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INTERVIEW WITH:

The Honorable George T. Kenney, Jr. (R)

170th District

Montgomery and Philadelphia Counties

1985-2008

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Jesse Teitelbaum (JT): Well, good afternoon. I am here with George Kenney, Jr., a Republican, who represented the 170th District, portions of Montgomery and Philadelphia Counties, from 1985 to 2008. Welcome.

The Honorable George Kenney (GK): Thanks, Jesse.

JT: What I'd like to do is start out by asking about your background. Tell me about where you grew up and then going into your education.

GK: Always grew up in the city of Philadelphia in the Somerton section of Philly, which is way up in Northeast, right on the Bucks County and Montgomery County borders. One of eight children. Father was a city worker, my mom was a homemaker, so a very active household, and attended LaSalle High School and graduated from LaSalle College. Worked my way through LaSalle College. I guess I started my political career, probably by the age of 14 working for a neighbor, Jim Melenson, who was running for city council. So, that was my first experience giving out literature and what have you, and from there, became a committeeman at 18. As I said, working through LaSalle College, working for McNeil Pharmaceutical Division of Johnson and Johnson. Had attended Drexel and then left Drexel and took a job at McNeil and then went to Drexel night school, and the commute was too far from Somerton to work to Drexel, and so I then transferred to LaSalle and got my degree from LaSalle in 1982. So, I graduated from high school in [19]75, so it was – since it was a work study program took a little longer, but I had no college loans. McNeil had paid for all my college, and once you got a C or better they took care of you, and I did that, so, and went into their sales force.

JT: Was there anyone else in your family that was in politics?

GK: My dad was a city worker. Worked for the city. His dad was a Republican ward leader until he died in, like, 1951, so he was involved in city politics. At that time, to get a city job, patronage was alive and well in the city of Philadelphia in the [19]40s, [19]50s, so my dad had gotten a city job with the Board of Revisions. So, there was politics always around our family, but no one really, except for my grandfather who died in the early [19]50s, since then – maybe my grandmother may have been a committee woman for a little bit, but she went to work for the courts when my grandfather died – so, there was politics. We were always political and Republican politics.

JT: Well, I was just going to say what influences would you say shaped you into becoming a Republican?

GK: I would say my parents. We always jokingly asked our parents were we Republicans or Catholics first? We weren't sure what (*laugh*), I mean, because, my dad, as I said, was a patronage job, and we just always were Republican. I mean, it was just something we were. I mean, there was not much discussion. (*laugh*) It was just the way it was, and I believe even to this day all eight of us are still – my parents are deceased – but we're all still Republicans.

JT: So why, eventually, did you run for the House as opposed to another office?

GK: So, I was a committeeman at the age of 18. I said [I] graduated from college, was still with McNeil Pharmaceutical, went into their sales force. I was 26, and Hank Salvatore [Frank A.; State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1973-1984; State Senator, 1985-2000] was our State Rep[resentative], and I always seen Representative Salvatore throughout the neighborhood, and it was a Republican district, even though it was the city. Very few districts were still Republican in 1984, and he decided he was going to run for the State Senate, and I thought to myself, “Here I am 26.” My future wife, Liz, and I were dating at the time. We met in 1980, and I remember saying to my dad, you know, “If I’m going to try this elective office. An opportunity is here,” I said, “You know, Mr. Salvatore is going to run for the Senate. Maybe I’d like to consider running for the House,” and he said, “You got to be out of your mind,” he said. He said, “You should stay in the pharmaceutical business, make money, and don’t get involved in all that nonsense,” because he, I think, Jesse, from being where he came from, he saw what happened to people as a patronage employee. He saw how people get – I’ll be kind – where they didn’t just wind up where they were supposed to just because of purely political reasons. I think he was advocating as a good father saying, “Go out. Make money. Don’t get involved in all this, at least not at that level,” the elected level. “Be a contributor. Be part of the business of politics. Just don’t be the politician,” but I decided. One of the many times I didn’t listen to my dad, and so I was elected in 1984, and 24 years later –

JT: You’re still here.

GK: Still here.

JT: Did you enjoy campaigning?

GK: I remember the first campaign; 1984. It was Senator Hank Salvatore said, “Raise five to ten thousand dollars. Listen to me, and don’t worry,” and we raised about 40,000 [dollars] that year in [19]84, so it took a lot more money, and the enjoyment went with what attracted me to the job was, you know, you represent your neighborhood. As I said, I grew up in this neighborhood in Somerton, which was the dominant community in the district, so campaigning was like, you know, I knew everybody from growing up, going to the church, there at St. Chris Church, and Somerton Youth, so that was the dominant part of the district. So yeah, it was enjoyable to, you know, go out door-to-door, and I thought it would be exciting to, you know, what better job than to represent your neighbors and your community? And that’s what excited me, and still excites me today.

JT: Speaking of your district, can you describe for me the 170th District in both geography and the constituents?

GK: Middle class, working class neighborhoods. It was before 2002. So, from [19]84 to 2002 it was Somerton, as I said, Bustleton in the 58th Ward from ward politics, which was in the northeast Philadelphia, and part of the 66th Ward, which were the communities of Parkwood and Normandy. Predominantly a Catholic community. A large Jewish population in Northeast Philadelphia. I probably had more Jewish federation housing than any district in Northeast Philadelphia, so there was a large Jewish population. [In] 2002 everything seemed to change. [19]92 was okay; my district didn’t change much. [In] 2002, Majority Leader Perzel [John; State

Representative, Philadelphia County, 1979-present; Speaker, 2003-2006] barely won his election in Northeast Philly. He won by like 90 votes in 2000, and then everything got moved around during that reapportionment year. Representative Wogan [Christopher R.; State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1981-2002], who represented the district that bordered me, became a judge, so he became a sitting judge in Commonwealth Pleas Court (*inaudible*), so that's when a district I always had in the city of Philadelphia then became a district in Northeast Philly. I had to pick up two voting divisions in Montgomery County to get below the new Perzel seat.

JT: Right.

GK: He needed a new seat to be competitive, so the world changed in 2002. It became a much different district then.

JT: What were some of the issues that were very important to your constituents?

GK: Initially, it was always taxes. As a Northeast Philadelphia Representative, I mean, Harrisburg was in another world. It was always City Hall, and they knew Washington, but it was always a fight with City Hall. We were always the forgotten communities in the city, and those years Hank Salvatore, my predecessor, went to the Senate, his campaign issue was always secession. He wanted to break off from the city of Philadelphia; our section in northeast Philly. Even though my constituency supported the concept, it really never became – it was never put to the voters. So, taxes and reinvestment in city tax dollars back to our neighborhoods was always the dominant issue. The one thing I had was, I had one huge state property, the Philadelphia

State Hospital, which early in my career, Governor [Robert P.] Casey [Pennsylvania Governor, 1987-1995] in 1986 had come in and started a movement to close down the Hospital, which was, I don't say a bad idea, but you're talking about a huge piece of property; 200-and-some acres, and now how do we reuse this property? The last patient left in 1990. People like to joke that once that issue was resolved, Kenney could stop running for State House, and so here we are 24 years later and still 50 acres of ground to develop, but it was time to move on. But, that was always the big local issue, the Philadelphia State Hospital issue, but taxes were always the dominant issue, just how the city was reinvesting in us, and when they always did reassessments of real estate, it was always a huge issue.

JT: Besides changing of the district boundaries over your time, have you seen a lot of changes with regards to constituents' issues and anything else that was going on?

GK: Well, with the city population, we've lost a huge – in the city as a whole – population. What we found in my district is those people that still wanted to live in the city, [are] mostly city workers. I have a large police, fire, city personnel, that makes up a large part of my constituency, and that's the biggest change I've seen, and since the Republican Party hasn't controlled the city of Philadelphia since the early [19]50s, over time, those voters became more Democratic. So, the district I would say was maybe 55-45 [percent] when I first ran as a Republican; it was a Republican district. We still, even today, only have our only elected city councilman in the city is from my area, represents a portion of my area, so you can see that shift that where the political make up is around 60-40 [percent] Democratic, but still the same make

up; it's working class people that go to work every day, but pay their taxes and very involved, very neighborhood-oriented, and really looking at my – no large industry dominates my –

JT: No.

GK: – we have Nabisco on the boulevard, which was always, probably, the largest employer in my district, but there was no dominant industry. So, nothing, nothing held it all together. It was just, most of the people worked, as I said, for the, probably for the city, and then commuted to work outside the district.

JT: Tell me about your first impressions when you were first elected and you came to the Capitol Building. What was going through your head during your first Swearing-In Ceremony or when you first saw the Capitol Building itself?

GK: Just in awe, really, just like, I mean, excitement in the sense that, oh my neighbors sent me here, wanting to make sure I did not make mistakes. Or at least my biggest fear was embarrassing my neighbors and mostly doing something stupid or, not corrupt so much as just stupid things, or what I would make the media for doing something outrageous or stupid or, you know, not paying attention to what was going on. So, that was my first – but the Capitol Building was just so – I had been up here for a couple of inaugurations with the Governor, so I'd seen the building, had some idea of what was going on, but, just a real sense of responsibility when I got here that hey, "Now I'm representing not just George Kenney, I'm representing some 60,000 people who I grew up with, and I want to make sure I do a great job for them, that no

matter whether they like me politically that I wouldn't" – it's something that I was most proud of; they may not have voted for me, but they didn't dislike me.

JT: Yeah.

GK: I mean, they still respected –

JT: Sure.

GK: – my position, and, I mean, they may not have agreed with me on issues but still respected me, who I was and the way I conducted myself on their behalf as their Representative.

JT: Did you share an office with anyone when you first came?

GK: When I first came, it was with Edgar Carlson [State Representative, Potter and Tioga Counties, 1985-1992] from Tioga County. I don't think I've yet to visit Tioga County. Edgar was from a rural district in the middle of, I guess the, what do they call it? The Grand Canyon of the Northeast? Wellsboro, and still have the lighted lampposts in the town, and I don't even know what they have up there, but so, Edgar and I shared an office. It was funny, going back to the politics, my dad said, "Get to know," you know, "meet other Legislators, not just the same," so, that's been a great experience, but I shared an office with Edgar Carlson.

JT: Do you remember who sat around you when you first sat on the Floor?

GK: Well, it was always the same. I sat with the Philadelphia delegation, so when I came up in [19]84, it was always John Taylor [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1985-present] who came with me in [19]84. He was from Northeast Philadelphia, also. He had beat a Democrat. I had won a Republican seat, an open seat, but it was always John Taylor, myself, Fran Weston [Frances; State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1981-1990], who Mike McGeehan [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1991-present] now has that seat, Chris Wogan who became a judge during reapportionment. Perzel and I split up that territory, so Perzel, Denny O'Brien [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1977-present; Speaker, 2007-2008], that's six. Yeah, there was the six of us, so we all sat in the back of the House, and the Democrat side were all the Democrat Members from Philly, so we always sat in the back of the House. So, yeah, most of the guys behind me were from Allegheny County.

JT: Okay.

GK: George Pott [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1977-1986] and Terry McVerry [Terrance; State Representative, Allegheny County, 1979-1990], and they were some – and actually, Ben Wilson [State Representative, Bucks County, 1967-1990] from Bucks County sat in the last seat in the back. He had seniority, so I guess he didn't want to be with his Bucks County buddies, but – and that was interesting because my wife's from Bucks County and so we had that connection. So, Ben Wilson. And one of the first Committees I asked for was his Committee because he Chaired Finance. But, that was the group back there.

JT: Was there anyone in particular that you saw as a mentor when you first started?

GK: Probably just all those Philadelphia guys. I kept close to them. They knew my district as well as I did. Senator Salvatore was in the Senate, so I always had him to lean on. He was a Caucus Administrator in the House, so I always had that relationship, and just really most of the time just kept an eye on what they were doing, and, you know, that's really who I looked toward. Yeah, no one in particular. I didn't, like, hold on to one person. It was more of a group.

JT: You didn't follow anyone around to know the whereabouts and – ?

GK: No, actually, when we came in [19]84, so [19]85, it was Ron Raymond [State Representative, Delaware County, 1985-2008] from Delaware County, John Taylor, Dave Argall [State Representative, Berks, Lehigh and Schuylkill Counties, 1985-2009; State Senator, 2009-present], and Jon Fox [State Representative, Montgomery County, 1985-1992]. We all shared an apartment, so as freshmen, we all hung together and that's who spent with our first year or two. Orientation – and the freshmen – were always treated as a group more or less.

JT: Right.

GK: So, that's who we spent most of my time with.

JT: Getting into your career in the House then. You had served on a number of Committees during your time here: Consumer Affairs, Finance, Urban Affairs, and so on. Was there one that was particularly your favorite?

GK: Probably the Finance Committee. As I'm getting back to the issue of taxes as being an important issue in my district, it was always the number one issue whenever we did polling or what have you, and I also looked to my colleagues from Philadelphia. I mean, there was no need for all of us to be on the same –

JT: Right.

GK: – out of six of us, spread it out. I know O'Brien and Wogan like – Wogan was a lawyer, and so he was Judiciary, and I mean, John Taylor's even more city than me. He always spent time doing more urban issues, so I always looked, early on, to the Finance Committee. I did seek Appropriations. I know I was trying to think if any of my colleagues – most of them had risen up, and I sat on the Appropriations Committee, so I was always looking that we spread our Committees and got our most bang for the buck, in a sense, and so we, the Philly Republicans, were on as many Committees as we possibly could. No sense in duplicating. So, Finance was, as I mentioned, Ben Wilson also sat right near me, and knowing taxes was an issue back home, so that was always an interest of mine.

JT: What were some of the issues that were important to you that you tried to get some legislation passed?

GK: The biggest issue was going back to the old Philadelphia State Hospital. You know, when you hear this issue, “All politics is local,” what I found out early in my career, I thought people paid attention to Harrisburg, I mean, my constituents. It really was another world to them. I mean, they came in for things but had nothing to do with Harrisburg, I mean, which was the most enlightening thing to me in the sense of I thought they would be worried about House Bill 2820 or – and rarely, if never, I mean, did someone come through my district office asking about a piece of legislation unless they were part of a special interest group. They were a nurse or a realtor, or they didn’t really know nor really care. They knew I was an elected official, so they came through that door, and it was most, I’d say 80 percent, of my issues were local.

JT: Yeah.

GK: Some Federal, and they really didn’t care what I was. They knew they were paying for my salary and they wanted me to address it. So, I was really free to, up here, do – but, if there was an issue back home I would – and that’s what the Appropriation is, mostly looking for money doing, you know, weatherization programs or something, but it was always back home related. Or, the other issues were always related to the city of Philadelphia. School funding; but, I always looked at those issues, “Okay, I’ll help you, city, if city reinvests back in Northeast Philly.” So, they were always the way the issues evolved. I don’t mind sending money downtown, but getting back to this whole concept of secession was still, like, there was still a movement to break away, because they didn’t feel they got the return on investment. So, I always looked at issues from Harrisburg, “Okay, we’re sending money to the school district, or

to these different agencies back home. What you going to invest in Northeast Philly or in my district?” So, that’s how most of the issues evolved. With the closing of Byberry – the Philadelphia State Hospital was known as Byberry – so, there was always issues related to that, in the sense that where were patients going to be placed, or employment, those type of issues, but everything was mostly local, and I really focused on local issues.

JT: One of the pieces of legislation that you had introduced was House Bill 720 in 2007, known as the Clean Indoor Air Act. Was this something that was important to you personally? Was this a constituent-based issue? How did you get involved in that?

GK: The way that happened is I became the Chairman of the Health Committee in, like, 2002, and that was really – I was Urban Affairs Chairman. There’s a story; as I said, Wogan became a judge. I convinced O’Brien to take his Consumer Affairs Committee at the time. Then we choose new Chairman by seniority. So, what had happened is Health and Human Services opened up then. And I remember being home one Friday and Matt Ryan [Matthew J.; State Representative, Delaware County, 1965-2003; Speaker, 1981-1982 and 1995-2003], who was our Leader, called down and said, “It’s down to you,” and I said, “What’s down to me?” He said, “No one wants this Health and Human Services Committee.” He said, “Would you be interested?” And I said, “Oh, sure,” you know, it’s something – having a pharmaceutical background – and then John Taylor got Intergovernmental, and I didn’t last long on – I kept Urban, and John eventually got Urban, so it worked out. So, when I took over Urban – we deal mostly with the government programs, Medicaid – and when I saw the cost of providing Medical Assistance to our low-income Pennsylvanians, one of the drivers was smoking, and, you know,

some of the statistics were overwhelming that smoking – I think the health care costs just, just in our public sector was about four billion dollars, and it was a national movement, you know, smoking bans across the country, and I think Sue Cornell [Susan; State Representative, Montgomery County, 2004-2006] was one of the first Members probably a couple years prior to that who had taken up that cause by, I'll say [20]05, because I don't remember the years, and Stew Greenleaf [Stewart; State Representative, Montgomery County, 1977-1978; State Senator, 1979-2010] was a Senator from Montgomery County who borders my district, he had introduced it in the Senate. So, for her term we tried to get that passed. I was the Majority Chairman. It was the only vote in committee. We did bring it up, and I always said to my Democrat colleague, Frank Oliver [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1973-2010], you know, "If we bring a bill up, it's to move it forward." I remember bringing the smoking ban up when I was the Chairman. You're talking about every special interest group for and against up in the Ryan Office Building, and we had a roll call vote, and (*laugh*) 14-14 was the vote.

JT: Oh.

GK: It was the most – some Members still think I purposely (*laugh*) wanted it 14-14 because there was people on both sides of the issue. But, Sue Cornell was an outgoing Member at the time. Now, by the time we got around to it, she had been defeated in the Primary, and I tried to get it done at least for her behalf, because she was leaving, and we just couldn't get it done. So, what happened is, a new Session comes and I thought it would still be an important issue, so I did introduce it, and I am now a Minority Chairman –

JT: Right.

GK: – in [20]07. I was the Majority Chairman with the prior Session. What happened then is, Mike Gerber [Michael; State Representative, Montgomery County, 2005-present], a freshman Democrat from Montgomery County, the Democrats want to control the agenda and who gets what credit, so I had introduced the same bill Sue, Representative Cornell, had, but they wanted a Democrat to have it, so they gave Mike Gerber the legislation and we, and we championed nice, you know, I mean, I didn't begrudge him. I knew it was an important issue to him, so I still wanted it passed and signed into law, and certainly the votes in committee were always overwhelming, you know, when Democrat Chairman Oliver had brought it up. But, it was an important issue. I think it makes sense, and a healthier Pennsylvania I think we'll have from that.

JT: Absolutely. In the last few years you were named Legislator of the Year by the ARC of Pennsylvania for your, and I'm quoting this, "The tireless work on behalf of citizens with cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disabilities and their families." This, obviously, was important to you. What, what's sparked this interest? Was this also constituent-based, or – ?

GK: Yeah, I mean, there were constituents that I would always, in this whole issue of institutionalization, dealing with the old Byberry. Byberry was closed, the old Philadelphia State Hospital was closed, because there were advocacy groups – this is going back into the [19]80s – that just said the mentally ill should not be just warehoused.

JT: Right.

GK: And so, at the time, being a new Legislator it was a tough issue because it employed thousands of people.

JT: Right.

GK: We were, at the time, spending like. I think it was almost like 39,000 dollars per patient; [a] huge number. Almost 60-some million dollars, I mean, so it was a huge economic engine, but over time I just learned to agree. If you have ever visited at least Philadelphia State, there were documentaries on it, and I began to support the advocates. Say, you know, in human consciousness, how do we put people in these environments? And, and what I also found out is most of them were self-committed, because history just said, That's where we put those that were mentally retarded – lot of mentally retarded, not just mentally ill – and I'm talking about, when we moved the summer, I'm going way back in the [19]60s, there were some 5,000 to 6,000 patients in Philadelphia State Hospital. At the time I took over in [19]80 as a Legislator, there were some 500-and-some patients, but still many of them shouldn't have been warehoused. So, that issue grew my interest in institutionalization, because we do have centers across – they were predominately mentally ill in our Philadelphia State Hospital System – and then we do have institutions for our mentally retarded. And as those advocacy groups started talking to me, and with the movement to a community-based system where these community living arrangements for those with the MR [mental retardation], were able to function in the community with assistance. That whole movement started in the [19]80s, into the [19]90s, and we have really

started to shut down our institutional – so, I became an advocate, and as you met parents that, I mean, really, their fear was, is their aging in place? What they’ve always said to me is they never want their children to wind-up in one of these institutions. They want to make sure their children wind up in a community living arrangement out in the community. So, I did take up that [cause], and then when I become Health Chairman, I became more passionate, because they are the least vulnerable of our society. I mean, if the government should be stepping in and protecting and helping people, it’s those that are unable to help and protect themselves. So, I became very involved with those advocacy groups, probably, you know, more involved, I should say –

JT: Right.

GK: – when I became the Chairman and really advocated for programming and support for those families and especially those individuals, ensuring that there was a system in place that protected these citizens, especially knowing their parents were all growing older, but they wanted them to make sure they were out in the community, and that’s not politically correct all the time because – but that’s how I became passionate at that issue and thought that’s what government should be doing.

JT: In dealing with your committee work and then the House Floor, what obstacles did you come across when trying to get some of your sponsored legislation passed?

GK: No matter what we spoke about, it always came down to money, or somebody always had the money issue, and I will use one issue; I asked one of my colleagues today on the – we protect newborns to 18, especially those with disabilities. We have protective services for them. We have protective services for older adults from 60 on. There are laws on the books that give them special protection. The group we do not protect are 19-59, and one of the disappointments – there was always a bill we moved out of Committee, could never get it done, was the Adult Protective Services Act, and I'll give this as a sidebar; when we just did the Puppy Mill Bill, which had national attention, how we had to protect – which I had no problem protecting – puppies and the environment they lived in, ensuring that they get a proper start at nutrition, medical care, the environment they lived in was okay. It was interesting. I had one advocate back home said, you know, “George, you have laws on the books to protect puppies, but you have no law on the book to protect an adult from 19-59.”

JT: Yeah.

GK: And you almost say, “You’re kidding,” and there’s nothing that says if you believe a person in that age range, mentally retarded, is being housed in a poor environment or not getting medical attention, there’s nothing you or I can do legally to knock on that door and say, “We think you’re treating your son and daughter,” or “your dependent,” if it’s a custodial arrangement, there’s nothing that says I can come in and look at – “Give me the medical records for that mentally retarded child.” You legally can’t do it, and you start thinking. And I said to one of my colleagues, a Democrat colleague, before I left, “Could you get that done at some point soon?” I said, “I wish I could have time,” and the first thing was money. And I said, “You

know, out of a 26 billion dollar budget, if we can take care of puppies, we certainly should be able to protect” – and not that it goes on and on, but not one person should be subjected or abused in an environment where their health is threatened, or they live in soil and soot and just are abused and neglected, and that no human being should be in that position, so. But money’s always the obstacle that, “It’s going to cost money to put that into place or to inspect,” but I think that’s something we should do.

JT: Did you find speaking on the, the House Floor comfortable?

GK: Never. Back home, getting back to my district, very few – being from the city, it was usually larger – and I’ll use the Lions. I mean, we don’t have a Lions Club. We did but it was very small, very inactive, disbanded a few years ago. So, you didn’t have these Lions luncheons to speak at. I never had the forums back home to speak at. Like, I was not invited – it was only when I became a Chairman later on in my career was I invited beyond my district to speak on issues, school violence, those type of issues, and I was appointed to a couple Special Committees, and the Urban School Restructuring Commission I sat on, where we traveled the state and we were outspoken then, and we got to speak. But, never in the environment when I needed to go to the House Floor and spend a lot of time speaking on an issue. Tried to do all my work – I mean, if you were going to bring one of my bills up or, if you knew the votes were there, I could. But, speaking in public, I think, is still something that still I get nervous at and still – so I was not a big, not a big Floor speaker. Mostly in committee, one-on-one, that type of thing.

JT: How did it feel to finally see some of your sponsored legislation be Acts?

GK: Become laws? It was good, but I got over them pretty quick. I mean, some people sit, and it was something I was advocated for. It's always nice to hear people – they're a lot more important, I guess, in a funny way hearing people describe – and I'll just use this newborn screening, was one of the last things we had done. The March of Dimes honored me, and Secretary of Public Welfare, Estelle Richman, and when she got up and spoke about me, I was almost, you know, and when the March of Dimes described me, it was like, "Oh, I, you know – it's pretty important stuff," but I knew it was important, but not to the – these people live it every day, and it felt good – I mean, knowing you made a difference, and that's a good feeling.

JT: Was there a typical Session day, or were they all different?

GK: I think they were all different. I mean, during the budget season they were like typical sit and wait, sit and wait, sit and wait. But non budget, I think they were all different. I mean, you had different issues most of the time, and usually, if you went to Caucus, you knew what to expect. But sitting where we sat in the back we had a great, both D and R, we were away from the fray in the sense of we weren't down in the well speaking where our Leaders spoke down in front, so we could have a lot of conversation, a lot of talk and chatter.

JT: Speaking of which, how was the camaraderie on the House?

GK: In the back? Oh, I thought it was – as I said, there was always a small group in the back. I mean, and the last several years, I mean, the very back. So, you were the last, and there's, like, special Democrats, and they would come over, and we would just sit and shoot the breeze and talk about whatever, and I was fortunate; Chairman Oliver, my Democrat counterpart in Health and Human Services was right there, so if we had an issue – I mean, he literally sat across the aisle from me – our staffs would come down, we would work on issues right there, resolve them right on the Floor. So, that was always convenient, and Frank was always good to work with.

JT: Did you have a relationship, good or bad, with the media in your district?

GK: A good relationship with the local media. Our market being *The Inquirer* and *The Daily News* back home, we were, like, small potatoes, and they really didn't spend a lot, you know – if we were casting big votes up here, and I would say a tax vote or pro-life, say, something that was controversial back home that we would get maybe mentioned once or twice, you know, the roll call vote or guns. But the local, the weeklies; great relationship. They were really an extension of our, our offices, really. I mean, because everything overlaps in a city. There are so many legislators from the city, we overlap media markets, even the dailies, so they were an extension. They ran off what was available in our offices, and they were consistent with what the other offices were doing, so, but it was a good relationship.

JT: Good. Over the years you probably have seen a lot of technological advancements, specifically laptops on the House Floor for everyone; PCN [Pennsylvania Cable Network], the

continual feed of the House Sessions. Do you have an opinion on if that's too much or if that's good?

GK: Oh, I think it's great. I really do think it's – I mean, it's instant contact now. I mean, it is, I think, something very positive for democracy and a civic lesson and for a Legislator this way you get answers. Certainly the information is available to you to develop an answer or an opinion or develop an issue, and your constituents have almost instant access. I came here and we didn't have cell phones or computers or, you know, so everything was – I'd call home like once a night, and that was my – to find out what was going on with the family, and we called the district office. But, it was all paper, and legislation would sit on our desk, and it was, like, thick, and I think this has been something very positive.

JT: Over the, well over 20 years that you've been in office, what do you think was the most important issue or the most important piece of legislation that went before the House?

GK: As a pro-life Legislator, I always – and just for my, I'll call it, a compassionate conservatism, I thought protecting life was always an – and not to say it has been controversial all those years, too, but we're probably one of the most pro-life Legislatures in the country and probably still are, and that's what led me to, you know, where government should, you know, stand up for those who don't have a voice, you know? But I think the most contentious issues were always those pro-life debates.

JT: Oh, sure.

GK: And some, some of the budget debates over just whether you were fiscally conservative or – but I was always very socially conservative, and I think they were the probably the most contentious.

JT: What do you think is the toughest issue before the Legislature today?

GK: I do believe it's right now going to be, how do we deliver for our citizens in the sense of protecting the Pennsylvania's economy, ensuring that there are jobs, and I think going forward I think this whole benefits – health benefits and their pensions – protecting those programs in the future, I think, are going to be the tough choices in the 21st Century. It is going to be difficult because there's fewer resources, money, and there's a real fear out there. I sense people are worried about their jobs, but also those who have invested in their healthcare and their pensions. What's that future look like for them? And you hear so often now that people who now thought they could retire in a year or two are now thinking five years, and it's frightening. And when you look at our own pension fund, as a future State retiree, I think we've lost like ten billion dollars in our pension fund over – it's a huge fund, but when you hear those numbers, you just say wow, and I think that's going to be – we really have to get our House in order, just priority spending, ensure there's a balance of protecting those retiring or near retirement, protecting pension funds, and at the same time trying to grow Pennsylvania's economy.

JT: What was your, or I should say, what aspect of the job did you like the most?

GK: I think the people I got to meet. Not only back home, you know, I got to meet a lot of great neighbors, and I call everyone neighbor because, I mean, the district's not that large in the sense of , when you hear some of my colleagues travel 250 miles from one end to the other. I had to maybe travel five to seven miles now. But, just the people you had the pleasure of meeting and interacting with.

JT: Was there a least favorite?

GK: I think the least favorite part of the job was I remember always leaving home thinking, oh, I got to go out to Harrisburg, spend two or three days. I'd rather, you know, I'd rather stay home. And then when you're out here, it's just being the disconnect from back home. That was the toughest part. I understood some of what my constituents thought was another world because it really is another world from Philly to coming to Harrisburg, and that was a tough – people think it's a gorgeous building, and the atmosphere's wonderful, and the people are great, but it is still a lonely, I think, a lonely, lonely job in the sense that you spend an awful lot of time, not by yourself, but, you know, you make new friends, and, you know, you go out to dinner late just because the night gets over quicker. So you stay in your office later, go out to dinner later, so the day comes to an end quicker. I mean, so that's what we did, but I think it's a lonely job. As great as the events we get and the people we get to meet, I think it can be a lonely job, too.

JT: You mentioned the one issue earlier that was a somewhat of a disappointment that you didn't get to work on legislation for 19 to 59 year olds. Were there any other issues or pieces of

legislation that you would have loved to have seen discussed or passed that you didn't necessarily get to?

GK: No, there's some back home, and I would say there's still some road issues, and I have a Woodhaven road project that's been on the books for over, probably, 1952, I think it started, so it's like a 56 year old issue. That's something. And I thought we were getting as close as we had been in working with my State Senator and PennDOT. I thought we were finally going to get something, but that fizzled out in the end, but it was legislation that we've had on the books for, you know, in the funding plan but still never got – and there is a state park that is still not developed. Was first conceived in 1976. We put the funding in in 1999, Senator Salvatore and I, and that money has still not been spent, and it's those things that you wish you still had a little more time to get them done, and I hope, you know, I'll see those things done. But, I'm trying to think if there's one issue that stands out that I wish we got to. There is one resolution that – one of my last – I think even today the bill was signed Senate Bill 1114. I had language in there. A resident of my district, Stephen Lesvinsky, a police sergeant in Philly, was killed in May of this year [2008], May 3rd, and there was a resolution on the calendar memorializing him and thanking him for his service, which we didn't get done, but at the same time, I didn't want it done in a way just to do it. I want it in a way where his – well, let me go back. In the legislation, I did get done memorializing him along Route 73 through our district where there'll be a plaque. PennDOT will erect a sign in memory of Police Sergeant Stephen Lesvinsky that will be on Route 73 through his neighborhood in the Burholme section where he lived, so as you enter Philly from Montgomery County on Cottman Avenue, there'll be that tribute through his – Cottman runs through Burholme – his neighborhood, so that got done. The one thing we didn't get done is

where we bring the family up and memorialize him on the House Floor. The resolution's on the Calendar, but I did want it where my successor can, you know, come up, bring the family up next year, and pay a tribute to him and thank him for his sacrifice.

JT: Okay. I like to ask each of the Members that I talk to if they have a particular story that they would like to share that not necessarily a lot of people know that happened during the House, whether it's a funny story, a happy story, a sad story, something really interesting that would be nice, you know, to have.

GK: I don't know if it would be one of the most – going back to the smoking ban, the 14-14 tie, I think it was neither the Democrat Leader was against it and the Republican Leader, and the Members were very uncomfortable. They'd rather us not bring this issue up, and I said I thought it important, and I said to Chairman Oliver, “Are you ready?” And some of the Members really weren't happy about – they didn't want to upset anyone. I mean, so, here we go. Someone's going to be mad at the end of this, and I knew both Leaders did not like it, and, so the roll call starts, and I'm, you know, I'm marking along the way, and I'm thinking, oh, my, you know, and Chairman Oliver switched his vote to no, so now I knew I was in real trouble. So it ends 14-14, and John Taylor, who's sitting on the committee he says, “Yo, George, 14-14, like you, you couldn't pull this off. How'd you do that?” he says. He thought I actually did it on purpose because, he thought, let's have a tie vote, you know, nobody loses in the sense it's tied. I mean, we didn't defeat or win, you know. And still to this day, I think he thinks I arranged it that way. And there was a line – Edgar Carlson, going back to who I first started, I remember him saying a line, “George, some of your friends are for it, some of your friends are against it; you're always

for your friends,” So, John Taylor says to me, “Yo, George,” he said, “how’d you pull that off?” And I, like, I knew what I was doing said, “Hey, John, some of our friends were for it, some of our friends were against it. We were for our friends,” and he just burst out laughing, but he really thought it was an orchestrated – and it really wasn’t. I was trying to get the bill passed. I was the Majority Chairman, but he, I think to this day, believes I had it down to a perfect everyone, no one could be mad because no one lost. No one won, but that’s how good I was as a Chairman. *(laugh)*

JT: There you go. Why are you leaving the House?

GK: Decided in [20]05 to leave the House. I told my leadership back home, told John Perzel, that was the day before – a year ago. It was the day before Thanksgiving, in [20]05. I said, “John, I have,” now Liz and I have had six – I don’t think there’s any Legislator in modern times that has had six children – I came here single, and I don’t think there’s anybody had six children –

JT: Wow.

GK: – going back for, I don’t know. You can go back in the history books. I don’t think we’ve ever – but, I was married in my first term, and we had six children. Caroline, our oldest, is deceased, but so, I have five children now: 21, 19, 17, 14 and six, all with the same woman. And my wife said to me, and we were talking, I mean, you know, It’s more competitive back home. I’m a Republican in a Democrat city. We’re down to like three Republicans out of the –

because when I started there was six of us, so Liz and I sat down. I said, “Look,” – she said, “You can stay, you know. We need money,” and we had just – the pay raise; we just had that fiasco. So, we knew there was no more money ever going to be made. I did not have – wasn’t a lawyer or have a family business where I had an income where someone could –

JT: Right.

GK: Liz was working like three jobs, so I decided in [20]05 I’d go to Leadership, and I said, “I’m not running in [20]06,” so they said, “Please don’t tell anybody.” Well, so January comes of [20]06, and I call my Party leader back home, John Perzel, I said, “Yo, remember I’m – yo!” because you have to file, like, in February. I said, “I’m not running.” He said, “George, it’s a little late now, isn’t it?” So, I wound up running in [20]06. So then my wife says, you know, we did need money – I mean, financially, five tuitions, two in college, two in high school, one in grade school, so I made the decision very public, like, in [20]07. (*laugh*) I publically went out, “I’m not running.” I had a great 24 years. It was just time for me to – financially, I needed to help my family, and my wife has these three part-time jobs, and it was just time, too. I think it was just you just know, and you sense when it’s your time to move on, and it was my time. And, mostly financial, but – I was young. I came in a young man, 24 years later leaving a young man, 51. Will start a new career back home. I hope to, you know, hope to stay involved in the sense of the Governor’s reached out to me, even as a Republican, say “Would you just serve in some capacity, whether it be on a commission or a board?” and I see he’s coming up with some ideas, so I said I would look at them. I said, “I want to come at the most one day a month to serve.” Hopefully, I can be back home with my advocacy on some of the issues. I’ve been asked to be

on a couple statewide boards, but I don't want to commit to something I can't give them the – and I've said to a couple of these boards that they like just having a former Legislator on board, and I said that I don't want to do it just to put my name on it and not participate. I really want to be involved, so hopefully, I'll stay involved, and I'll be involved back home.

JT: Good. How would you like your tenure in the House to be remembered?

GK: George Kenney was always a gentleman, served his constituents honorably. Some people don't like the term but he was a nice guy and respected and respected the institution and respected those he served with.

JT: Good. Final question for you: what advice would you have for new Members?

GK: New Members, I would say, pick a couple issues or a Committee and just stay focused on a couple issues and become the best at those issues, knowing the most about that issue, pro and con, and articulating them and becoming passionate about them and never forgetting where you came from. Never forgetting home, because as important as we think we are up here, you know, back home we do represent our neighbors, but we still have an obligation to hear them. They come first, not the special interest in Harrisburg. Their issues come first. You know, your neighborhoods back home come first, and just don't forget that, and, I think, any freshmen can, you know, have a great career here and do great work. Even my, my – I'll have a Democrat replacing me, but I wish him the best. Advocate for our communities, and if he's advocating for our communities, I think he'll do fine.

JT: Good. Representative George Kenney, I'd like to thank you very much for participating in our Oral History program and for sharing your stories with us today.

GK: Thank you.

JT: And good luck with everything you do.

GK: Thank you, Jesse. Thank you very much.