we were looking at revenue shortfalls and the unemployment numbers were going up, so I was doing that. And I was flying to Washington on a fairly regular basis to begin to get briefings in case this were to go forward, and all of that was under secrecy.

I was nominated [before] Saint Patrick’s Day, and that sort of stands out in my mind as a Kathleen Mary

44. Bob Dole is one of the most renowned politicians in Kansas history. He served in the U.S. Senate from 1969 to 1996 and was the Republican nominee for president in 1996, losing to Bill Clinton.

45. Daschle had served in the U.S. Senate from 1987 to 2005. Obama nominated him for HHS secretary on December 11, 2008, but revelations regarding failure to pay certain past income taxes irrevocably damaged his nomination, and he withdrew his name from consideration.

Gilligan.<sup>46</sup> From that point until April, when the hearings were held, I was doing at least two or three things. You're getting briefed on this major department, knowing that the HHS secretary goes through two Senate committees, not one Senate committee, as most cabinet secretaries do. They could ask anything under the sun, and it's a department with eleven operating agencies. I had a crash course on HHS and was being prepared for any number of questions and issues as well as being governor. So there wasn't a lot of time for reflecting much about anything.

[Senator] Teddy Kennedy was still there at that point; he had not stepped down as chairman, and the last hearing he chaired was my confirmation hearing. Bob Dole came with me to both hearings, sat with me, introduced me to the committees since he had been in the Senate, giving it kind of a bipartisan look. In his introduction, he said, "I don't agree with her on everything, but she's been a great governor; she'll be a great secretary."

I often think about how it was very symbolic, the way I started it all. We finally had a plan, and we knew that the Senate was going to take up my nomination on the 28th of April, at least start the debate. We had talked to the chief of the Kansas Supreme Court about coming over to the capital. I would resign, he would get Mark [Parkinson] sworn in, and then I would leave with my husband and go to Washington and start my new job, and it all seemed very lovely. But that morning, I got a call from Washington saying, "The president is sending a plane. It will be at Forbes Airport at noon. We need you on that plane." I said, "Well, you know, I haven't been confirmed; I have a job here, not sure about that, that isn't really the plan." Whereupon the person at the White House said, "There's a plane in the air. You're to be on that plane." And so, literally, I left a note on my desk in the governor's office that said, "In the event I am confirmed, I hereby resign," and signed it and had it notarized because I was hopeful I would be confirmed but not certain. I didn't want to give up one job before I actually had another one. I didn't know where I was going. I got up in the plane, and then I have no idea where we're going; nobody told me. I mean luckily, I wasn't in my pajamas. I went home,

46. President Obama announced his nomination of Sebelius on March 2, 2009, saying, "Kathleen has remarkable intellect, unquestioned integrity, and the kind of pragmatic wisdom you'll tend to find in a Kansan. I know she will bring some much-needed grace and good humor to Washington." See "Sebelius at HHS," White House, President Barack Obama, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/03/02/sebelius-hhs>; Sebelius's father (Gilligan) and mother (Mary) were descendants of Irish immigrants, so that's what Sebelius is referring to in terms of St. Patrick's Day.

stuffed some clothes in a bag, and got on the plane. I went to the White House, got sworn in by the president the evening of April the 28th, went directly to the situation room, and never really looked back. I ended up taking over an agency at 5 o'clock at night and then spending four hours in the situation room.<sup>47</sup>

One of my best friends was [in Washington]. I called her at 11 o'clock that night and said, "Are you up? Will I be disturbing you?" And she said, "No, where are you?" I said, "Well, I'm in Washington, and I just became a cabinet secretary, and I would sort of like to go 'Woo-hoo!' with somebody, so could I come over?" And that's how I began.

It was enormously overwhelming. It didn't really hit me until the following week. I was the last member of the cabinet to be appointed, and [President Obama] called a cabinet meeting. I kind of came into this room very overwhelmed but knowing that there were some allies and friends who would help me. And the president said, "You know, we're in the midst of this flu pandemic. We haven't seen a pandemic in seventy years, and I'm going to turn over the cabinet meeting to my two lieutenants who are going to take care of this, Janet Napolitano and Kathleen Sebelius," and there we went.

## BIPARTISANSHIP

What I knew about Kansans is if you could get a message out and if voters really believed you were on their side, they were willing to cross party lines and vote for the person and not necessarily the party. So that was my job, to make sure that I could get up above the dialogue about who is a Republican and who is a Democrat and talk to them about the issues.

I came to Kansas the year Bob Bennett started serving as governor. I was very confused about who the Democrats were and who the Republicans were because Bob Bennett, to me, sounded like a Democrat. He talked about mental health reform. He talked about more money in schools. He talked about criminal justice.<sup>48</sup> So I knew

47. Sebelius was confirmed by the U.S. Senate by a vote of 65 to 31 and immediately went to work to address a swine flu outbreak in the United States and several other countries. At her swearing-in ceremony on May 1, 2009, Obama said, "What I didn't expect was that a serious H1N1 flu outbreak would be her first assignment. But it is. And that's why on Tuesday, only hours after being confirmed by the Senate, she was sworn in by my side in the Oval Office and then went straight to the Situation Room to get working with this emergency." "Transcript of Sebelius' HHS ceremony," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, May 1, 2009.

48. Robert "Bob" Bennett (1927–2000) served as the thirty-ninth governor of Kansas from 1975 to 1979, losing his bid for reelection in

that there was some real mix and match here from the outset about party labels, and whether it was Bob Bennett or Mike Hayden or Bill Graves, my three experiences with Republican governors had been very moderate.

There was always a debate about how big government got and what was better done by the private sector. But there was never a debate about government doing positive things, about building roads or funding schools, which was sort of the hallmark of Kansas, of supporting a business platform that allowed us to move forward. And that was both Democratic and Republican.

I will always consider myself a probusiness Democrat because I really did strongly believe that you needed a strong economy, which meant supporting workers with good salaries and negotiating power. I mean, I was a union supporter. But it wasn't an either/or. I was also a business supporter. I knew that we needed to grow small businesses, [and] we needed to grow big businesses.

I think it's unfortunate to have partisan dialogue that tries to drive people away from some kind of common discussion. What has been successful in this state and hopefully will continue to be successful is finding out ways we bring people together, about finding a solution to the challenges that we face.

To have issues that are so critical to Kansans like their kid's school or what happens with health care break down into "I'm a Republican, you're a Democrat; you had this idea, so I don't like it"—that gets a little frustrating. You have to kind of bring people back to the table and find a way to find common ground and then try to move from there. Get away from the dialogue about what party you belong to and more into identification of common interests.

## JOB AS GOVERNOR

It is significantly more intense than I ever expected. There is something going on every moment. There are ten things that I can't do because there's just not enough time in every day. The other piece of the puzzle that is a surprise is how visible this office is. People are so excited about meeting the governor, about introducing their children and grandchildren to the governor. About having me sign an autograph or have a picture taken. Since I had been in

statewide office, I didn't expect a big change. But it's a big change in that regard. You're never invisible.

[A governor] can put a package on the table at the beginning of the session—budget initiatives, new laws—and by March and April, I'm signing a number of those initiatives into law. So you really do see the process through and are able to effect in a very real way changes. States can be much more nimble than the federal government. We can really identify issues and problems and put together coalitions and solve them quickly and then move on.

[A Kansas governor] should get up every morning and realize how incredibly lucky they are. This is a wonderful job in a wonderful state. Savoring each moment and relishing the opportunity is key. The big thing is to just figure out how to get along with people, how to bring people to the table. It's always important to work across party lines to put coalitions of people together, and so much of that is personal relationships. Can you talk to somebody; can you lift up the phone and have them visit with you, bring them into the office, learn about their kids and their families and their concerns and their constituents?

You have to spend a lot of time out in the state. It's a real mistake to get housed in the office and not reach out very much. There are a lot of Kansans who don't feel that the sun rises and sets inside the capitol. Being able to talk to Kansans where they live, see the farm conditions and what's happening in the oil fields and the aircraft workers who are losing their jobs, visiting those communities, talking to people one on one, is really a critical part of understanding what is best for Kansas.

## LEGACY

In the legislature, there was still a very small group of women who were elected, and I was the first woman to serve as insurance commissioner. So in some ways, the challenges of making sure you're jumping higher, running faster, have always been there.

I feel a sense of responsibility to not screw it up for people who come behind me. I have to do well to make sure that the next four, five, ten women can do well, that people look back at my tenure and say, "She did a great job, and we're thrilled to have another woman." That's important to me. I think Kansans are quick to give women opportunities that may not be available in other states.

I hope [Kansans] think that I was on their side, working for them, that I left Kansas a better place than I found it. That would feel really good.

1978 to Democrat John Carlin. Bennett was the first Kansas governor elected to a four-year term. For more on Bennett, see Virgil W. Dean, ed., "'Seeking 'Realism and a Little Rationality in Government': The Observations of Former Governor Robert F. Bennett," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 31 (Summer 2008): 104–13.

*Kathleen Sebelius is only the second Kansas governor to serve as a cabinet secretary.<sup>49</sup> When President Obama signed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) into law on March 23, 2010, it was left to Secretary Sebelius to implement the most significant health care reform the United States had seen since the creation of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965. She served five years, resigning on April 14, 2014, saying that her service as secretary of HHS and the stewardship of the ACA were “the most meaningful work I’ve ever been a part of.”<sup>50</sup> Obama said, “She’s got bumps, I’ve got bumps, bruises” from working to pass the ACA and its subsequent rollout but that she would “go down in history” for her role in health care expansion.*

*After leaving HHS, Sebelius founded the consulting firm Sebelius Resources LLC. She serves on the board of directors of the Kaiser Family Foundation, cochairs the Aspen Institute Health Strategy Group, and serves on advisory boards for the Dole Institute of Politics and Solera Health.*

*Sebelius continues to travel throughout the United States and in Kansas, speaking to groups about issues ranging from Kansas politics to health care reform to women’s empowerment. At a luncheon in Topeka in 2017, she told a group that despite troubled times, “We are the change. It’s up to us; it’s up to we the people to keep striving for a more perfect union.”<sup>51</sup> [KH]*

49. Harry Woodring (1887–1967), Kansas governor from 1931 to 1933, served in President Franklin Roosevelt’s cabinet as secretary of war from 1936 to 1940.

50. Halimah Abdullah, “Sebelius Had ‘Toughest Job in Washington,’” April 11, 2014, CNN Politics, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/11/politics/sebelius-future>.

51. Jonathan Shorman, “‘We Are the Change’: Despite Global Uncertainty, Sebelius Still Hopeful,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, January 14, 2017.