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BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

The Honorable Gerald Kaufman (D)

23rd District

Allegheny County

1967-1972

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Jennifer Ott (JO): I'm here today with former State Representative Gerald Kaufman who represented the 23rd Legislative District from the years 1967 to 1972. The 23rd District included part of Allegheny County. Thank you for being here with me today.

The Honorable Gerald Kaufman (GK): Thank you for having me.

JO: We're going to start with a few questions about your background. So, can you please describe your childhood and your family life?

GK: That's a simple question.

JO: Yep.

GK: My childhood was pretty normal, Jewish, Squirrel Hill, which is a section of Pittsburgh that is very Jewish and very affluent – so do you want me to go into, like, college?

JO: Sure, if you want to tell me about your educational background that would be great.

GK: Okay. So, I went to private school for high school at Kiskiminetas Spring School in Saltsburg outside of Pittsburgh. I had gone to summer camp there, so I did four years there and then I went to Yale. It was not easy to get into, but I did. And I went from there to Columbia Law School and then I went from there to practicing law with my father in Pittsburgh. And I led, what I call, a life that was subscribed for me. This is what I was expected to do: go to private

school, go to an elite college, go to an elite law school, practice law with my father, live in the same community where I grew up and my parent lived. And after about six years, I thought, “I can’t take this anymore.” I had to break out. I lived such a script that I then went to – I got involved with politics and I was running the campaign for state legislature for Molly Yard¹ who was well known, she headed the National Organization for Women (NOW), and she lost. She was not Jewish running in a Jewish district and then it was my turn. And I ran and won, and spent three terms in the state legislature. And it was an incredible experience because, what did I know about that world? And I really rose pretty much to prominence doing that. Even though it was only six years, but I was very out front on so many issues of our day, environmental, women’s rights, civil rights, I was there. And one of the main things that I did was sponsor the Equal Rights Amendment to the Pennsylvania Constitution. And that was unique in the country at the time, I think, equal rights for women. But I was involved in lots and lots of stuff in public issues, in welfare, in equal rights, in public assistance, making sure that people had a fair living. And so that was a lot of my focus.

JO: Can we back up a little bit, and can you tell me about your first campaign, campaigning in general, did you enjoy that?

GK: Oh yes, I enjoyed it very much. My campaign, you know, I really had to work hard because I ran against a Republican incumbent, even though it was a very Democratic district, and I won. And I raised all the liberal issues. I really went on the – I was going to say attack, but it wasn’t an attack it was – I was going to say the word prominent – I made news. That’s what I

¹ Molly Yard: unsuccessful candidate for election to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, 1964. She was president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) from 1987 to 1991.

did. And I made news on so many issues and the district then responded to me and it was very liberal district and I was very liberal.

JO: Do you remember your first Swearing-In here in Harrisburg?

GK: Do you have anything to remind me of?

JO: Well, often times people remember all the flowers and their family coming with them for the first time — most people don't live near here and sometimes Swearing-In is the first time they're actually in Harrisburg.

GK: Well, my family, I'm sure my father as a lawyer, he'd been in Harrisburg and I don't know about my mother or my sister, I think she came to my Swearing-In as well.

JO: Okay. You mentioned a little bit about your district, Squirrel Hill, can you tell me what was that district like and what were the issues that were important to the people that lived there.

GK: Well, the district was pretty heavily Jewish: reformed, conservative, orthodox. I went into a lot of synagogues and temples but also liberal Christian organizations. I mean, I was everywhere. I was very active and I think I touched the liberal base of my district because I was outspoken as hell.

JO: Once you were in Harrisburg was it easy to keep your constituents informed about what went on in Harrisburg?

GK: Well I was in the news a lot so that way I did press releases, reporters covered me, I was newsworthy. I was out there on so many of the controversial issues of the time. And I was out there. And I got a lot of press coverage.

JO: Whenever you got to Harrisburg did you have anyone take on a mentor role for you, to show you how things were done?

GK: Maybe Irvis [K. Leroy; State Representative, Allegheny County, 1959-1990; Speaker of the House, 1977-1978 and 1983-1988]. Maybe Fineman [Herbert; State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1955-1978; Speaker of the House, 1969-1972 and 1975-1977]. But I'm not sure. Maybe Bob Butera [Robert; State Representative, Montgomery County, 1963-1977] *[Aside to former Representative Butera who was in the room during interview]* Did I look to you as a mentor in Harrisburg when I got there?

Robert J. Butera: *I think more of a friend. Maybe I gave you some direction because I had been here for a while.*

GK: Okay, because Democrats and Republicans didn't become friends.

JO: That's unusual for the opposite party to be your mentor or advisor of any sort.

GK: Yeah, so what I was known for was being controversial. I was out front on so many issues and so much interviewed and I had large press coverage. I mean for a freshman Member I had a large press coverage, because I was controversial.

JO: You've mentioned some of the issues that were important to you, I'm going to ask about some of them specifically.

GK: Go ahead.

JO: Why was civil rights an issue you were passionate about?

GK: Just who I was. That's not a very good answer, but I think, again, my mentors I had Irvis, I had friends who were very active in the Civil Rights Movement and I went to Harrisburg with that as part of my background.

JO: You mentioned a little bit about your work for an Equal Rights Amendment to Pennsylvania's Constitution. Can you tell me about any resistance you faced trying to get that accomplished?

GK: Oh yeah. Our state and our society was not very open to women's rights in those times. And the fact that Molly Yard, the president of NOW who campaigned the term before me, helped set the stage. But it was really a hot issue. It was becoming a hot issue and women were beginning to assert themselves, well that's not the right word, but to become more strong and as

a group. And I captured that. And, you know, I think if there had been a strong woman around I probably wouldn't have, but there wasn't. I mean, we didn't have somebody who was going to be the leading feminist for the Equal Rights Amendment. Now, a lot of people joined. It became pretty popular. You know, it had to go through two sessions of the legislature and then had to go on the ballot and it did that. It's one of my proudest moments.

JO: Why do you think it was a struggle to find, or that women were resistant to lead that cause?

GK: Because they were subjected, they were subjugated, they were treated as inferior, they didn't want to assert themselves in this male world. After I did it, you know, it became, it wasn't just for me, I mean, all over the country women's rights were being pushed. But it was hard here. This is a very conservative state. But, go ahead.

JO: Your next issue that you had a lot of legislation, a lot of press on, were your efforts dealing with welfare and poverty in Pennsylvania. How did that issue become important to you?

GK: Well, the welfare rights and those groups came to me. I mean, I was the beacon for all that kind of — in the Democratic Party. And so, I became the —

JO: The one they brought it to.

GK: You know, and they reached out and it was very exciting to see your gender get so involved and so excited about equal rights. And the idea the equal rights for women, “What, are you crazy?” That wasn’t part of our society. Very fulfilling and very exciting for me.

JO: Do you have any issues or legislation that didn’t get across the finish line while you were here that you regret or something that, ‘ah, didn’t get as far with that as would have wanted to go.’?”

GK: I don’t know. Can you think of any?

JO: Well, I mean, you had some abortion bills that I know didn’t quite make it, but you did pretty good for only being here three terms.

GK: Oh, so I did sponsor pro-choice bills.

JO: Yes, you did.

GK: And they didn’t get very far. It was just so powerful on the other side.

JO: Do you think that partisanship has gotten worse since you were in office? Because you’re mentioning it and we talk a lot about it now, but this was –

GK: We'll, I think in today's legislature the Republicans have become so conservative and they're so dominate that it's very hard for people on my side to do what we want to do. The resistance wasn't as strong back then. You know, I put out the Equal Rights Amendment and that was I think, well I'm trying to remember. I thought, did it pass?

JO: Yeah, Pennsylvania passed it in the [19]70s.

GK: Yeah, but that, I think if it came up today it wouldn't pass. I think we were able to kind of keep it under the surface. 'What do you mean equal rights?' 'Well, you don't want your mother being equal to your father?' You know, it was an easier argument. And there was not quite the organized opposition that there is now.

JO: Interesting. You were in office during some of the years of the Vietnam War.

GK: Right.

JO: And there is some press about you supporting Vietnam War protestors, and I know that you yourself have some military background. Can you talk about your relationship to those protestors and why you supported them?

GK: Well I was a protestor too.

JO: Okay.

GK: That's why I supported them!

JO: Great.

GK: Now I thought the Vietnam War was one of the important key issues of our time, my time. What we were doing there, why we were there, made no sense to me. Just killing people. So, I'm a very, you know, I was very active in protests and we did a lot of on the street protesting. We marched, we held rallies, it was a very important of my time.

JO: Do you think it was an advantage being in the army yourself and being a protestor? Did it give you a little more authority to talk on it?

GK: No, no, people didn't know I was in the Army. I was in the reserves. I was in the Army for six months. I mean it was –

JO: Not a career.

GK: No big deal.

JO: Alright, you mentioned being very outspoken, even when you first got here and that people came to you with important issues. What was your strength as a legislator that they saw in you? Why did they think you were going to be able to it done as a new guy?

GK: Good question. What's the matter with them? They were crazy. They didn't know what they were doing. Because, I guess, and this is just a guess, that there was nobody else around who was going to carry the ball on the left as I was. There were some people who supported anti-war stuff and other stuff, but they weren't going to be the leaders in it. And I was out front and that's what I wanted to do. I mean, why did I get elected to the legislature if I wasn't going to do that kind of stuff?

JO: What was your family's response to you taking some controversial positions and being out there?

GK: They were proud of me. I think they were proud of me. I don't remember hearing anything from my parents, "take it easy, don't go there." I don't remember any of that. I'm not saying it wasn't there, but I don't remember it.

JO: Did your politics impact your family? Your wife and children?

GK: I don't think so. I think my kids were proud to the extent that they were old enough to be proud of me. And my wife then, I don't know. That's a good question. Was she embarrassed? I think she wasn't. I think she was supportive, yeah.

JO: That's good. Do you remember any committees you enjoyed working on? I know you were on Health and Welfare, and you were on the Education Committee, and you even had a

subcommittee [chair] on welfare for Appropriations which is pretty impressive for a young Member. No committee work stuck out?

GK: No.

JO: That's no problem. Why did you decide not to run for office anymore? You had a lot of success while you were here, and you left after just six years.

GK: It was time. Wasn't the Vietnam War over?

JO: It was wrapping up when you were leaving.

GK: And so, I didn't have the kind of important goal. I had done what I came to do. Stop the War.

JO: What did you do in the years after you left office? You still had a lot of working years ahead of you.

GK: Oh my gosh, most of my life.

JO: Yeah.

GK: Well, I became involved in most of the progressive issues of our time. If I can remember what they were. I was still a spokesperson. I still took leads. I wish I could remember.

JO: That's okay. I know you practiced law, you continued to practice law.

GK: Yep.

JO: What kind of law did you practice?

GK: Well, corporate, tax, the usual, middle class business law with my father.

JO: You eventually left Pittsburgh and moved to Philadelphia. What prompted your relocation across the state?

GK: Well, I did something else in between, didn't I?

JO: You had Pennsylvania Legal Services Core. You had worked for them for a while.

GK: Oh, yeah.

JO: And then you didn't.

GK: And then what?

JO: And then you didn't.

GK: Pennsylvania Legal Services Center, you know, I ran that. And that was the free legal services for the poor. So, I was always wanting to work in social change organizations, and that was one of them.

JO: You were the president of the Southeastern Pennsylvanian Chapter for Democratic Action in Philadelphia.

GK: I was, I don't remember that. In Philadelphia, even though I'm from Allegheny County?

JO: I think it was more recent.

GK: Oh, that's a more recent one.

JO: Yeah. It's no problem. Do you remember any fun things you did while you were in the House that didn't have to do with law making? Friends you made? Things you did after hours that you remember fondly?

GK: Did a lot drinking.

JO: Okay

GK: Now we did, we partied a lot.

JO: Is that where the real law work gets done? After hours?

GK: Yes, a lot of it. A lot of it, yeah. And I was out there very much, very much.

JO: Do you think that's still the way Harrisburg runs or do you think it's different now that there's a little more of a watchful eye on the Members here by the press and people.

GK: Yeah, because the press then, we would go out drinking together. And I don't know. I really don't know how it's different now.

JO: You're a little bit far from town to know now.

GK: Yeah.

JO: What part of being a Representative did most enjoy?

GK: And least enjoy.

JO: And least enjoy?

GK: Well, I think the least part was responding to calls and mail and writing letters and the most was social change.

JO: Do you think that social change in the way that was possible in your time is still possible now?

GK: No. No, I don't. Have you asked this question to others? Did anyone say yes to that question?

JO: We don't have to many interviews with people who served so long ago.

GK: Okay. Now your question was is social change –

JO: Yeah, it just seems like you were able to get a lot accomplished in a very little time.

GK: Very little time. No. I don't think you can do it today. I think the conservative side that's opposed to this kind of social change has become much more powerful. And people like me were sort of unique because nobody ever heard of some of the stuff we talked about. And I think now there's so much build up against it that the conservative, if you can even call them conservative, the resistance to that kind of change is so strong in corporate America that we didn't have that kind of money in politics that we have now. I think it is so disturbing how much that side has been able to buy what's happening in our society.

JO: Do you have any disappointments or regrets about your time in office or about leaving office?

GK: I have some regrets about leaving office. Although, I really had no choice. I had accomplished what I wanted to accomplish in six years and it was time to move on. I don't think I had the personality to make a career of it. But part of me is sad about that. But I think I got done what I could have. I really do. You know, there was all kinds of stuff that we did in changing our world. And the fact that these issues that I was active in aren't even talked about and, I mean, look at the changes we have made in civil rights, education. So, I think I was a good catalyst, but I think it was over for me, six years.

JO: What advice would you give to current Members of the House?

GK: Shape up. I think, you know, the current Members, you need a leader, you need some leaders, who are going to take positions that are going to build public support for where we're going. And, I mean, those are hard. Now there is this huge movement to reduce the size of the House.

JO: You had some advocacy for that during your time and we still talk about it.

GK: What did I do?

JO: I found some news clippings where you said there should be a smaller Assembly and advocated for more staff for Members.

GK: Okay. I don't remember that. But, the salaries have gotten higher and I think being reelected has become a huge issue. I mean, I was in for three terms, then I left. Now you've got retirement, you've got salaries, nobody wants to leave, so you'll do whatever it takes to stay in, and I think that is the most destructive new trend in public life.

JO: How would you want someone to remember you and your time in office and the issues that you stood for?

GK: Kindly. I would want some people to begin to say, we aren't doing those kinds of things anymore, and we need to reconstruct or rethink who we elected to public office. And it shouldn't be the big corporate types who are paid and are paid by the lobbyists. I mean, I think it's become so corrupt that it's really hard to be back where we were in my time.

JO: It's very different.

GK: Yeah. Very different. And I think the high salaries and the jobs that you get afterwards are so part of the culture of who we are and making money is the –

JO: Well, the last thing I was just going to ask you is: What else do you have to say? Any other fun stories or things that I should know about you and what made your time in office unique?

GK: That's a hard question.

JO: It is.

GK: Well, one of the things is I could do on the left, and I had a constituency that would reelect me, and I could be who I was. I didn't have to worry about getting reelected. And if I did, then I didn't get reelected. Did I get defeated or did I quit?

JO: You didn't run — no you went out a winner.

GK: That's what I thought. It's making me sad.

JO: Why?

GK: To think about what was possible then and what's possible now. What I did, was able to do with help, I mean, I wasn't alone. I had colleagues that worked with me and voted with me and — all the sudden I'm feeling very sad of what the possibility was and doesn't seem to be here anymore.

JO: I would be interested to know if other people feel that way too. But maybe when you're in it you feel differently.

GK: Who are you interviewing? Who else are you interviewing?

JO: You're the only one we're interviewing for now. We tend to only do our interviews when the cycles of a two-year session are up and we interview people as they leave. So, no one until probably next fall.

GK: But any idea of what kind of people you want to look at?

JO: Well, we ask everybody who retires.

GK: Oh, you do?

JO: We do. I will say we are trying to track down some former women Reps right now, but, yeah, you're the only one on the agenda.

GK: Oh, okay. Thank you. That's nice.

JO: I'm glad — thank you very much for talking to me, if you remember anything else let us know we can always talk again or you can write things down for us and we'll add to you interview.

GK: Alright, let me think about that because memory is pretty gone.

JO: Absolutely, maybe if we jog some things, you can write them down and send them to us and we'll add it to this.

GK: Okay, so what do you mean, 'jog some things'?

JO: If you remember after you walk out of here.

GK: Okay.

JO: Okay.

GK: Alright. Okay.

JO: Well, thank you very much for talking with me today.

GK: Thank you very much.

JO: It was a pleasure.

GK: Oh, it was a pleasure.