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BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

The Honorable Lita I. Cohen (R)

148th District

Montgomery County

1993-2002

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY: Heidi Mays, House Archivist
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Heidi Mays (HM): Good morning.

The Honorable Lita I. Cohen (LC): Good morning.

HM: I'm here today with former Representative Lita Cohen, who represented the 148th Legislative District from Montgomery County between the years 1993 and 2002. Thank you for being here with me today.

LC: It's my pleasure. Thanks for asking me.

HM: I wanted to begin by asking you about your childhood and your family life, and how do you think that prepared you for public life?

LC: I think that I've been in training for public life and for this position my entire life. I'm an only child but the youngest of a slew of cousins, and we all lived in the same neighborhood. My mother and a bachelor uncle who lived with us were probably the two most important influences in my life. My uncle had founded two radio stations in Philadelphia, and also the first UHF [ultra high frequency] television station in the city, as well as an FM [frequency modulation radio] antenna tower, so he was an entrepreneur. My mother had been a teacher. She was one of eight children, six girls, and the only one of the six girls to not only finish high school but also got a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. So, she taught me the importance of education as well as public service. I think some of the important things that have stuck with me, and I've tried to transfer to

my children and grandchildren – my mother said a few things – number one; women are people, too. Maybe we can't dig ditches, but as a people, we can do anything a man can do. So, when I was ten years old, I said I wanted to be a lawyer, and everybody laughed. My mother said, "Go for it." She also said that we are privileged, and therefore, the give-back theory was very important in our household. My mother was active in a slew of charities, and she instilled that in me, the idea of taking responsibility for myself and my actions and my obligation as a woman to make women proud of me, but to do whatever a woman – a person – could do, so that's where it started. In the beginning I always wanted to be the Senator's wife or the Vice President's wife, and then one day at a young age it hit me, hey, I could be the Senator or the Vice President, so my mother agreed. When I finished college and I had to take courses to be a teacher, to get a teaching certificate, and I told my father, "Well, I've for all these years said, 'I want to be a lawyer.' I'm going to law school," and, of course, he said, "Why can't you be a teacher like your mother and all your other cousins? It's a noble profession," which it is. I said, "It is, but I want to be a lawyer, and I'm going to law school." So, as a result, I went to the University of Pennsylvania undergrad and then finished three years of law school with a J.D. degree at Penn, and I had a happy childhood, really lots of fun. Did all the things that regular kids did, but as an only child and the baby in this immense family of relatives, I was spoiled and got everything I wanted, and the world revolved around me. So, life was good then, and still is, actually. *(laugh)*

HM: Was your family political?

LC: Yes. The uncle, my uncle Billy Banks, who had lived with us, founded the Young Republicans of Philadelphia in 1918, I think, and they were staunch Republicans. We used to kid my father that he was the only Jew in America that never voted for Roosevelt, had four chances, never did, and he always taught me, “You vote Republican,” so I never really thought about, “Am I a Republican or a Democrat?” I just became a Republican, and we’ll talk about my District, which was a Democrat District, but I’ve always been a swimming upstream kind of Republican, marching to a different drummer than the mainstream Republicans.

HM: Well, I wanted to ask you about your education. You said you were – you had your J.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. Weren’t you one of four women that year that graduated?

LC: You’ve done your homework. (*laugh*) Yes, and it was wonderful. All those men and there we were. And in those days, of course, the men wore ties and jackets to class and the women wore – I don’t think they had panty hose then. We wore stockings – stockings and heels and dresses and got dressed. We were treated as adults and professionals in those days. Although I kind of thought, in many respects, law school was a trade school, but it was great fun. I made it a point not to date classmates, or I think I had one or two dates of upperclassmen, but it was my, kind-of, my own personal rule; you don’t date the guys that you’re in school with. And as a result, I became very friendly with the men in my class and their wives, and we’re still good friends. And, I was a political science major in undergrad school, which was in the Wharton School,

which had just opened up to women, so most of my classmates in my major were men, and I became one of the guys, which has whatever business I've been, I've always been one of the few, or sometimes the only woman, and I think that helped. So, I also started a master's degree in international relations in my senior year at Penn as an undergrad. I didn't finish because I went on to law school, but I had professors like Robert Strousoupe, and a former Secretary of State, Alexander Haig [1981-1982], was also a professor there – although he didn't teach me, and he's also a graduate of my high school, Lower Merion – so it was interesting, and it still is. I'm very often the only woman, but as my mother said, "I'm a people. I'm a person," so you do the business at hand, not, "I'm a girl," and, you know, "do I come – ?" Now, as a woman, I do come from a different perspective, and I think today my new hero is Nancy Pelosi¹. What did she do when she was Sworn In? She brought the children, and she carried a grandchild. I do think that women come with a different perspective, and that's good. That's very good in many instances, as long as they don't come with a chip on their shoulder thinking that the world owes them something, and as long as they haven't lost their sense of humor. I think we have a lot as women to give to the Legislature.

HM: Well, I'd like to talk about your career prior to coming to the Legislature. Can you tell me about your experiences in, I guess, nongovernmental work?

LC: Sure. I have a very checkered past. When I finished law school, it was very difficult to get a job. I tried to get jobs with some Federal judges, and they all said the

¹ Democrat Representative of the U.S. Congress, California, 1987- present; served as the Minority Whip, 2001-2002, Minority Leader, 2003-2006 and Speaker, 2007-present.

same thing to me; “You’re the best candidate to come down the line, but I can’t hire a woman because I leave work at five, and you’re here until midnight, and the hallways in the Federal Building are dark. People wandering around. It’s not safe. I would treat you like a daughter,” and I would say, “I’m not your daughter. I’m your law clerk.” So, I did get an interesting job. I was the Assistant Regional Counsel for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and that sounds wonderful, but I was terribly bored. Then, I went from there to the Philadelphia School District as Assistant Counsel there, and it was in the days of turmoil. We had students rioting. We just – it was – well, it’s always in turmoil, but it really was in turmoil then, and we were changing – Richardson Dilworth was the President of the [Philadelphia School] Board, so it was very exciting. I did a lot of tax litigation. I wrote some tax ordinances. I was very, very active, and that was fun, and then I became pregnant, so I came back part time, and then I became pregnant immediately afterward and realized I wanted to mommy full time, which I did, but I practiced law from home. I did two things, primarily; I did agency adoptions and nonprofit corporate work. So, I kept my hand in the law, and I did some arbitrations, but I was a full time mother and loved it, just loved it, and had fun. When my – my children are only a year apart in school, so when my baby was in nursery school from 9 [AM] to 12 [PM] – at the time my uncle who had owned these radio stations became ill and asked me to come in – so I worked from 9 [AM] to 12 [PM], five days a week when no one had an ear infection or I didn’t have to go to school to be a classroom mom or something. And then when my baby was in kindergarten, it was full day, so I was able to work longer. Again, the stipulation was if somebody’s sick, I’m there. And I went from being General Counsel at the radio stations to the Chief Operating Officer to the

Executive Vice President, and we ran a Sinatra radio program. People used to come to us and say, “Why don’t you syndicate?” And my answer always was, “Because I don’t know how,” and then I thought, “Well, all I can do is make every mistake in the book, but I’m smart enough not to make the same mistake twice.” So, I did two things. With my uncle, the FM station had been a jazz station for eighteen years, never made any money, and we had heard that a CBS-owned station was dropping talk radio. So, I went with my uncle to New York to the advertising agencies to see if we picked up talk on FM would they buy time and sponsor us, and everyone said, “That’s crazy. You can’t do talk radio on FM. It’s not done anywhere in the country, especially in a major market like in Philadelphia. [You] can’t do it.” So, on the train coming home, I looked at my uncle, and I said, “Uncle Billy, we’re going to do it, aren’t we?” And he said yes, and in 1976 we did. So, we did talk radio, and then I was in a three-way partnership with Frank Sinatra syndicating his radio program throughout the country with the disc jockey and Sinatra and I. That was the three of us. And we made every mistake in the book, and we had been affiliates of the Mutual Broadcasting Network at the time, so I went with the disc jockey, who was actually doing the show, and our station comptroller to Washington, [D.C.], to the Mutual Network to sell a New Year’s program with Sinatra, and we’re driving to Washington, three hours. “Well, how much should we charge? How much should we charge? Five thousand, ten thousand?” We left it – I don’t know, ten or fifteen thousand. We got to Washington. We got to the office. I said, “I’m going to the bathroom. Excuse me.” I come out of the bathroom. We get into the meeting with the President of the Mutual Network, and we negotiated. We talked, “How are we going to do it?” And he said, “How much do you want?” And I was about to say, “Fifteen

thousand dollars,” and my comptroller said, “Fifty thousand for a two hour New Years program.” From the bathroom to the meeting it went up, and he said, “Okay,” and then as we left, we said, “They said it so easily we should have asked for one hundred,” but that’s how we started to syndicate. I made every mistake in the book but never twice. By the time I had sold the program, we were on two hundred and eighty-eight radio stations across the country, so that was exciting. But I had had enough of Sinatra and went out on my own syndicating radio programs and I did that for several years. At the same time I was doing radio, I had the sidetrack of community involvement, and in 1973 I was the first woman ever appointed to any commission in Lower Merion Township. It was the planning commission, and I remember my first meeting. I was told it is customary for the men – they were all men – to stand at the table, and I was supposed to walk on the other side of the table and go down the table and shake everyone’s hand. And I had heard that one man had said ahead of time, “If you appoint a woman, I won’t serve.” So, I started shaking hands, and I got to this man and I put my hand down. He looked at me. He turned around and picked up his hat and coat and left. He resigned. I have no clue – nobody ever heard from him again. And then shortly after that, they appointed another woman. So, I had been on the Planning Commission all those years, and then in 1985 the Republican – my predecessor as a Township Commissioner was not serving the people well, and I had been asked to run, and I kept saying, “No, I have babies. I have babies. Can’t do it,” but I said, “Okay, I’ll do it.” My kids were in high school at the time – yeah, yes, high school – and so I called the sitting Commissioner, the incumbent who had served two terms, and I said, “I hope you’re not running again because if you are, you’ll have a Primary,” and he said, “Well, I served two terms. Okay.” My district at the time

was 85 percent Democrat, and I went to every door, every day in the snow, in the rain, in the heat, and because I had always lived in Lower Merion, everybody knew me, and I got elected. It was a very difficult election that first election. I did not win all of my precincts. I lost one precinct, and that was devastating to me that – because I always said, “I will give my opponent his vote, his wife’s vote, his kids, and maybe some relatives,” but other people voted for him, and it became ugly because one of the churches on a Sunday said you had to vote for that parishioner, and that was very upsetting to me that religion was injected into the campaign. But, it was 85 percent Democrat, and I won, and I won big. I won probably about 75, 80 percent of the vote. Then I ran again four years later and, again, I had a Democrat opponent, but I won handily, so that was good. And then, my predecessor in the House was about to retire, she had served twelve years², and I said, “I’ll do it,” and I was asked to do it. That was my most difficult election that I’ve ever had. It was a Primary, and the – my opponent was the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors in Whitmarsh Township, but it was very clear what the issues were. He was – and let me explain the District. At the time, the District was about 75 percent Democrat when I first ran. When I left, it was 87 percent Democrat, but the issues were: a woman’s choice, personal choice; school choice vouchers; sensible gun laws; and prayer in school. And I was pro-choice, anti-voucher, in favor of sensible gun laws, against prayer in school, and I used to kid, saying, “There is prayer in school. Whenever there’s a math test, everybody’s praying,” but he was on the opposite of that. That was a very difficult election. It got very ugly at the end. I won 60 percent of the vote, but I have to tell you, I thought it would be ugly. It turns out my opponent, Jack McCarthy, was a noble gentleman. We became friends after this fierce election, and he passed away a few

² Lois Sherman Hagarty, Republican, Montgomery County, 1980-1992.

years after that, and I got a phone call one day that said, “Lita, Jack’s passed away. He has money left in his campaign account, and he’s asked that it go to you into your campaign account.” I fell over, and I’m still in contact with his wife and some of his children, but there were so many McCarthys at my forty-four polling places. There was a McCarthy child – he had nine kids – relatives at every polling place. That election was the worst day of all my Election Days. I was sure I would lose because he had every poll covered. Flags, everything, and there I was, but it worked out for the best, I think. At least for me it did.

HM: Well, I want to talk a little bit about Montgomery County politics. You said they asked you to run. Can you describe to me, like, what was going on at the time? You said your predecessor in the House seat decided to retire.

LC: Right.

HM: So can you, maybe, pick it up from there?

LC: She had served, as I said, twelve years, and I was talked to about – I was approached about running. The powers that be in the county supported my opponent, and that became, really, part of the difficulty and the obstacles in running. For example, I had to come to Harrisburg with my papers and my ethics statement to file. Well, the county organization, when they took everybody else’s papers up here to file, they took my opponent’s, so it was that underlying. But, the township – the Chairman of the Township

Republicans, I said, “I want to have breakfast with you,” and I met with him and the Vice Chair of the Township Republicans, and they kind-of hesitated. They knew that people wanted me, but – and they wanted someone from Lower Merion, not from Whitemarsh, so they were conflicted, and it was not a pleasant – there were some religious overtones in that breakfast, but unbeknownst to me – and my husband came with me. He said, “I want to go,” and I said, “No, I don’t – it’ll give the impression that oh, you know, she’s a little girl. She needs her strong husband.” He said, “I’m going to that breakfast with you.” I said, “Well, just keep your mouth shut because I’m the candidate.” And it got a little unpleasant, and he reached into his pocket, and he said, “Here’s a ten thousand dollar check made to Lita’s campaign committee. This shows our commitment.” Well, they knew that nobody was going to put that kind of money on the table, and this was 1992, and it was intimidating. It was meant to intimidate. I raised a record amount of money because I love to raise money, and I do it now for charities. I raised 126,000 dollars, and I spent it, which was a lot of money in those days. It’s nothing now. I didn’t have to do television; I just did direct mail. But I spent that money, and I think that was very important at that – that sealed it for me because that showed my commitment that I really wanted this job, and I could taste it, so – but it was not really pleasant in the county until I won, and then, of course, everybody was my best friend (*laugh*), but it wasn’t easy.

HM: So who worked on your first campaign? Do you remember the people that were involved?

LC: My husband. He's always been my unofficial Campaign Chair. A friend of mine, a woman who's a CPA [certified public accountant] was always my Treasurer, and I – a neighbor. I trusted her. She was very special, and I think my best campaign worker was my daughter. The timing for me was right because it was 1992, and my son was just being graduated from Brown University. My daughter had one more year at NYU [New York University], so the kids were out of the house, and I wouldn't have done it earlier. My daughter is the world's best poll worker. She's extraordinary, and I have visions of someday maybe she'll have a public service career, but it was my friends who came out that first election more than politicians. I did not rely on committee people because I was never sure. So, I had friends that I had – I was fifty-two years old, so for – fifty-one. For fifty-one years, friends that I had nurtured, everybody – every poll was manned from seven in the morning till eight at night. People came and stuffed envelopes. We did it in my house. I had a campaign office. People came in. Some people snuck in because they said, "I really want you, Lita, but, you know, I can't." It was real people. I had always done work with special needs kids, and they came out in droves, and that to me was the heart-and-soul of my campaign, these special kids that I had helped and worked with when I was a Commissioner. I was chair of the Recreation Committee, and I realized Lower Merion has all these playgrounds and wonderful recreation stuff. Nothing for special needs kids. The end result was because of the programs that we had developed, we got state and local and national awards for – we had services twenty-four hours a day, so the parents of these kids came out. The kids – I call them "kids," and some of them are in their thirties, other adults. They came out and did more than what they were

capable of doing. And that was the crux of – not just my campaign, but my heart-and-soul throughout all my years of public service.

HM: I have a quote by then Majority Leader John Perzel [Philadelphia County, 1979-present; Speaker, 2003-2006] from February 27, [20]02 whenever new Member Wallace Brooks [Montgomery County, 2002] was being Sworn In. I don't know if you know this.

LC: No.

HM: Okay. This was in regard to going campaigning and going door-to-door. "I mean, Lita Cohen, when she first ran, she was incredible, absolutely incredible. She would change outfits in the back of her car with the photographers there in order to be able to hit the next five hundred houses she had to go – she had to go to – but I mean, that was dedication." So, that was what was said by Mr. Perzel.

LC: Everybody laughed because when we had to take pictures, I changed in the back of the car. I brought things to change so that I could have a suit when it was appropriate and jeans and, you know. And the photographer who had done political stuff was sitting in the front of the car with – or, my campaign professional person and the photographer who was also driving, and I just said to them, "Look, guys, you know, I'm really not stripping, and I'm fifty-one years old. You know, if you haven't seen it by now, shame on you," and I just changed in the back of the car so that I didn't have to stop. We just went on going.

HM: You just kept going. (*laugh*)

LC: And John Perzel, who's really my hero, and hopefully, I'll get to talk about the wonderfulness of John Perzel. He gave me a quota of houses, and I said to him, "John, you know, you live in the city. You have row houses. I have houses acres apart. I have to drive door-to-door sometimes. I can't do it." He said, "This is your quota," and so I did it. And Matt Ryan [Matthew J. Ryan, Delaware County, 1965-2003; Speaker, 1981-1982, 1995-2003], who was then in [19]92 was the Majority Leader, and he said, "That's right." And Matt cracked the whip, and Perzel cracked the whip, and – but you have to taste it. You just must taste it, and I did because I knew I wanted to better the world, so you can do it.

HM: Yeah. How would you say subsequent campaigns were for you? You said that the first one was definitely the hardest.

LC: It was the hardest. Right. I always – after I survived the Primary – and before the Primary when they would do polls, I said, "If you want to tell me what the polls would say, just tell me I'm behind." And they would tell Stanley, my husband, "She's up two to one." And the day after an election is when I started campaigning for the next election. A cousin of mine sent me money from Texas, he lives in Texas, and the day after the Primary he called, and he said, "When do you start running again?" I said, "Today," so the elections were easier because I had token opposition, and sometimes I didn't have any

opposition, which I didn't like because if you don't have opposition it tends to make you ease off. It tends to make you say, "Oh, I don't feel like going door-to-door tonight. I think I'll slack off," so that's really not good. You should have opponents all the time. And they never were formidable in any of my House elections, but I treated them as if I was always the underdog, and I always told everybody, "Don't tell me that I'm going to win hands down," and even when I didn't have an opponent, I was always – I would tell myself, "Well, maybe there's going to be a write-in, so just keep going every day." And campaigning – but serving is thirty hours a day, eight days a week, always. You have no weekends, no nights, no free time at all.

HM: When you mentioned the House, what about your Senate run? Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

LC: Yeah, you asked, so I'll tell you. It was very unpleasant. People who I thought were with me were not. That includes Republicans, so that I got done-in by people who I thought were with me. I raised a record amount of money. I raised nine hundred thousand dollars. My opponent put in four million of her own, so that was not – that was – I simply couldn't match it. My husband put in eighty thousand of our money, but it, you know, I just – I couldn't match it, and it was disappointing. People who I thought were friends – Governor Rendell [Edward G. Rendell, Governor of Pennsylvania, 2003-2011] had one of my bills that – I worked with Governor Rendell when he was the Mayor [of Philadelphia] was sensible gun laws, the one handgun a month bill, which is now very active. He called me one day, his secretary, and said, "Come to the Mayor's office

Friday afternoon at two o'clock," and I said, "Okay." And he said, "Lita, here's my plan for one gun a month, et cetera." And I said, "Well, why do you want me to do it? I'm a Republican," and he said, "But you've had a record number of bills passed. You get things done in Harrisburg. You're suburban, so you understand the problems in Philadelphia. You work with both Caucuses, which few people do. You're ideal." So, Ed and I went for about two years through the state holding public hearings, and it was the sort of the "Ed and Lita Show," and he was with me more than 100 percent on this gun issue. And then when I ran for the Senate, he supported my opponent. When I was attacked, people said, "Lita wants to take our guns away from us," and I kept saying, "No, I have hunters and collectors and sportsmen in my District. I support these people. I'll go to the mat for these people. It's just sensible gun laws. I don't want straw purchasing, et cetera." And when I was attacked, he wasn't there. He backed off. That was very painful, very hurtful to me. There was a very – there were some ugly, ugly television spots. The campaign on the other side became very ugly. I was in shock. I was astounded. It took me six months – took me three months to cry. The night of the election, I said to my staff, "I'm still the State Rep[resentative]. I am still here. I want everybody in the office nine o'clock tomorrow. That's it," and they looked at me. Everybody cried. Took me three months to cry, and then I couldn't stop crying. It turns out it was really for the best, because that election was November of [20]01. My Primary – and I'll backtrack for a minute – was so tough I had to promise something. I promised two things. Term limits were the issue, was one issue. That was a hot topic. I promised to serve ten years in the House, so 2002 was my tenth year. I left. I had promised ten years. That was it, and that's why I ran, you know, a run for the Senate. But, my

grandson was born in May of 2000. My granddaughter was born October of 2002, and I left November 30th of [20]02. I went from Harrisburg up to New York state to help my daughter with her two babies, and when the little one started to crawl, my daughter said to me, “Do you remember when Jason was this age?” And I said, “No, I was working,” so now I am called “bubby,” which is Yiddish for “grandmother,” and it is very fulfilling. In a sense I’d still be in Harrisburg serving as the Senator and missing what I call the “dessert of life,” which is grandchildren. As fulfilling as children are, grandchildren are absolutely the dessert of life. You have both have a common enemy, so, in retrospect, as much as I wanted it – because I had so much more to do to make this a better world – for me personally, it was the best.

HM: Thank you for sharing that.

LC: Yes.

HM: I’d like for you to tell us a little bit more about the 148th Legislative District.

LC: Okay.

HM: You talked about the political aspects of it, but could you tell us more specifically about the people and their issues?

LC: I had – when I started, it was economically, supposedly, the wealthiest District in the Commonwealth. I think it had the nicest people in the world. I think Pennsylvania’s a microcosm of the whole country. It’s urban and suburban and rural. We have farms. We have industry. We have everything. My District was almost just like that, because I had farms and we were adjacent to Philadelphia, so we’re Philadelphia-oriented but yet suburban. We had a very high proportion of people with advanced education. Economically, it was very high on the charts, but I had some pockets where people were on every kind of local, state, federal assistance that really needed help, and that’s where I put my office, in that area, because these people needed me for life, for living. When I started, it was 30 percent – 33 percent Jewish, 33 percent Catholic, and 33 percent, what we euphemistically say “WASP” [white Anglo-Saxon Protestant]. Not that many Asians or African-Americans. When I left, it was 87 percent Democrat. it was probably about 40 percent Jewish, and there were more minorities. It’s a wonderful District. When I left, they had reapportioned the District. In 2000, the last election was 87 percent Democrat. Then the election of [20]02 had been reapportioned, and they took out ten thousand Democrats and gave them to Kathy Manderino [Philadelphia and Montgomery Counties, 1993-2010], whose District was primarily Philadelphia. So, ten thousand went to Philadelphia and ten thousand more Republicans came in, but my successor could not get reelected. A Democrat got reelected, even though Party-wise in [20]04, a Democrat, and he’s terrific. Mike Gerber [Michael F. Gerber, Montgomery County, 2005-present], he’s wonderful because he works so hard, and that’s what you have to do, and he loves it, and he’s there all the time.

HM: Can you think of any rewarding constituent stories that you'd like to share?

LC: Oh, you know, there are thousands and thousands. I'll give you a couple. One was we got a call one day in the District office from a woman who said, "You're my last – the last call I'm making. I'm going to kill myself. I have a gun. I'm going to kill myself. Bye. Bye." We had her name and address. I said, "I'm going there," and I had three people in the District office, and I assigned everybody local – I said, "First of all, call the Lower Merion Police. That's the first thing you do," and then I assigned everybody to agencies; local, state, federal. "Just get as many people as you can there." The police got there. She had a gun. Her story was – oh, and it was right after we had voted on the so-called welfare reform, and I was proud to say I was one of four Republicans that voted against it because it was Draconian – she had been on welfare. She was responsible for her dead sister's two children. She was putting herself through college because she didn't want to be on welfare. She had these kids. She was schizophrenic, but it was under control. She was taking her medication. She said, "I can't go to college. They're making me work twenty hours a week. I can't take my medicine, take care of these kids, work twenty hours a week. I can't do it. They'll be better off without me." Well, to this day, I still go over there. We have coffee. I send her flowers. I'm in touch. She finished college. We got her special dispensation. Everybody chipped in, and we saved her life. Another time someone came in – two men came into the office, and they said, "There's a man, our neighbor, living in his car. He's sick, he's dying of cancer. He's a vet. We know he's a vet. He has no papers." So, it took us two weeks, unfortunately, but we got him proof, and he went to a VA [veteran's affairs] Hospital. He did die, but he died

bathed and fed and loved and cleaned, and we made sure the staff was taking care of him. And thirdly, another call I got was from a mother whose two daughters were trapped in the city in an unfortunate neighborhood, in an alleged drug house. And these little girls, I think they were twelve and fourteen, she couldn't contact them. It was a terrible situation. So, I called my police chief, and we went there with some ATF [Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms] guys and a bunch of people, and we got these two kids out and got the family counseling and help, and they're fine. And it just goes on and on and on of saving lives. I miss that, by the way, more than anything. I miss the daily calls of, "Can you save my life?" And that went on for ten years. And that's the best part of the job, just saving lives.

HM: Wow. Those are wonderful stories.

LC: Yeah.

HM: Whenever you first came to Harrisburg, what do you think surprised you the most?

LC: Oh, dear. Well, it's an 'old boys' club.' The women were definitely second-class citizens. I was used to that because my freshman year at Penn Law School we were the first class in the new building, and they forgot to build a ladies' room, so they took an old closet and made a ladies' room out of it, so I was kind of used to that. The – you had to earn your keep. Seniority was very important, so you had to be here a long time to get power to get things done. The enormity of it was overwhelming, and everybody knew

everybody except we didn't know each other, and we didn't know everybody else. I remember one of the early days walking from the Capitol down the path to Strawberry Square, and someone walking toward me, just a man alone, and he looked familiar. I wasn't sure who he was, and he said, "Representative Cohen, hello," and I said, "Hey, how are you doing?" And as soon as he walked by, I went, "Oh, that's the Lieutenant Governor, Mark Singel [Lieutenant Governor of Pennsylvania, 1987-1995; acting Governor, 1993], and I'm saying, 'Hey, how are you doing?'" So, it's the presence here, and what I did every day- I was here for ten years – even if it were not a Legislative Session, if I had to be here, the first thing I ever did was walk into the Rotunda and look up and look around. It was very overwhelming, and just the building itself said to me, "Lita," one of my favorite – my husband's favorite expressions, "never take yourself too seriously. Have fun, but remember, you're here to do good. You're here to do the people's business. You're the voice of sixty thousand people, so never take it too seriously, never let it go to your head. Do what they sent you here to do, what the taxpayers are paying you to do," and I did that every day. It's awesome, and I think that helped me keep my perspective, and, of course, finding my way around the Capitol. That was impossible.

HM: Well, how did you feel on your first Swearing-In? What was that like for you?

LC: It was overwhelming. My husband was sitting next to me. I raised my right hand, and he said, "I'm just going to tell you a couple things," as we're getting Sworn-In. He said, "Don't take yourself too seriously. Don't mess up." He didn't quite use the word

“mess up,” but you can’t say the other word in public, and “I never want to see my name in the newspaper.” “Okay.” Sometimes I took myself too seriously. I often messed up. I’m a bull in a china shop, and I say what I think, even if it gets me in trouble sometimes. But, I try to do the people’s business. When I left in [20]02, I had about fifty bills in the hopper that I really wanted passed, and I’m disappointed that some of them weren’t, but I also had ten bills, at least ten, passed, which was a record. So, I succeeded, but I guess it’s always good to leave things unfinished.

HM: Did you keep his name out of the paper, your husband’s name out of the paper?

LC: Yes. (*laugh*)

HM: Okay. So, you did good on that part. (*laugh*)

LC: Not my name (*laugh*), but my husband’s name, yeah.

HM: Whenever you first came to Harrisburg, did you have any mentors?

LC: Not a whole lot, no. Matt Ryan, absolutely. Certainly John Perzel. John Barley³ [Lancaster County, 1985-2002] taught me, and I think my best mentors were the staff members. My District supervisor, she was terrific because she had been my predecessor’s, so she would – I made sure that her desk at home was next to mine, and she’d holler in. She’d hear me on the phone. “You don’t want to say that,” and she’d

³ Minority Secretary, 1991-1994; Majority Whip, 1995-1998

come running in, “No, no, no, no,” and she’d put a piece of paper in front of me. “Tell them this.” She was my mentor. My Harrisburg secretary, Cathy O’Donnell, had been my predecessor’s secretary. She was also my mentor. She didn’t think so, and if you ask her today, she’ll tell you no, but she was really my mentor, and I think the staff here is so extraordinary. They were my mentors. They helped me writing letters, making speeches, thinking about things, answering questions, facing issues, and also the lobbyists and the press were also my mentors. One of the first votes I had to make was nutrient management. Do you know what nutrient management is? I’m a city girl; I didn’t either. Its manure (*laugh*), and I had to vote on nutrient – what, you know, what’s nutrient management? One of the Republican Members was a pig farmer, so I went to him, and he helped me out, but the staff helped me and the lobbyists. I don’t – I think lobbyists, they’re good people, as long as you keep the issue in perspective. But, you know, you get – thousands of issues cross your desk in a two-year period, and you can’t be an expert on either. So, you go to staff, you go to lobbyists, and you go to the press. The press need us – and I would tell everybody –they need us as much as we need them. So, press was my friend, so you know, they were good folks.

HM: Would you say you were able to mentor anyone while you were here?

LC: In the beginning, I would take women who followed me and try to help them out, but they were bright women, so it didn’t take a whole lot of mentoring. And the Caucus had changed, the complexion of the Caucus. When I came here, I thought that I was a conservative Republican. If you ask any Member of the Caucus, they’ll tell you I was

some kind of flaming liberal, so the Caucus swung a great deal to the right and became more religiously oriented. I was adamant in telling everyone, “We are here to save lives, not souls,” and so they – a lot of people as the years passed came with a religious and a more conservative right-wing agenda, so there were fewer people to mentor because they really thought that I was an off-the-wall, far-left liberal, and I never – I sort of thought I was a kind-of a Rockefeller Republican⁴, a Clinton Republican⁵, because I always thought he was a Rockefeller Republican, so there wasn’t that much mentoring.

HM: You talked a little bit about the seniority system. Whenever you did make that promise of to only serve ten years, how do you think that impacted your decision and – based on seniority? Do you think that maybe that impacted [END OF SIDE 1], maybe, future aspirations for Leadership?

LC: No, because I think ten years is the starting gate.

HM: Yeah.

LC: Eleven years, the world’s your oyster. Had I stayed another one or two terms, I could have been in Leadership, in a Committee Chair, and I remember coming back to Harrisburg with my husband, because he had a meeting to attend and I came as his spouse, and as we walked through the halls and everybody said, “Representative Cohen,”

⁴ A term for more liberal-minded Republicans who espouse the views of former Vice President, Nelson Rockefeller (1908-1979); Governor of New York from 1959 to 1974 and Vice President from 1974 to 1977.

⁵ William Jefferson Clinton (1946-), 42nd President of the United States, 1993-2001.

actually, they didn't say "Representative Cohen," they said "Lita," because I always told staff, "My mother named me Lita. She did not name me Representative. You have to call me by my first name," and just as an aside, Melanie Brown, one of our staff members, after I did not get elected to the Senate, she said, "You know why I feel really bad you didn't get elected?" I said, "Why?" She said, "You'd be the only Senator who didn't change her first name." I said, "What do you mean they change their first names?" "Yeah, they all change their first name to Senator. You'd still be Lita." But, my husband said to me, "How could you have left? Look at this, you could've – how could you have just turned your back on the power?" I did. It was tough. It took about a year and a half to find out – to be happy in my skin without power, be a nobody, but then I realized I'm somebody different, but I'm happy in my skin now, yeah.

HM: What was your relationship like with Leadership, and this might be the opportunity that you had asked for to talk about some of those people?

LC: I had a good relationship with Leadership. When Matt Ryan, who was the Majority Leader my first term – my first term, Casey [Robert P. Casey, Governor, 1987-1995] the Democrat was the Governor, and the House and Senate were Democrat, and I just got along very well with Bill DeWeese [H. William DeWeese, Greene and Fayette Counties, 1979-present; Speaker, 1993-1994], who was the Speaker, and all of the Democrats – the whole – all of them because we thought alike on so many issues. And I had a bill passed my first year of my first term because I worked – it was a local government issue. Not terribly important as far as, you know, the major issues, but important to my constituents,

and so I worked with Frank Oliver [Philadelphia County, 1973-present], the Democrat, and he said, “I will get your bill passed,” and everybody said to me, “No Republican gets bills passed.” My first year of my first term being in the minority, Frank Oliver shepherded my bill through committee and through the House, and it was passed. But, when you get called to Matt Ryan’s office, it was like being called to the principal’s office in school, you did something wrong, and it wasn’t. Everybody was afraid, “Oh, God, you know, Lita, what’d you do wrong now?” He was always there to help. I can only describe John Perzel in this regard; when I had been asked by the police in Montgomery County initially to get a legislative grant to build a firearms training facility – there’s none in the county. Our police have to go out of the county, and it’s inefficient, expensive, blah, blah, blah. Then along came September 11 [2001], and the police said, “We think we can build the nation’s first anti-terrorism training facility for Montgomery County Police, fire, and emergency services personnel. It’s six million dollars.” So, Senator Tilghman [Richard A. Tilghman, Delaware and Montgomery Counties, 1969-2002] and I together got one million and a half, and then, as I was leaving, I went to John Perzel, and I said, “I need one million dollars,” and he said, “Lita, do you know what I could do with that million dollars? Spread it among my Representatives. You’re leaving. Why should I give you one million dollars?” I said, “Gee, John, the only thing I can think of is that I was a good soldier for ten years.” He gave me that million dollars. He didn’t have to; he shouldn’t have. He could have spread a million among his folks, but he did. He was always there whenever I needed something. A shoulder to cry on; he was there. When John Barley was the chair of Appropriations, he helped me out, so he was helpful, and all the Chairs of all of the committees were really very helpful, but one,

a woman. She – and I was warned about her when I got here. I was warned that if she doesn't like you, she'll make your life miserable, and indeed she did. But, that's okay too, but everybody in Leadership; everybody in my Caucus. And sometimes we fought – and maybe we're getting a little off, but I think this is really important. The work in Harrisburg is done in committees and mainly in the Caucus, and I really felt that my work in Caucus was critical because I came from a different perspective, and I was diametrically opposed to so many people in the Caucus that I believe we had respect for one another. Jerry Birmelin [Pike, Susquehanna and Wayne Counties, 1985-2006] and I were always at loggerheads, always, on issues. So John Perzel, because he's smart, one night – and I usually commuted back and forth. I liked being in the District – One night he said, "Lita, the next time you stay over, let's have dinner," and I said, "I would," and we did, only he invited Jerry, and he didn't tell Jerry that I was invited, and I was shocked. The three of us had dinner. Jerry and I talked, and I certainly came away from that dinner respecting him for being a person and really believing what he believed in, which I didn't like and didn't agree, but we went after each other vehemently on issues, but it was never personal, so when they made Brett Feese [Lycoming County, 1995-2006] Chair of – Caucus Chair, he came to me. He said, "Somebody told me that you don't like me." I said, "I like you, Brett, and you're right, and I respect you. I just think you're full of yourself, and you're very arrogant, and I'm telling you I'm going to sit in that Caucus and call upon you whenever you get arrogant." And so, we laughed about it. We still do, but everybody in the Caucus – but I felt I was the, in some respects, the moral barometer. They were good to me because I observe Jewish dietary laws, and once a year, PECO [Philadelphia Electric Company] used to bring a roasted pig for lunch, and

they always – somebody in the Caucus always said, “Lita won’t eat pork.” They always had a platter of cheese for me, and that was very touching to me. On the other hand, in 1994 when Ridge [Thomas J. Ridge, Governor, 1995-2001] was elected, and now we were Republicans in the House and Senate, everybody was given a bill. Well, I already had bills passed. They gave a bill to somebody to make, I think it was, the third Thursday in May the Commonwealth Day of Prayer, where we should all go to our church to pray. And John Barley came to me on the House Floor. He said, “Lita, I’m going to insert an amendment. I’m so sorry. I’m a cosponsor of this bill, and I’m going to amend it to include synagogue. Okay?” And I said, “No, it’s not okay.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “What about mosque? Ashram? What about standing by your baby’s crib? What about going down to the river and seeing the water and the clouds and the birds?” And he said, “I don’t understand it.” I said, “John, I’ve said it hundreds of times. We are here to save lives, not souls. If you have to give Jim Lynch [Forest, McKean and Warren Counties, 1993-2004] a bill – he hasn’t had a bill passed. I’ve got dozens in the hopper. I have no pride of authorship. Give him one of my bills. This is wrong.” “No, no, we have to.” And I spoke to Matt Ryan and John Perzel and they had to do the bill, they said. In Caucus I stood up, and I said, “If you run this bill, it is wrong. It is morally wrong. It is not why we’re here to serve the people. I will put in amendments that will embarrass every Member of this Caucus.” “No, Lita, you wouldn’t.” “Yes, I would,” so I did. Put in a whole slew of amendments. Banks– it should be a bank holiday, so then the lobbyists for the bankers came. “Lita, they got all bent out of shape.” It should be a commercial holiday. Stores have to be closed, so, of course, the retailers got all bent out of shape. Closed – it should be a school holiday.

Well, all the working mothers got – “What will we do with our kids?” But then the clincher was it’s a nonsmoking day. Anyone who’s caught smoking will be fined, you know, and, like, life sentence in jail, and I got really silly about it because, again, they just lose their sense of humor out here, and then – but the last two did it. No television – anybody caught watching television, and then no sex, and I had it, you know – and when I went to Legislative Reference Bureau to put it in legalese, they all said, “Are you serious?” I said yes, and I went to Caucus with my list of amendments, and they said, “You wouldn’t dare,” and so, I filed them. Needless to say, I was on every radio station in the Commonwealth. I had a wonderful time with it, and it sent – it wasn’t really funny, although it was, but it wasn’t. It sent a message to my Caucus. So, we negotiated back and forth, and I worked with Senator Jubelier [Robert C. Jubelier, Huntingdon, Blair, Bedford, Mifflin, Somerset, and Fulton Counties, 1975-2006] in the Senate, and I said, “You guys can’t pass this bill,” but it was like politically sensitive. They amended the bill so much I think it became the Commonwealth Day of Contemplation, or something, that I voted for it. I withdrew my amendments, and they amended the bill to make it palatable for everybody. But, that’s how the Caucus works and that was very important to me to stop that bill because it just was wrong, and I felt strongly about that. I felt very strongly when I first came; I was approached by the gay community to do a hate crimes bill. It was so innocuous; just add actual or perceived sexual orientation to the list of hate crimes: race, religion, national origin, blah. It took ten years to get that bill passed. My last night at 10 o’clock at night, the bill was passed. It was debated for two hours. If you would have heard the hate speech on the Floor, it was so sad. But John Perzel, again, who was the [Majority Leader] then, promised me. He said, “Lita, if you

get me thirty signatures, I'll run the bill." He didn't say thirty Republicans. (*laugh*) He forgot to say thirty Republicans. I guess he assumed I knew what he meant. I got forty-two signatures. Forty were Democrats (*laugh*), one other Republican, and myself. "Okay." He ran the bill, and it passed, and there were, I don't know, about thirteen Republicans that voted for it, and actually, some Floor Leaders worked the Floor that night against it. That was disappointing to me, but it finally got passed, but it took ten years. It was the right thing to do, and sometimes you just have to stand up for what you believe in. I'm a parent with feet in both camps. My children went to a religious day-school from K[indeergarten]-[grade] 6 and public school [grades] 7-12, so I understand the need to help religious schools. We still give to that religious school. I started a scholarship fund in my mother's name for that school, but we should. Privately, we should. Governor Ridge called me in, and he said – because that was his prime agenda – He looked at me, he said, "Lita, I will give you a Primary because you are leading the Republican effort against vouchers," and I said to him, "I love challenges. You're on, Governor." Well, obviously, he was advised against it, and I didn't have another Primary, but it was – it's those kinds of things that when you're here, you have to believe in certain things and go for it, and you know what? If you don't get reelected, then you don't get reelected, but you sure go down fighting for what's right.

HM: Would you like to talk about any of your other legislation? You've talked about – like I said, now that I've asked, huh?

LC: Oh, wonderful that you've asked.

HM: Like I said, you've already talked about the Hate Crimes Act of 2002.

LC: Right.

HM: Could you explain a little bit about how it changed the existing law, and – ?

LC: Well, several things had happened. Matthew Shepard was killed in Wyoming because he was gay or perceived to be gay. People are assaulted or murdered because you perceive them to be gay, or they are. And I kept saying the night of the debate on the Floor, telling people, "I don't care if you condone or condemn homosexuality, and if you religiously oppose it, that's okay, too. But you don't assault people. You don't discriminate against them because they are gay, or you perceive them to be homosexual. It's very simple," and, I mean, you had to hear the comments. "Well, I don't want *them* teaching my children." They're not pedophiles. Pedophiles are not homosexuals. It was so hate-filled. **[tape break]** Some of the other legislation that I did. You can now go to your local beer distributor and pay by credit card. I never knew that. I was approached by a lobbyist, so now that passed. One in 2000 increases penalties for people who commit sex offenses against children and it mandated counseling while they're in prison. It was sort of a corollary to Megan's Law, and they called it Lita's Law. There were some open space legislation that I did. They used to call me the Osteoporosis Queen, because it was an osteoporosis prevention act. It was – it's an education act because osteoporosis, and I keep telling people, is a childhood disease. It's not a disease of

seniors. It can be prevented. So, we were trying to get education to obstetricians and pediatricians. We did a bill – this was great fun. My daughter who, at the time was taking an M.B.A., and it was the Continuity of Contracts Law, and it was great fun because nobody understood it, least of all me – no, least of all Governor Ridge. He called me into his office, he said, “What is this?” I said, “It’s just a good thing, Governor, and Mellon Bank does sixteen billion dollars’ worth of currency transactions in a year, without this bill. It’s got to be passed.” And it had to do with Europe adopting the Euro, and it was critical, and the states had to adopt it. Federal government couldn’t because of the commerce clause of the Constitution. It was a very intricate – and it was wonderful because – and the Speaker asked me, “Do you want to talk about it on the Floor?” And I said no because the idea’s to keep everybody confused. Nobody’ll know what it is, and everybody’ll be too embarrassed to ask about it because then they think they’ll look stupid, and it passed without debate. It just went right through, and it really saved hundreds of thousands dollars in the Commonwealth. The only way I knew about it is my daughter in class read a little article, a footnote, in an obscure magazine, and only half a dozen, a dozen states, adopted this law, and it saved jobs. It saved everything. So, I was very proud of that, and most of all keeping everybody in the dark and getting an important bill passed. I talked to you about the beer distributors. Also, tougher parole standards. The Governor – when Ridge came in, the first thing he did was have a Special Session on Crime, and my bill, he had asked me, was House Bill 6. Now, as you know, Bills 1 through 20 are always reserved for Leadership, and mine was House Bill 6, so that was reserved for me. The Governor asked me to do that, and it had to deal, McFadden, and, you know, people violating parole and then going out and killing. It made the

standards tougher for parole, and those kinds of things. What I see – and then, of course, we did these kinds of, where the Governor would sign some of the – and I’ve kept all of these, and a lot of them are framed with the Governor signing them. There are – there’s some legislation at home, really, things I did at home that I’m proudest about. One was, again, because of my tough Primary, not only did I pledge ten years, my husband said, “Pledge to give back ten percent of your salary.” And when I came to Harrisburg, and people said, some of my fellow Members said, “What did you do? What stupid person advised you to do that?” And I was too embarrassed to say my husband, so I said, “My Campaign Manager,” and then they said, “Well, who’s your campaign manager?” And I had to say, “My husband.” But, I gave back about 80 or 90 percent of my salary, and I’m happy and proud that I did that. I also – as the mother, I am the mother of City Avenue Special Services District, which is the, still, I think, the only district, Special Services District in the country between two municipalities, Philadelphia and Lower Merion, and we’ve lowered the crime rate exponentially, and the economics of the district, it’s just thriving. Real estate values are now – they had dropped terribly, and it’s – you know, I live there. It’s my house. And now, even though there’s a real state slowdown, not in the Merion Valley/Cynwyd area. You can’t touch houses, because people are – when a house goes up for sale, people start bargaining and vying for one another. Houses are sold in half an hour still, even with the real estate turn down. So, I’m really proud of that. What I think I’m disappointed in is the bills that are still not passed. My one handgun a month bill. I had a bill – I was the Chair of a Task Force to rewrite the entire divorce code in the Commonwealth and, again, I had to battle even the State Supreme Court Justices because one of the provisions – it mandated judicial education, and the justices

weren't real happy about that, nor were any of the Common Pleas Court Justices, and everybody said, "Lita, you're a lawyer, you know. You'll never be able to go before any court in this Commonwealth and argue a case," and I said, "I know, but its right." They were a little ticked off. I had an asthma inhalers bill letting children under very guarded circumstances, asthmatic children, take their inhalers, self administer them because by the time you go to the nurse, you're in the hospital. You know, these kids – and it's of epidemic proportions. I understand that's now law in Pennsylvania. I'm happy about that. I had a daycare bill setting standards for daycare, and some of the religious groups were opposed to it. We did a tour of daycare centers. It's horrible. It's – I had nightmares afterward. Some of these babies – because, welfare requires the mothers to work. We didn't make provision for healthcare, transportation, job training, and child care. These babies are put in fire traps with people that aren't educated. My grandchildren go to day care at age four months. You should see these places. It's the Rolls Royce of day care, nirvana. Every teacher has a bachelor's degree in child care. Daycare can be great, but – so, I think I'm disappointed that those major bills weren't passed. I'm disappointed a lot. I left with being the sponsor, the prime sponsor of fifty bills. They weren't passed. I'm disappointed that we couldn't – the two Caucuses couldn't work together. It's the partisanship. I'm disappointed in that. I'm disappointed that there are people here, Representatives, that have a touch of intolerance; religious, racial, philosophical intolerance. I don't think a lot of that has changed. That's disappointing to me. I'm proud of what I did. I've got a couple of wonderful experiences if you want to hear a couple of those. A great experience was Matt Ryan, the Speaker, always let the retiring Members be Speaker. I was so proud to be up there, and

Matt said, “I never asked you to do this before, did I?” And I said, “No.” He said, “Why not?” I said, “I don’t know, Matt. I never did it.” He said, “You were so good,” and to have that video, and then I showed it to my grandchildren, and the older one. I was sitting there. He got confused because he saw me on television, and then he looked, and there I was standing there. But, I have that for my grandchildren. And I think being very proud being designated the person to run the bill, to actually speak and run the bill on the House Floor and be in charge of that. That’s just a wonderful memory. The great part was having constituents come here, presenting them with citations for good things they did. My high school basketball team with Kobe Bryant. We brought those kids up, and I tried to tell everybody on the House, “It’s the team,” but, of course, everybody wanted Kobe’s autograph. One of the most extraordinary things that I ever did was when they were rehabbing – refurbishing the House Chambers and putting in smoke detectors and replacing light bulbs. I didn’t like that they replaced light bulbs because sometimes when we had overnight Sessions, to keep us awake, we used to look up and count the light bulbs that were out, and that would keep us awake. So, when they fixed them, all the light bulbs were working, so we had to find something else to keep us awake. But, they asked us if we wanted to see a work in progress, so we went up to the visitors’ gallery, and then they had – the contractors had erected a platform on top of the Floor. We walked on this platform. I guess we were ten feet from the ceiling, and there was a ladder. I asked if I could climb up and touch the ceiling, and they said yes. Of course, I was wearing a skirt, tight skirt that day and heels, and the men all said, “We’ll hold the ladder.” I said, “Forget it, you know. I’ll have my friends hold the ladder.” *(laugh)* I climbed up, and I touched a star on the ceiling. It was so awesome, and then later I was

asked why. I said, “Because I don’t have any grandchildren now, but someday I’m going to, heaven willing, have grandchildren and I’m going to bring them here, and I’m going to say, “Bubbie touched that star,” and it was so awesome. Some of the other things were just having press conferences. That was very important. Doing public service messages, which, of course, people are saying today that, you know, oh, it’s all political. It isn’t, because every time one of my public service messages aired on cable, we were flooded with phone calls, no matter what the topic. “Oh, I didn’t know you could help us with that.” So, we were flooded with people calling, so I think, you know, that’s important. Some of my best memories of fun stuff happened. Once the Governor called me in. He – I think he must have been annoyed again at something – and he offered me chocolate chip cookies that a constituent had baked. So, I sat there and I ate the cookie over the desk, but then I realized now there are all these crumbs. What am I going to do with all these crumbs? So when he turned around, I went like this, and I just wiped them off and put them on the floor. We were the first to do cell phone collections for abused women. I was proud of that. We were the first in the country to collect cell phones for people. You remember some weird things. I fell down the steps once. I was always in heels. At the Rotunda has the big step, and then it goes off to the side. I tripped at the top of the step. I went down the first, to the first landing and kept on going all the way down. I was not hurt. One heel went flying this way, the other this way, and I was more embarrassed than anything else, so at the time I got to the bottom, people helped me up. “Are you hurt? Are you okay?” I was just – I was so embarrassed. Then another day we got off from a lunch break, and I was walking with Representative Katie True [Lancaster County, 1993-2000 and 2003-2010], our offices were next to each other, and one of our

fellow Republicans is a hunter, and he had bagged, I guess you call it, a turkey that he had in a plastic container, this stuffed turkey, and they were wheeling it into his office, and I hollered, “Quick, Katie, get a knife and fork. There’s lunch!” Well, my fellow legislator, he really – he didn’t think that that was very funny. I was the prime sponsor of the bill to outlaw the pigeon shoot. Well, I didn’t know – that’s really – or it was a really big thing in Pennsylvania. The jokes that went around about the pigeon shoot were awesome, and I was glad to hear the jokes because it just showed that people were human, that at least, you know – I mean, I thought the pigeon shoot was very distasteful, but at least there was some humor in it. One of the things that you had asked about was who did we make fun of – I’ll drop that. To me, the hardest part was leaving my family. That’s why I commuted. I told my husband, “I can come home and get a couple good hours of sleep with you at night. If I stay in a hotel, I can toss and turn for eight hours, so I might as well come home. The train rides at five thirty in the morning train was horrendous. I don’t miss angry phone calls. I don’t miss people threatening my life. I used to love constituents that would call three o’clock in the morning because they can’t sleep and leave a voicemail message. Well, we had caller ID, so I would call them during the day and say, “Hi, it’s Lita Cohen. I understand that you called me last night,” you know, and then they’d get all shaky. I wasn’t happy sometimes about going against my Caucus, but I knew that those were things that my constituents sent me to Harrisburg for, and I had to do it, so there are things that I miss. There are things that I don’t miss. I love, now, all of the community work and the boards that I’m on. I love having weekends and summers and babysitting and watching my grandchildren grow. I came home with ten trans files of my papers, and I’ve kept them, and the reason that I’ve kept

them and all of the awards and the plaques and things is because, I'm sixty-six, and my grandson is six and one half. By the time my grandchildren remember me, by the time they're really old enough, I'll be in the home dribbling my pablum, and I want them – all I want is them to know that their Bubby saved just a very small portion of the world, and maybe it will encourage them to go into public service to save the world. And if everybody does a little bit to save the world, then wouldn't this be a wonderful world? Newspapers used to ask me, "Well, why are you running?" you know "What do you hope to accomplish?" And I'd say, "To better the quality of life of my constituents, and if I can do that, I'm a success," and as I said, despite having so much more to do, even today, and I'm out four and one half years, even today people come up and say, "We miss you. You helped me. You helped my daughter. You did such good," and oh, I needed that. That's nice to hear, and it makes my day, but it's important. It's very important.

HM: Well, you talked – mentioned it, I should say, the ten percent that you were giving back of your salary. Was that called Cohen CARE?

LC: Cohen CARE (Community Advisory Reinvestment Effort). I did not make the decision. I put that money in a bank account, and I had two people from each of my five municipalities, not elected officials, citizens, and we would meet once, maybe twice a year. I'd take them for breakfast or lunch, and I'd say, "Okay, here's the money. You decide," and it went to things that couldn't be in the budget. Clean streams, fire hazards, libraries.

HM: Looks like skating rinks, playground equipment, repair pedestrian walkways.

LC: Right.

HM: Planting trees, benches, a veterans' war memorial.

LC: Yeah.

HM: I mean, wonderful things.

LC: Yeah.

HM: A portable public address system for police and civics groups, so, one really wonderful program.

LC: Right, right. It was, and sometimes when I pass the thing that I did if I'm with the babies. I'll say, "Bubbe did that," you know. No kidding. "Bubby did that." I forget – just recently, I don't even remember what we were talking about. My son-in-law said something, and I said, "You're –" Oh, it was a land development something, and I talked about ordinances and land development, and my son-in-law looked at me like why would I know that? And my husband got furious and jumped on him and said, "Do you know that she was on the Planning Commission and the first woman ever appointed, and do you know this? She did this, and she did that." He's my really biggest booster, my

husband. And, those kinds of things are important. That's why I like, and I'll say it, I liked WAMs [walking around money], legislative initiative grants, because they're – it's five thousand dollars to the local library, that's so important, that won't be in the budget, and another five thousand to plant trees in an environmentally sensitive area, and it's just a couple thousand here and there. Those people, the firemen and the police and the citizens' organizations, the streams. We have a trails organization to clean up the trails. They won't get that. It won't be in the budget. They'll never see that money, and two thousand dollars is so important to these groups. So, I'm all in favor of WAMs, policed. I always published them. Everybody knew what I gave away. If you do it honestly and you do it right, they're wonderful. They're really good.

HM: That's great. You served on several committees while you were in the House. Did you have a favorite committee that you served on?

LC: Yes. People think that I should say Appropriations. That's the most important committee and I was on it eight of, I think, eight of my ten years, but that wasn't my favorite committee, although I did like the two weeks when the House wasn't in Session when we would come and have our public hearings, and I learned a very lot. I guess Judiciary was my favorite because almost every bill came through Judiciary, and that was important. I really liked it, maybe because I'm a lawyer, but it was good. I was on the Liquor Control Committee one term. I didn't like that. That was when Ridge thought we were going to privatize the State Stores, but he and I had a difference of opinion on, I wanted to privatize everything, including warehousing and purchasing, and he didn't, so

that wasn't my favorite. And I was only there – I was on Tourism. That was fun. That was okay. I think, also, Judiciary because I was the Chair of a couple subcommittees. One was rewriting divorce. One was Women, Children, and Families, so we did a lot on abuse and things like that, and I was the co-Chair of the Commission on Adoption. We had a model adoption law that in my time was never passed by the House. I don't know if it's been done since. Pennsylvania's adoption laws were and maybe still are, horrendous; so unfair to everybody. And that was very important, so we wrote a model law, so I really like that. I liked drafting the divorce code and the abuse things, so, I guess I have to say Judiciary was my favorite.

HM: Did you belong to any informal Caucuses? You hear so much about the informal Caucuses.

LC: Right. Oh, they were – I was a member of the Cigar Smokers. (*laugh*)

HM: I would not have guessed.

LC: I didn't go often. I think in my ten years I went maybe once or twice. That was just a wonderful Caucus. Everybody had a good time. We tried to form a Women's Caucus. I didn't think we should because, again, it was my mother's "Women are people, too, and we shouldn't separate ourselves." I was happy when they refurbished the ladies' lounge, so in overnight Sessions, it was a place where we could at least put our feet up with the girls. I don't – I was not in any other informal Caucuses – we didn't have a Jewish

Caucus. I'm not Italian. I'm not black. There was a Black Caucus and an Italian Caucus. I really – I'm 50 percent Polish. I tried to form a Polish Caucus just to have fun, and we could tell all the Polish jokes of the world. That didn't work, so I just did my homework.

HM: How did you feel about the changes that you witnessed while you were here? Did you see any changes in the House structure, in technology? I think probably technology would be one thing.

LC: Yeah, killing fewer trees. The laptops were not only saving the paperwork, but it made us much more efficient that during a lull we could do our email. We could be instantly in touch with our constituents, which boggled their minds. “Well, you mean you're sitting on the House Floor?” or “You're calling me from the House Floor?” Oh, they thought that was wonderful. I thought that that was good. A lot of that kind of technology. The no smoking, which now I understand they're trying to get the whole – I wear contact lenses. My seat – Montgomery County – we were troublemakers, so we all sat in the back. *(laugh)* Well, when you're there at night and the smoke comes wafting from the lounge in the back, you're sure you have ten tons of sand in your eyes, so I'd like to see that. I think – I mentioned the women's lounge. We did something early on that was great fun, and I have to put that in as a technology advancement, was, in the back of the House is the lounge, the legislators' lounge. You have to walk through that to get to the ladies' room. The toilets in the ladies' room – usually a flusher is just sort of a tube, and you could put your foot on it and flush the toilet. Well, they had those in the

ladies' room, but then they had, like, a metal bar over it so that you had to use your hand to reach that flusher, so I got all the girls together from both sides of the aisle in the back of the House one day, and I said, "Wouldn't you like them to take that bar off?" Everybody said, "Yeah, I would rather just lift my foot and press it down to flush the toilet," so we got Ted Mazia⁶, the Clerk, the Chief Clerk, called him back, so he walked, and there he met with all of the girls in the back of the House. You had to see the men – the boys. At that point they were children – boys. They were sure the women were about to do something against the men, that we were about to do something, and they didn't know what we were up to, and Ted said, "That's easy. I'll take care of that right away," and indeed he did. We all went back to our seats, and all the men, "What were you talking about? What are you girls going to do? What are you girls going to do?" And we said, "None of your business." They were so unnerved, so that was one of the technological advancements (*laugh*) in the House. They got defibrillators, which was important. I was told that guns, some Members carried guns and were not allowed on the House Floor. I was then told that some Members were carrying guns on the House Floor. I would hope that that would be a technology change; no one should carry a gun on the House Floor. I was told that years before me Legislators shared offices. We didn't; we had our own office, our own secretaries. It is much advanced. I would hope that staff is taken good care of in terms of the salaries that they're paid, just maybe the perks that they're given. The staff in Harrisburg – and I'm proud of my District office staff, too – I'd pit them against anybody's staff in any state. You know, if they have to have a war of state staffs, the staff here in Harrisburg is extraordinary in terms of quality, education, how bright they are, how devoted and honest they are, and dedication – you just can't

⁶ Pennsylvania House of Representatives Chief Clerk, 1995-2004

beat staff. So, those are the things that I hope are appreciated by the powers that be here in the Capitol.

HM: Thank you. Do you think your issues have changed through the years?

LC: Nope. Absolutely not, no. I don't – I've probably mellowed in my old age, but the things that really meant a lot to me then are still the issues; choice, vouchers, guns, prayer in school, the gay rights issues. They are still very, very important to me. Very important. An honest, healthy economy, and in that sense, I think I have succeeded, mostly as a mother. My daughter is a Vice President of Master Card dealing with global business issues. My son left a major Wall Street law firm. He's now a Federal Public Defender in Los Angeles defending people who I don't particularly think are upstanding citizens, but everybody's entitled to a lawyer, and these people have the best because my son's really good, and he's defending Federal defendants, so they're major, major criminals. So, my issues are exactly the same; doing the right thing, the moral, ethical thing, and making it a better world.

HM: What do you think the hardest issue you've faced in Harrisburg was?

LC: Well, I used to joke. I used to say to people, "You think you've got it tough? How would you like to be a female, pro-choice, sensitive gun issue, anti-voucher, Jewish, bleached red head in the Republican Caucus?" And I was the only one. I was the only

Jew in the Republican Caucus. (*laugh*) So I tell people, “After that, everything else pales.”

HM: (*laugh*) I think you’ve already shared some really wonderful stories, but in case you had any others, I’d like to offer that opportunity to you now.

LC: Hmm.... I’m just checking some of my notes – I guess that I’ve covered everything. If I had it to do all over again, would I yell and scream as much? Would I try to convince my fellow Caucus Members and maybe use a little bit more sugar and honey as opposed to spice? But I think because of the change in the Caucus, they’re much – they’re hardliners now, and I’d probably – I wouldn’t have succeeded anyway. One of the things – my slogan was, which was my husband’s, again, and everybody adopted it, all the campaign folks, was, “She’s everywhere,” and I think that’s what I tried to be, and as I said, it was thirty hours a day. I did not have a personal life. I’m proudest of the fact that I tasted this wonderful job, and I – that’s the advice that I would give to anybody who wants this job is, you have to really want it because it pulls your guts out. If you’re doing a good job, it takes – it rips your insides. You are not a person. You are not your own person. You owe sixty-some thousand people and trying to balance that with motherhood, fatherhood, earning a living, a family. You cannot do it if you do it right, especially, you know, some Districts, you could be an axe murderer, but if you’re a Democrat or a Republican, you don’t have to do anything, it doesn’t matter, and that’s not fair. Even if your district is 90 percent your Party. You have to live and breathe it, and be – one of my favorite words is “passion”. You have to be passionate

about it, and I was – she was everywhere, and my staff – it was on one of my campaign posters. My staff made a huge – they blew it up and made it huge. “She’s everywhere,” and that’s in my office at home now, and my grandchildren look at it. My kids when they see it, they understand what it is, what it means. It’s a collage of all the different places and people where I had been, and I think you’ve been great. Your questions are great. Of course, you prepped me, so I got all these papers here (*laugh*), but it’s a wonderful job. It’s wonderful, and everybody should want to do some kind of help and public service and save the world. I am blessed that I had the opportunity for ten years to do it, and I’m happy I did it. It was the best ten years of my life. I did it. I wish I could have accomplished more, but I did accomplish, and I’m happy.

HM: Well, what would you like your political legacy to be?

LC: Hmm. I guess what I would want my grandchildren – I saved a portion of the world. I had the opportunity, which most people don’t have, and I did it.

HM: You’ve already talked a lot about your grandchildren, which is wonderful, but what else have you been up to since you’ve left the House? Can you tell us?

LC: Sure. I am a board member of the Susquehanna Patriot Bank, and we’re an eight billion dollar – our parent company’s an eight billion dollar company. That’s a lot of work. I’m the Development Chair and a Board Member, Trustee, of the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine. That takes a lot of time. I raise a lot of money for

them. I'm on the City Avenue Special Services District. I did serve – continue – Matt Ryan had appointed me, and I continued until recently, as a Commissioner on the Pennsylvania Public Television Network. I was on the Board of a wonderful group called A.W.A.R.E., a-w-a-r-e. It's an internet foundation that gives health advice to teenagers in bypassed neighborhoods, because now they all have computer capabilities, and we have M.D.s from all over the country answering all kinds of questions on healthcare. So, I serve on a lot of non-profits. I spent a couple years reading for the blind, which was very fulfilling. I work out an hour every day. I baby-sit when my daughter travels. My husband and I are traveling, so there's much more time for me now, but I still do a lot of public service because I still believe I'm not finished, and I have to give back. I was recently interviewed, and I was asked, "Well, when you get to the pearly gates, what are you going to tell God?" And I said, "Well, that's easy. I'm going to beat up on him and say, 'Send me back. I have more to do and more help to give,'" so I think that that's it.

HM: Well, that's wonderful.

LC: I want to be remembered as being honest, not taking advantage of the system, and helping as many people and making it a better world.

HM: Finally, what would your advice be for the new Members that are just starting the 2007-2008 Legislative Session?

LC: Well, you know, I always said that they should pay us either one thousand dollars a year – one dollar a year or four hundred thousand dollars a year. That means, it would be independently wealthy people who wanted to serve because they didn't need the money, you know, people like Jon Corzine⁷, on and on and on. I believe my advice would be, “Don't come to do this job,” – because now they get paid a handsome salary – “Don't do it because you want the money,” and I know that there are people now, and there were people when I served who probably could not make this kind of money in the real world. So, I believe that you have to want to taste this. You have to be dedicated. You have to work hard. You have to have a thick skin, which I do not, so – but you should, and you have to be dedicated. Don't cut corners. You are representing sixty-two, whatever the number is, thousand people sit on your lap in that House Floor every day, not you. There's sixty-some thousand people sitting on your lap. Do what they want you to do. Be their voice. Have the nerve and the stamina if you think it's morally right and you disagree to stand up for that, but if you don't fit the District, don't do it. And work your buns off and be responsive. The house rule in my District office was, “You have to answer a constituent in twenty-four hours. You have to have an answer, even if it's not the answer they want. You must have an answer. Don't not answer. Don't ignore them. Every human being is important.” And then, good luck. (*laugh*)

HM: (*laugh*) Well, thank you very much. Your insights today have been very interesting and very educational for me, so I certainly appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule to come and do this interview with me.

⁷ Corzine (1947-), currently serving as the Governor of New Jersey (2006-); former US Senator, 2000-2006; CEO of the investment firm Goldman Sachs, 1994-1999.

LC: And thank you for asking.

HM: It was fun.

LC: Thank you so much.