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BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

The Honorable Dennis E. Leh (R)

130th District

Berks County

1987-2006

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Heidi Mays (HM): Good morning.

The Honorable Dennis Leh (DL): Good morning.

HM: I'm here today with State Representative Dennis Leh, who has served the 130th Legislative District from Berks County from the years 1987 to 2006. Thank you for being here with me today.

DL: Thank you, Heidi. It's a pleasure to be here.

HM: I wanted to begin by asking you: what influence did your family have on your early career and future as a public official?

DL: Well, I'm assuming you're referring to my parents and that family. I don't necessarily think they, themselves, had much because, quite honestly, if somebody would have told me when I was younger – in fact, if somebody would have told me 25 years ago that I'd be a State Legislator, I would have laughed at them because I never even considered running for public office at all, even at the local level. But, what got me interested in it, and this may – maybe I'm taking away from one of your future questions – but what really got me interested in politics and government, in 1974 I started a business – and I'm a tool and die maker by trade, and I've worked for a major die casting manufacturer back in Montgomery County – but as a tool-and-die maker, I learned to do other things with my hands and I started my own tool business. And, as I hired people

and ran a business like any small businessman, I realized the burdens that affected businesspeople: of hiring people, workmen's comp[ensation], withholding taxes, safety issues, just the burden of regulation and taxes. And that began to, I guess, get me to think about, you know, this stuff might be necessary, but maybe there's a better way to do it. And I started complaining, and some people, like I'm sure you heard before, people, "Well, then, why don't you run for office, then?" And I guess that's when I started to think about it, and that was back in about 1985.

HM: So, your family was not political in any way?

DL: No, no, my family, other than being registered to vote, and they were Democrats when I ran, and they did change for me. (*laugh*) But no, they themselves – and they were quite surprised. Now, my immediate family, my wife, that's another story. She, bless her heart, she always had more faith in me than I've ever had in myself, and, you know, she had the faith that I could do it and that I would be a good Legislator.

HM: So, would you say your business background influenced you to become a Republican if it wasn't your family?

DL: Oh, the business background and also a lot of the moral issues. Some of them are still going on at this time. I've always been very strongly pro-life, and, of course, back then that was even, I think, more of an up front issue than it is today. So, that got my wife and I involved, because we were involved in the private sector with some of the

charitable organizations that dealt with the abortion issue. So, between that and my business and the people that I was associating with that finally said, “Why don’t you run for office?”

HM: What kind of Republican do you think you are?

DL: I hate to use the word “conservative,” because that’s tossed around so much today, and especially in campaigns it’s tossed around, and that – conservative, liberal. I would rather say that, you know, I tend – I guess for lack of a better term, yes, I’m a conservative, but I also believe in the Constitution and a Constitutionally-run government.

HM: You talked a little bit about your career before coming to the House. You didn’t run for any other offices before coming to the House?

DL: This surprised a lot of people when I gave my farewell speech on the House Floor. The only other office that I ran for and won and held successfully for a few years was when I was in the private sector, working as a tool-and-die maker, I was a member of the United Autoworkers Union, and I ran for Steel Trades Rep[resentative] and also Union Steward, and I won and held those positions. And quite a few of my friends and colleagues on the Democratic side of the aisle, and even the Republicans, I was told, when I made that statement, they were kind of dumbfounded. They said, “Dennis was a Union member?”

HM: Well, could you talk about your first campaign for the House of Representatives, what the issues were, and – ?

DL: Well, I guess there's two ways to look at what the issues were, then I guess the reason I was running, like I described earlier, was business issues, tax issues, property tax – which is not necessarily a business issue, but property tax was always a cornerstone of every campaign that I ran, and I don't want to get off the trail here, but property taxes, I always believed, were, in my own mind, unconstitutional. Now, I'm not an attorney, so therefore, I'm not a judge, but I just can't accept the fact that property taxes are constitutional when we're guaranteed by our Federal Constitution and State Constitution the right to happiness, which one of those rights is the right to own and hold property, and when you're paying the property tax, you really can't say, and you really can't feel secure in that property because if you don't pay it, it's going to be taken away from you, so you're really only paying rent, so that was an issue that was always a cornerstone of every campaign, and I told other people that I really have no regrets in my last 20 years here, but I guess that would be one of them. That would be the one regret that, although we've made some movement in property tax, it was very small, and we didn't eliminate it, and what we did do, I think, was just tinker with it around the edges, and I would hope that the next Legislature, along with the Administration, would really get in and tackle property tax.

HM: Well, what made you decide in 1986 that this was the year to run?

DL: Well, I think everything politically was coming to a crescendo. You had the Ronald Reagan election to President in 1980, and Ronald Reagan himself was, we'll use that word, recognized as a conservative, bringing conservative values to Washington, and I think a lot of people – I don't want to say they piggybacked on that. I think Ronald Reagan's win in 1980 and other Republicans and conservative wins after that were all part of a conservative grassroots effort across this country, and it just so happened that that was the time that I was making up my mind concerning my business. I was upset with that, upset with a lot of the moral issues and the direction this country was going in, and like I said, that's when the people that I worked with and people that I went to church with and family and friends said, "Hey, why don't you run for office?" Now, the funny thing was there was some other folks, too, that wanted to run for office, even in the small group that I circulated in and when, I guess you would call it, the core of what was to become my campaign committee, when we first got together, it was either I was going to run or another younger man that had a younger family than I did at the time, and we felt he was better qualified. He had a college background; I didn't have a college background. But, he had a college background, so they felt, "Well, let's put him up." And I was fine with that. And then at the last – I wouldn't say the last moment, because we were talking about this in the summer, the early summer of [19]85, and we had to make a decision by August. August came around, and we all sat down again, and the other young man said, "I'd like to do it, but I can't do it. Talked it over with my wife. Our kids are young. I can't be in Harrisburg all that time," and they said, "So, Dennis, you run," so, that was the decision made that I run. Everybody accepted it, and then we

started working together, started really putting together a campaign committee and planning for what we were going to do come January of 1986, which was the beginning of that election year. And I had planned to run against the incumbent, which was a Democrat, Lester Fryer [State Representative, Berks County, 1963-1986] and a great guy. Lester was good on a lot of economic issues, but the one thing where he had problems with the people of the 130th at that time, he wasn't pro-life. And, even though the District was at that time 58 percent Democrat, and I think only about 41 percent Republican and one percent Independent, he squeezed by in elections. And he was a feisty little guy, and people liked him and respected him for that, but – and he was, I guess, he was about 64 at the time, and that seemed old to me, but I'm going to be 61; it doesn't seem too old anymore. *(laugh)* But anyway, the plan was I would run against Lester Fryer, providing I'd win the Primary election, and I would run against Lester Fryer, and I would probably lose, but I would have run an election, my name would have been out there, and in 1988 we felt for sure that Lester was going to retire. So, anyway, as things would have it, January came around, January 1st or 2nd, I got my press release out that I was running for election, and within about a week, Lester Fryer announced that he was going to retire. And I never thought that he was going to retire because Dennis Leh's running against him, but it was just the way things worked out. He decided to retire, and he probably had already decided that before I announced. In fact, I've always assumed that, that he just wanted to wait around and didn't want to rush things, because if you – politically, if you announce too soon that you're retiring, too many other people get it into their head that they're going to run, and Lester Fryer had a legislative aide that he wanted to run for that seat, and he was grueling him for it, and he was going to be the hand-picked boy. But

anyway, Lester announced his retirement. Then another Republican threw their hat in the ring, so that meant I was going to have a Primary – well, another Republican formally announced, and then another Republican announced. I think all together there was about four Republicans that were running, and I think there was four or five Democrats, so it was, you know, an open seat. There was a lot of interest in it, and the interesting thing was at the time the Republicans up here were in the minority by one vote, by one seat. So, they became very interested in any open seats that they thought had some promise, and – I don't want to get ahead of myself, but there was another open seat out in the Western part of the state where another young man was running, a little bit younger than me. That young man is in Washington now, Congressman James Gerlach [State Representative, Chester County, 1991-1994; State Senator, 1995-2002; U.S. Representative, 2003-present], okay? *(laugh)* However, long story short, Jim Gerlach lost his race out there. Frank LaGrotta [State Representative, Beaver, Butler and Lawrence Counties, 1987-2006] won it and held the seat until this year. Anyway, Jim Gerlach, of course, it's history now. He moved into Chester County, eventually ran against Sam Morris [Samuel W.; State Representative, Chester County, 1971-1990], I think, in the early nineties or [19]92, won that seat, and, of course, now he's in Congress. But anyway, in my race it was a contested Primary. Drew a lot of interest because the Republicans knew if they could win one of those two open seats, they'd be in the majority, so really – and here again, unbeknownst to me, I'm a political neophyte. I was not used to all of a sudden being thrust into the political limelight, and – because these races did draw state attention, not national attention, but it's, I mean, they were focused on by the whole state, and people became very interested. But, anyway, we were able to

get two of the other Republican candidates to drop out. We sat down with them. They were very much on the same wavelength and mindset that I was on on the issues, and they felt, “Gee whiz, okay. You were out of box first, you know. We can support you. We like where you stand.” So, they put their people on board our bus, and it ended up just being a two-way Primary race, and the gentleman that I ran against was the Mayor of Topton at the time, Mr. Larry Wurst. And regretfully for him – because he had run for the seat before, he had his name out there, he thought he was a shoe-in, and he was – although we don’t have an endorsement in Berks County, basically, it was understood that he was going to be the Party candidate. I was the dark horse. He had run before. He earned it, you know, so therefore, you know, everybody just, you know, they were nice to me and this and that, but nobody really paid much attention to me. But, I went door-to-door, and that’s (*laugh*) the mother’s milk in local politics, if you’re running for office; I started going door-to-door collecting signatures for my petition, my nominating petition, and didn’t stop until Election Day, November. Went straight through all summer. But my Republican opponent, he didn’t. He went to some doors, but he really didn’t put out because he thought it made, and when the Primary election eve came, he lost by 61 votes out of 32 precincts. That’s two votes a precinct, so people say, “Boy, my vote doesn’t count,” and, of course, the Democrats, they had a real knock-down, drag-out fight. The gentleman who was Lester Fryer’s hand-picked candidate, he lost by 21 votes, and Lester was infuriated. And Lester – and I can say this now; Lester, bless his heart, he died and is gone now – but, he called me up Election Night, he said, “Dennis, can you be at my home tomorrow morning?” I said, “Fine, Lester, okay.” I come over there. He comes out in his robe. My word, he looked like Scrooge. I think he actually had a cap on and a

robe (*laugh*), but anyway, he invited me in and we had a nice talk, and he said, “Dennis.” He said, “I can’t do anything for you in the open, because I’m still a Democratic Legislator.” In fact, he was the, sort-of, the Speaker Pro Temp for the House for [K.] Leroy Irvis [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1959-1988; Speaker, 1977-1978 and 1983-1988]. Whenever Leroy couldn’t be on the dais, Lester Fryer would be up there. So, Lester was very careful. He didn’t want to jeopardize himself with his own Party, but he did tell me, he said, “I will do everything I can. My committee people back here, the people that work for my campaign, and everybody that is anybody in the Democratic Party will know that I want you to win the race, but they want you to know this; this isn’t because we’re going to become great friends or anything else, but I have nothing personally against you, but,” he said, “it’ll be a lot easier to beat you in a General election next year as a Republican then beat Jack McClusky, who won the Democratic nomination. So, it’ll be a lot easier for Randy to beat you next year, rather than beat the Democrat in the Primary.” And I said, “Fine. That’s fine. Just get me elected, and I’ll worry about next election next time.” So, anyway, that was the case. They worked with me, and well, it was a lot of campaigning and dealing with a lot of issues, and I learned an awful lot because, I mean, all this stuff being thrust on you, because I never had an elected position before. But, come November Election, I won by 51 percent, and I’ve held the seat for 20 years. However, regretfully, there was a third seat that wasn’t an open seat that the Republicans lost, so instead of – we didn’t win the seat in the west (Frank LaGrotta won that), but I won mine, which still – if we would have held everything else, we would have been at 102 then, but there was a seat up in the Northwest. I just forget the gentleman’s name; he was an incumbent. He had some

problems, I think, and he lost, so I came in at 101. They were still glad that I won, but we were still at 101.

HM: Your first race was the – in the General, was a tight race as well.

DL: Yes, yeah, it was very tight, and like I said, it drew statewide attention. I mean, I was thrust into the limelight. Somebody who basically was never used to being in that situation, and I guess some people, it's a much easier transition to go from whatever you're doing in the private sector to public life and having cameras thrown in your face and microphones under your chin, but that was one thing that took me a while to get used to and adjust to was, you know, "Mr. Leh," or whatever. "What do you think about this?" and all of a sudden, there's a camera lens in your face and there's a microphone there and you got to have an answer. And if you don't, you tend to look ridiculous, and even if you don't have an answer, you don't want to give an answer that's not true, but you better say something.

HM: What happened in the next election?

DL: Okay, can I just back up?

HM: Oh, absolutely. I'm sorry.

DL: Because we talked about the first election, but there was a big issue in the first election that also won me a lot of support, and in the first election, there was a landfill issue in the District, and the gentleman that I ran against in the General election was a Township Supervisor in Earl Township, where this landfill was. Now, this landfill was a privately owned landfill from a resident of that area, but like a lot of landfills years ago, it just continued to grow and grow and grow, and it began to get out of hand because of the – I mean, we didn't have the environmental laws we have today and I mean, basically, this landfill started as a hole in the ground and garbage trucks just dumped their stuff there. But as the landfill grew, Delaware County got interested in it. They needed a place to put their garbage, so they were looking at different places and they liked the location of this landfill, even though it was probably about – I don't know what the exact mileage is. It might be 40 miles from Delaware County, maybe 50. But anyway, they liked this, and they wanted to purchase the land. Well, of course, the people there – and this is a beautiful part of my District. It's not so much rolling hills, some rugged-looking hills, but a lot of forests and wood and very sparsely populated, a lot of wildlife, and a lot of good streams in the area. So naturally, the residents of Earl Township and nearby Oley Township and Colebrookdale got up in arms. They said, "No way are we going to take Philadelphia's trash," because at that time Delaware County was taking Philadelphia's trash. "There's no way we're going to take Philadelphia's trash and bring it up here on our pristine environment." So, as it turned out, the gentleman that I ran against, who was a Township Supervisor, was getting blamed for this, and unrightfully so, but that's politics. I mean, that's campaigning, and we knew that we could use this as a wedge issue, and we did. So, we started blaming him for not managing the township

correctly, and therefore, he was the culprit behind allowing the landfill to come in. Trying to make a long story a little bit shorter, Delaware County eventually got the land because they bought everybody else out, but the citizens' group at the landfill, the majority of them began to support me, came on even though they were Democrats. They came on my campaign, and that helped me an awful lot in that area, and like I said, the landfill was an issue. As politics being what it is, it was probably unfair to characterize my opponent at that time as the culprit for allowing the landfill to come in, but in politics you use what you can, and we weren't 100 percent wrong. We weren't lying about anything, but you do exaggerate some things. But, the landfill played a major factor in my first race, and I will say this, though. After all the years there, the landfill and the laws that we passed up here and some of the ones that I got language in concerning landfills, they formed a Citizens' Advisory Committee to work with Delaware County and the landfill, and where, back in the early nineties, it was ugly. I mean, you had the citizens against the landfill. You had protests out there. You had some incidents that were almost on the verge of being very dangerous with the citizens' anger and the landfill retaliating with their anger. But, once we got some laws into place that actually allowed and required that these local landfills, such as the one we had there, create Citizens' Advisory Council with the local citizens and work with them, listen to them, what their concerns are, because these people aren't dumb. I mean, these people were regular people, but they did their homework. They understood environmental laws. They understood environmental science, and they were able to work with the landfill. Once Delaware County understood that this would be in their best interest, too, they started working together, and I'll tell you, every year I'm invited to a dinner that the Delaware

County Solid Waste Authority – the citizens’ advisory council, which used to be like this. They’re now like this. They work together. It’s one of the best landfills in the state, if not the best, and it was just amazing to see that evolve. What used to be a very hostile situation has now evolved – I don’t want to say a love fest (*laugh*) – but has now evolved into something where you can see people are working together. And there are times when they still have their problems, and they call me to try to intervene with DEP [Department of Environmental Protection] and we work things out. But now, they tend to work things out, and they do it in an enjoyable environment where they know they can basically trust each other and work together for the common good, and that – I look back, and that amazes me, so (*laugh*)– but that landfill played a big factor in the first two campaigns that I had, because running for the second election, a lot of the stuff that I used on my opponent, who was a Township Supervisor, was now being used on me because now I was a two-year incumbent, and what have I done concerning the landfill? But then, luckily, I think we started putting some amendments, I think, on Act 101 and getting these things in order, and the Citizens’ Advisory Council took over, and probably by about the mid-nineties, it really started coming together. So, I don’t really cite that as an achievement much, but the more I think about it – not that I played a major role, although some would say that I did, and they said publicly that I did – but I know I played some part in bringing that together and making a very hostile and ugly situation a workable one where people can work together.

HM: So –

DL: I didn't mean to go on.

HM: No, that's a great story, though. Can you tell me about subsequent campaigns?

Did Lester Fryer come out?

DL: Yes, my first reelection in 1988, Lester Fryer's – I don't want to call him his boy. I called him his boy at the time because he was younger. You know, he's a gentleman now, and he went on to other political heights – but anyway, his name was Randy Pyle and he came out, and of course, he announced, and, of course, I got all upset, because I knew how hard I campaigned two years ago, and think, my word, I got to go through all this again? You know, is this really worth it? Because you're spending time away from home and family, and even though I didn't have small kids, they were – the oldest one had graduated, and I had still had the other two in high school – but I thought, man, I wished he wouldn't have run because, boy, this could be trouble. I could lose. But anyway, I knew what I had to do because I'd already won a campaign. We got the campaign people back together and the volunteers and stuff. They were still energized, and we ran a good campaign, and we had good debates, and I didn't have any Primary, and by November that year, Election Night, I won by 68 percent. And since then, I've always won by anywhere between 67 and 72 percent of the vote.

HM: I liked what you said –

DL: Except for last May. *(laugh)*

HM: Well, I liked what you said before we started taping about how you think about this time of year.

DL: Yeah.

HM: Could you say that again?

DL: I always thought in my 20 years here that after my first election – because like I said, people don't realize you do work hard. It may not look like much when you're going door-to-door and you're doing TV, but you're doing all this stuff behind. You're doing ads. You're making sure mailers get out. You got to make sure what every one says, but the bottom line is that, after the election, because you're so pumped up and at the same time you're so wore out once the election comes, and usually around Thanksgiving weekend, you start to realize that things are going to slow down. Christmas season's coming up. People aren't thinking politics. They're thinking shopping, family, friends, good times, and I always tell people, and I know I first told my wife this. I said, "You know, this is the best time that you'll ever have in your next term because you're the farthest away you're ever going to be from the next election," but as soon as January comes around, the thought hits you that next January I've got to start circulating my nominating petitions again. It just becomes a vicious cycle.

HM: Did you like to campaign?

DL: Certain things I liked. Campaigning as a whole, no, because the major thing you got to do in a campaign is raise money, and I've hated that worse than anything, worse than any part of the job was asking people for their money. I hated it. I wasn't brought up that way. I was brought up, "If you want money, you earn it," and just to go out and ask people for money, just was against everything that I was taught to believe in, and it was hard to do. You had to force yourself to do it. Some guys are great at it. I think most of us, though, are not. Most of the colleagues that I've talked to over the years despise it, but it's a necessary – I mean, you have to do it because you cannot do a campaign without money. And campaigns have become a lot more expensive now than they were when I ran. When I ran, my total first year I ran, I think I spent about 30 thousand dollars in the Primary and 50 [thousand] in the General, so a total of about 80 or 85 thousand. Today, that same campaign, because that was a number one focus campaign, today that same campaign would probably easily cost 300 thousand dollars. *(laugh)*

HM: Well, what were your first impressions – when you came to Harrisburg – of the House and its Chamber?

DL: Wide-eyed. *(laugh)* The funny thing was when, outside of coming here in fourth grade, which I completely forget, I'd never been back to the Capitol since I was in grade school. In 1985, the summer of 1985, right after – this was in August – right after where I had decided to run and the other guy decided to drop out. My wife's a photographer, so

she was asked to come up here by, then Representative Joe Pitts [Joseph R.; State Representative, Chester County, 1973-1996; U.S. Representative, 1997-present], who is now in Congress, but Joe Pitts, I guess he was Chairman of the Capitol Preservation Committee at the time, and Joe was a good friend of ours, so Joe knows that my wife's a photographer, so he says, "Why don't you come up? We've got the scaffolding up in the Rotunda." It's the same company that was doing the scaffolding on the Statue of Liberty at that time. He says, "Why don't you come up? We're taking the murals off the wall 300 feet up," – I think it is, or maybe it's 108 maybe, I forget, but it's way up there – He said, "We're taking the murals off the wall, and I'd like to get pictures of what we're doing and also before we actually take them off so we know what they actually looked like before we took them off." So, my wife, she's scrambling around with all this camera equipment. Up she goes on the scaffolding, and you're walking up there on plywood. You can look down through, and see, you know, see 180 feet down. But anyway, she took all these pictures and stuff, we spent most of the day here, and then when we were done, Joe says, "Why not take you on a tour?" Joe did not know that I was running at the time. He said, "Why don't I take you on a tour?" And so, as he came down, the first place we went in, we walked in through the back into the House Chamber, and that's – I couldn't believe it. I had never seen that before, and to walk in there and see that beautiful Chamber; I was in awe. And I like to tell people that really, although I had the fire in my stomach to run for office and to run for a House seat, that was like pouring gasoline on it. I mean, that just ignited it, and I told Joe at the time, I said, "Joe," I said. "This is beautiful, and I know you don't know it yet, but you will. I'm running for a House seat in here." And Joe looked at me like, "Yeah?" And then, of course, Joe –

yeah, when the campaign actually took place, Joe became very involved and was very helpful, along with Representative Ray Bunt [Raymond, Jr.; State Representative, Montgomery County, 1983-2006], Representative Bob Godshall [Robert W.; State Representative, Montgomery County, 1983-present], very helpful in my race. But anyway, you know, I'm going back to the first race now, but, yeah, the re-election was almost as difficult as the first time except I didn't have a Primary, but you're running scared in your first re-election because you're not sure what the people think of you, if they approved of what you'd done, the votes you'd made, if they approved of services you'd provided, and at the same time, you realize how hard it was the first time knocking on all those doors, and I went out again and – I will say this, as much as knocking on doors; I don't want to say I didn't like it. It was just one of those things you didn't look forward to it, but once you got past the first three doors, and if you got at least two good responses, you were ready to go, and you kept going, so.

HM: Could you tell me how you felt during your first Swearing-In Ceremony?

DL: What did I get myself into? (*laugh*) I guess excited more than anything. I mean, you're in awe – there again, you're in awe of the whole process because I was never an elected official before, especially not in state office, especially not in grandeur, or an office that I was holding. I mean, I was still in shock, I think, that I actually won because nobody expected me to win, and I don't mean to get off the track here again, but talking about nobody expecting me to win. I had two senior citizens. I don't want to call them little old ladies. The one has passed on now, regretfully, but they worked very hard on

my campaign, and they were my local committeewomen in Amity Township, and they were very enthused about the campaign, this and that, and when I won the Primary, I called them up first thing in the morning. And they said, “Who?” and I said, “It’s Dennis.” I said. “I won,” and they said, “Well, that’s nice. We thought you would win Amity Township because it’s your home Township.” I said, “No, you don’t understand. I won the Primary.” “Oh, no, no, you didn’t. You couldn’t have.” I said, “I did,” because it was a late night county vote, and I said, “I did. I won it,” and then they became ecstatic, and then when I won the General election, there was a picture on the front page of the paper of me with thumbs up at the victory party, and these two elderly ladies were kissing each cheek. *(laugh)* And I will always treasure that, but now I forgot where I – I went off on a rabbit trail.

HM: *(laugh)* We were talking about your first Swearing-In, but –

DL: Yeah, well, I think, you know, there again, for people who’ve never seen a Swearing-In Ceremony like myself, I couldn’t understand why all the flowers were there, and, you know, for people in the audience who may be viewing this, it’s tradition that all the Members receive flowers from family, friends, and staff, and the whole House is just filled with beautiful flower –

HM: Arrangements?

DL: Arrangements, yeah, flower arrangements, and the aroma in there. It's just beautiful. It's gorgeous, and it just adds to the already colorful, or color of the House Chamber. But I don't know, I was excited, but I was also – I don't know what the term is. Not out of it, but I don't think I really understood the fullness of it and the enormity of what was taking place. I was being Sworn-In. I was being Sworn-In to an office. I was being Sworn-In to an office and to a tradition, the oldest Democratic Republican type of government in this country, 300 years old, and it's still going strong, and you know, it was just – I think the first Swearing-In day is a lot to take in. You have family and friends there. I don't think you really get down to think about what it's all about. You're just too busy taking everything in, and then after that, once that's over, you begin to realize, "Hey, you know, this is my job. This is my responsibility." You know, you got to make tough decisions, and you hope you'll make the best decisions you make. But, Swearing-In days – and I see the new guys that won this election, they're up here for orientation, and they're wide-eyed and bushy tailed, you know, and you tend to think ill of them at first. You think, yeah, you know, but you remember, hey, that was me when I came up here. You know? I was going to change the world and I was going to do this, that and that, and you realize, eventually, you do the best you can. And like my good friend Rod Wilt [State Representative, Crawford, Lawrence and Mercer Counties, 1997-2004] always says, you know, "Politics isn't the art of the ideal. It's the art of the possible." You realize, you figure out what can be done, not what maybe should be done, but what can be done in a legislative process where you're dealing with two legislative bodies, four caucuses, and a Governor. So [if] you want something done, you have an idea to do something, what is actually possible? What can we actually possibly achieve

that we can all agree to? And that's what a lot of people don't realize, and that's why some good things don't get done.

HM: You've already stated several great pieces of advice, but whenever you first started your career, did anybody take you under their wing and kind of show you how things worked?

DL: Oh, I think a lot of guys did. Now, I was originally assigned, and when I got here, Republican Leadership assigned Scot Chadwick [State Representative, Bradford County, 1985-2000], who is now a lobbyist with the Medical Society, and Scot was a great mentor. I'm not so sure that they expected Scot to actually teach me things or just keep me out of trouble (*laugh*), but I sat aside of Scot, and I sat aside of him, I guess – trying to think – at least a couple terms, and he was a great mentor, you know, because unlike – and I hope none of my colleagues really see this, but when I came here – and the older colleagues, we talk about it. When freshmen came here, you didn't speak on the House Floor for usually the first term, and if you did, you were given a piece of paper and told what to say. “This House is adjourned till dada, dada, dada,” or whatever. And now, the Members come in and they're speaking right away. They all have something to say, and I don't know whether that adds to their credibility or detracts from it, because I know a lot of the senior Members – let's face it. A lot of the issues that we've dealt with here Members have dealt with long before I got here. Property tax is a good example, but there's so many other issues – somebody put a paper, a front page of the *Reading Eagle* on Sam Rohrer's [State Representative, Berks County, 1993-present] desk yesterday –

Sam Rohrer thought I put it there. It was the Reading paper from the sine die Session of 1996, and it had the same issues on the front page we're dealing with today. *(laugh)*

HM: I don't think a lot of people realize that.

DL: Yeah, yeah, and so when these new guys come in and they have all the answers and they get up, sometimes they make fools of themselves because we sit back, and we can say, you know, "Yeah, that sounds good, but we tried that. It doesn't work when you're dealing with two Chambers, four caucuses, and a Governor."

HM: So, when do you think they will finally realize it?

DL: Some maybe never do. *(laugh)* I don't know, but no, I think some, if they're really serious and they really want to get some things done, they begin to learn that you got to be able to give on your positions. Not necessarily compromise your principles, and I've always tried to tell younger Members and even other people on the outside that my idea of compromising is you compromise from a position of weakness to get more. You never compromise on a position of strength. You try to get your opponent to compromise from a position of strength because, why should I compromise from a position of strength? I become weaker then, and my position becomes weaker, or the issue that I'm trying to address becomes weaker, so you always try to get your opponent to make the compromise, and you make him think that he's getting something.

HM: Well, I'd like for you to talk a little bit about, maybe, special relationships and camaraderie that you may formed with other Members while you're here?

DL: Yeah, I think that's the hardest part about leaving is the great friends that you've made here, the relationships that developed over the years between Members on both sides of the aisle. I mean, I honestly thought when I first came up here that I was going to come up here and do nothing but holler and yell at the other side of the aisle. Well, it didn't take too long before I realized I can do a lot of hollering at people on my side of the aisle, too. *(laugh)* But at the same time, you begin to develop relationships. You begin to realize that, hey, these people have their own views. I may consider their views wrong. They probably consider my views wrong. We're going to butt heads on issues. We're going to probably use some strong talk against each other, whether it's on the House Floor or whether it's in committee meetings, or whatever, but the bottom line is, after it's all over we can go out and have a good time. And, I think, that in itself makes you closer together.

HM: I was wondering if you could talk about some of the legislation that you were involved in while you were here?

DL: Okay, and that's trying to go back 20 years, but one of the first pieces of legislation goes back to about two days after the election in 1986 when I won the seat. Like I said, I worked for a major manufacturing company at that time, and it was – well, election's always on Tuesday, so it was probably Thursday that I went back into my full time job,

and I went back, and one of my colleagues who worked with me was also now going to be a constituent of mine, and he told me. He said, “Hey, I hope you can help us out.” He also served on the school board, so he said, “I hope you can help us out,” he said. “Last night we had a major underground oil tank leak at the elementary school,” he said, “and we don’t have the money to fix it, so it’s probably going to be above a half a million dollars to fix. What can you do?” I said, “Well, I don’t get Sworn-In until January.” But I did know that you really take your office, your term begins December 1, even though you’re not Sworn-In. But anyway, I said, “Hey, I’ll see what I can do,” so I actually called up here, got a hold of Republican Leadership, told them what I needed – or told them what happened, and if they could be of any assistance. Well naturally, not so much because they wanted to be assistance. They wanted to make sure that they did everything to make me look good to make sure that they held the seat. I mean, they were already concerned about holding my seat, not necessarily for me, but holding that seat that a Republican has now picked up, so they were willing in the upcoming year’s budget, which would be the budget of 1987-86, to put a half a million dollars in their earmark for the cleanup of that oil spill, and, of course, it was my amendment that went in, so I got credit for it, got the press for it. When the check was cut that July that the budget was passed, I delivered the check, and that did – that got me a lot of press, got me a lot of support and a lot of confidence up there, but like with any elected office, a few months later, “What have you done for me lately?” (*laugh*) But that was, anyway, that was the first piece of legislation that I actually introduced. The next one I introduced was an amendment to what was to become Act 101, the Solid Waste Act – Solid Waste and Recycling Act. And that was an amendment to prohibit Philadelphia trash from being

dumped in the landfill, which was a big issue at the time like I said, in the campaign. And I remember at the time – here again, I was scared to death. I mean, here I am, somebody who really never made any public speaking other than when I was campaigning, and at that time, you never spoke – I mean, the largest audience I ever spoke to was, except if it was at a campaign rally for me, it may have been one hundred people, but other than that, it may have been half a dozen. But all of a sudden, I'm speaking on the House Floor, and I'm debating with the Democratic Floor Leader, Jim Manderino [James J.; State Representative, Westmoreland County, 1967-1989; Speaker, 1989-1989]. And thank goodness that I didn't have all the political smarts that I had here now, because if I knew then what I knew a little bit later, you don't get up there and try to blast the Democratic Leader, the Floor Leader, especially Jim Manderino who was a good Majority Leader for his Party and his Caucus. But the amendment went in. I mean, even though we didn't have the majority then, and Delaware County legislators didn't go with me, but we picked up a lot of Democratic legislators who felt that, you know, a rural area shouldn't be receiving Philadelphia trash. So, it went in, so that was my – that was actually my first amendment that I got in, but. And then some, you know, some other bills and amendments. The actual first bill that I got signed into law was an interesting one, and this might be interesting for people who are thinking about getting into politics and wanting to know how bills get passed. I think it was 19 – probably 1988. A gentleman called me who I didn't know at the time. He was a state cop. He was a state cop, but he also was a hot rod fanatic, and he wanted to be able to amend the law concerning hot rod license plates, getting street rod plates for cars that don't have all the original parts on them. Under past PennDOT law, if you had an authorized street rod

plate on your car, that car had to be – if it was a 1934 Ford Coupe, it had to have a real 1934 Ford chassis on it, and it had to have original parts. Well, years ago, it was easy to get original parts. You go to a junkyard for stuff like that. But because of all the hot rod enthusiasts out there that market was drying up, so they started remanufacturing parts. They were the exact same part, but they were brand new, okay. They were simply – they were made to the same standards and statistics, but they were new parts. It could have been a new frame. Well, PennDOT wasn't going to grant a street rod license for something that really wasn't an original car with original parts. So anyway, my bill that I introduced simply said that, you know, as long as the parts were authorized remanufactured parts that were identical to the original ones, you could grant a street rod plate to it, and that took two terms to get through. Simple thing like that took two terms to get through, and I worked with this guy, and we became very good friends. He later got involved in politics and is now Berks County County Sheriff, (*laugh*) okay? So I mean, that shows you how things go, but we got that bill through, and I remember it was the first bill that I had to go speak at a committee meeting. The bill was naturally in the Transportation Committee. Joe Petrarca [State Representative, Westmoreland County, 1973-1994], a Democrat from Pittsburgh, was the Chairman of that Committee at the time and a great guy, and his son [Joseph A. Petrarca, Armstrong and Westmoreland Counties, 1995-present] serves in the House now, another great guy, but I remember, you know, I had to go before the committee and explain what my bill did, and Joe recognized me, and you know, said, "Would you like to comment on the bill?" And I started speaking, and I was speaking and he said, "If you don't shut up, I won't move this bill." He said, "I only asked you for some comments." He said, "I can read the bill. I know

what it does.” (*laugh*) So I said, “Sorry, Mr. Chairman, I apologize,” and I shut up. He moved the bill, and it came out of Committee, and we got it through the Senate, and Governor Casey [Robert P.; Governor, 1987-1995] signed it into law, and that was my actually first bill that I got signed into law. But it was interesting just to understand the process, because I had to do basically the same thing in the Senate side. Go over there, and, you know, speak, but I understood then, and I just – I limited my comments, so.

HM: Could you talk a little bit about the Fair Housing Advertising, I think you were involved in that?

DL: Yeah, that was a very interesting piece of legislation and a very interesting issue, and an issue, I guess, one of the few issues up here that I really went to bat for the newsprint media, so. But anyway, I come from a rural area, and one of my boroughs has a weekly newspaper, the *Boyertown Times*, and a great little weekly newspaper, and I know the owner well, the publisher, and he called me up one day. He called me up along with a local realtor who I also knew. They both came to me because they were both involved in the same issue. The issue was the local realtor was putting ads in their paper, just standard ads to sell real estate, and the Philadelphia Fair Housing Council was – well, we found out later [what] they were doing. They were simply viewing all ads from all newspapers and picking out anything they could and then get somebody to file a discrimination claim against it, and then they would ask for damages from both the newspaper and the real estate agent. And you’re talking damages, 25, 50 thousand dollars. Damages for what, you say? What kind of discrimination? Right away you

think, “Well, if they’re discriminating, you ought to go after them. They ought to be punished.” Well, I think the ad in question was one, if I remember correctly, it was an ad advertising a property with a nice view. And you think, “What’s wrong with that? Well, what’s the nice view?” That was discriminating. [They] said a nice view discriminates blind people. And then they went on, and as we dug into this, we found cases where they were filing claims against ads that had nice property with mature shrubbery. Well, that discriminated against young people, and we found out they were doing things, you know, you couldn’t even mention family, and you know, some of these claims – and Philadelphia Fair Housing Council was making these claims, and they had attorneys making the claims, you know, for all types of weird stuff. And as we started to look at the legislation – and I was on the State Government Committee then, which is a committee that sort of oversees stuff like that – so as we got involved in this, more newspapers got on board, more realtors got on board, and I forget exactly if we were – I don’t know if we were able to do it in one term or not, but the bottom line is we were able to pass legislation, and here again, this is a good point, was this the ideal way to solve this problem? No, the ideal way would be to just tell them, “Hey, what they’re doing is crazy. You don’t do it. Use some common sense.” But the bottom line is what we actually had to do was provide a list of words that were absolute no-no’s, and some of them were ridiculous, but at least the publishers and the real estate people knew you cannot use these words or these phrases, however, if you use any other ones, you’ll be okay. And, of course, we were able to, through negotiations, we were able to narrow that list down so it wasn’t too broad, and the bottom line is that problem has basically been solved. But, that was, you know, that’s some of the ridiculous stuff that you have to deal

with. Now there was another bill that, and I think this is interesting, too, and I'm not trying to put a feather in my cap for this, but this was probably the longest piece of legislation that I ever worked on, and that was my bill that would give direct access to a physical therapist, and I will say at the start, while if you go on the computer and you look and see what bill was signed into law by the Governor, it wasn't my bill. However, it was identical to my bill. It was a Senate Bill. Let me back up and tell you how we got involved in the issue. This is back, probably, in [19]91. I was having a fundraiser up here in Harrisburg, which the big, bad lobbyists came to, you know, with their special interests, but the one special interest was the lobbyist for the physical therapists, and I really didn't know him at the time, and he came in, introduced himself. I had many before, so it wasn't totally foreign to me, but my wife was at the fundraiser, too. I mean, that was in the days when coming to Harrisburg for her was still a novelty. She hasn't been up for probably about ten years. *(laugh)* It wore off quick. But anyway, I introduced my wife to the lobbyist, and – because the lobbyist knew that I had previously signed on to a bill that would give you as a client direct access to a physical therapist if you had a tennis elbow or any chronic ailment. And I introduced the lobbyist to my wife and the lobbyist was telling my wife about this legislation that, you know, he was glad that I'd support it, and my wife says, "Well, the reason he supports it's because," she said, "I have chronic back problems." And she said, "Every time I need a physical therapist, I have to go to my General Practitioner, and I know what I need, and the General Practitioner knows what I need, but he simply has to sign a prescription so I can see a physical therapist, and I got to pay my General Practitioner 40 dollars to do that. Why can't I just go to the physical therapist?" And that's what this bill was all about,

and so anyway, as it turned out, that upcoming Session the prime sponsor, who it normally was moved on or something, and this lobbyist came and asked if I would be the prime sponsor and take over and try to move that bill forward, and so I said yes, and that was, I think, back in [19]91, and I think it was about eight or nine years it took, which was about four terms. After working with everybody, and there was some other internal problems with some Chairmen who chaired this committee or that and who they had – because the Medical Society, they did not like this bill, and they pressured some of the Chairman to, you know, keep the bill in committee, don't let it out. But after about nine years, we were able to get it through, but the Physical Therapists Association came to me, and they said, "Dennis, this is your bill. You worked your tail off on this, but this year, would you mind if we have Tim Murphy [State Representative, Allegheny and Washington Counties, 1997-2003; U.S. Representative, 2003-present], who's now a Congressman, introduce the identical bill in the Senate? We figure that if we can move it through the Senate a lot quicker, send it to the House, and that way you're not going to have all the political problems, you know, trying to get it out of Committee." And they said, "We know, you know, this bill will always be your bill. You will get the credit for it, but your name is not going to be on the bill in the finished product," and I said, "Hey, I don't care. This is a good issue. You guys have put your heart and soul into it. Let's get it done." You know, "let Tim have it and do it." So, that's what we did. We got it through, and they recognized that, you know, that I was the prime factor in that, and I actually got – when the bill came over to the House, I had to do all the greasing to keep it going. Grease all the skids, and anybody on my side will tell you that that, you know, it was because of me that that bill became law, and as things would have it, when it did

become law, at the bill signing ceremony, Mark Schweiker [Lieutenant Governor, 1995-2001; Governor, 2001-2003], who was Governor at the time, not only signed the Senate Bill, which I have up on the wall, but I asked him, I said, “Mark, you know the background behind this bill. Here is my bill. Would you sign it?” And Mark signed my bill, so I have them both together. But, a lot of people don’t know that, but nevertheless, the bottom line is that’s done, and now anybody who has a chronic illness, a nonskeletal chronic illness, can simply go to a physical therapist directly, have their medical problem taken care of, and the bill does have language in it that if you’re not any better, if you don’t notice any improvement within thirty days, that physical therapist has to recommend you back to a physician, so. And it’s been about six years now. We haven’t had any problem with it.

HM: You talked about some of the power that committee Chairmen have. You’re a committee Chairman now.

DL: Yeah, yes.

HM: Do you enjoy that role?

DL: Yes, yeah, yeah. I did very much, and there again, it’s another step in the whole political process. More responsibility, and when you first get to it, you wonder, Oh boy, you know, am I going to be able to do this, handle this, but on the Republican side and on the Democrat side too, great staff people; great staff people who are there, you know, to

help you and work with you. Without them, I think the whole committee process would probably fall apart, but being a Chairman of committee, you know, is very nice. My first committee was Chair with Intergovernmental Affairs, which was more-or-less of a – I don't want to say a do-nothing committee or a know-nothing committee, because somebody's going to take that committee this year. I mean, somebody has to take it, but it's usually the first stepping stone, and it's a good one because you deal with issues that maybe are on the lighter side. You're dealing with issues that deal with Federal and State relations. Although, since 9/11 [September 11, 2001], I mean, I was talking to one of the gentlemen who may take that committee, and I said, "You know, if I had that committee now, I'd do a lot of Homeland Security work on it because you're dealing with State and Federal, and you're also dealing with State and county," and I said, "It would be a prime committee for doing that stuff," so that committee may become a little bit more prominent, but when I took it, it was a good stepping stone for the committee process because you could more or less ease yourself into it, holding committee meetings, you know. At other committee meetings, you know, you sit back, and if you have a question, you ask it, but when you're Chairing the meeting, you've got to do most of the talking, you're recognizing everybody, not to mention calling the bills up and making sure you have the votes because you don't want to run a bill that doesn't have the votes, and I've always done that with my committee people, whether they be Republicans or Democrats. I say, "Hey, do you want the bill run? Do you have the votes? I don't want to embarrass anybody." Nothing's worse than putting a bill up – it's one thing to put an amendment up and have it fail. It's another thing to put a bill up and have it fail, because you put a

bill up and have it fail, it's going to be very hard to get the same people to vote for it the next time.

HM: Can you talk about some of the major changes that you've witnessed since you've been a Member?

DL: That's a good question. Major changes – okay, I can think of one right off the bat that I would like to get changed, but it's not going to change and not for the obvious reasons. I think the biggest change that I've seen in the House not only was a change but also caused a change, and that is the placing of the actual operation of the House on live camera. I was here, and I'm not sure exactly when the live cameras came in, but just say, I've been here 20 years. Say the first ten years I was here, the cameras weren't here. Legislative Sessions were much shorter, because not everybody felt – I mean, if you had something to really say, you got up and said it, and then you sat down. With the cameras, more people think they have to get up and say something because their constituents have to see them on TV, because then it'll, you know – not that they're not doing anything any other time, but they want to make sure that they're verifying the fact that, “Hey, I'm here doing my job,” you know, but the cameras have greatly extended our length of Sessions, and I'm not talking about the length in yearly terms, but the length of the day because, you know, people want to get up and talk, and they want their face to be seen on TV so that, not so much because of ego, just so their constituents see it. And it's funny, you look at a lot of the people who – of course, PCN [Pennsylvania Cable Network] now is getting into more and more the area around the state, but as PCN was evolving and

getting into those areas, you could always tell the guys who had PCN and who didn't have it. The guys who didn't have it wouldn't talk. They sat there, you know, and they made their comments, or maybe they made their comments in committee meetings or whatever, and they knew how they were going to vote. They knew the issues, but the people that had the PCN, they're the ones getting up and talking. But that was, I would say that was a big change, and I don't really know if it was for the better. Yes, it creates a transparency in our process, which is good in itself, but on the other hand, it destroys some of the integrity of the process by everybody's got to say something.

HM: Do you have a fondest memory of serving?

DL: Geez.

HM: These are the hard questions.

DL: Yeah, they are. That is a hard question. Fond memory – I probably do. Maybe I'm having a senior moment. I guess my fond memory would be the 20 years here, really. I mean, like I said earlier, I think before we were being taped, my experience here with the House, and I think a lot of my colleagues would share it; after you're here for a while, but when you first get here, you're awed by everything, and you enjoy it, but after a while, you develop this love-hate relationship with the place, the politics. I mean, there are times when you love it, you know, and you can embrace it and you look forward to coming to work. There's other times when you can't get far enough away from it. I

mean, mentally, it fatigues you. It angers you, frustrates you, but you keep coming back. And I think a lot of Members probably feel that way, but all in all, I leave here with many fond memories: relationships that I've developed, relationships that'll continue, deep friendships. I mean, you have friendships, relationships, and then you have good friends, in my case, my buddies. I mean, similar to friendships and the buddyships that I had when I served in the Army. And that's the hardest part about leaving. Because, some of these guys, you know, you say, "Hey, we're going to stay in touch." And, sometimes it just doesn't happen, and that's what's sad.

HM: You've already shared several great stories. Do you have a favorite story that you'd like to share?

DL: I don't know if I can tell that on TV. *(laugh)* No, I, oh, I don't know. There'd probably be a number of them, and they'd be with my closest friends here. Just, you know, when the fighting's over on the House Floor, the yelling, the arguing, the late nights, just to go out and relax and cool down and looking back and then just having a lot of laughs about everything and realizing that you can't take yourself too seriously.

HM: Do you plan to stay active in politics?

DL: Yes. I will never run for public office again – maybe I shouldn't say that. No, I have no intentions of running for public office, and I know that's the first thing people say when they're going to run for office. But no, I have no desire to run. My wife would

probably leave me and I don't want that to happen, but I do intend to stay involved. And that's because it gets in your blood, and I think, like one of my colleagues put it, I think it was Ray Bunt I was talking to just this week in his office, and we were talking because he's leaving also, and you know, he said it best. He said, "You know," he said. "You're up here so much," he said. "If you're up here for, you know, extended periods of time, 20, 25 years," he said, "you look back, and you realize you actually spent more time with the people here than you did with your own family." He said, "So, these people become your extended family," and he said, "You just can't walk away from them. I mean, there's friendships and relationships that, you know, developed, and it's like brothers and sisters." Oh, you'll have times when you'll fight and argue, but I mean, there'll be times when you embrace each other and say, "Hey, you know, it's been great knowing you," or "Let's always stay in touch." I don't know how many times I've said that, but I think everybody has it in their mind that they want to, and some of the relationships will last and, you know, I'm not that far from here. I'm 75 miles, I think, you know, an hour and 20 minutes I can be here, so I don't intend to be a stranger.

HM: What are your future plans?

DL: Well, go home and probably do nothing for a while, but I was just talking to my wife this morning on the radio – on the radio – on the telephone, and she said to me, she said, "You know," she said, and – like I said she's a photographer – she said, "You know, I was thinking." She said, "Yesterday, I didn't have much to do." She said, "I was going stir crazy." She said, "What are you going to do?" She said, "I know you," and she said,

“What are you going to do?” I said, “It’s the winter months.” She said, “You’re not going to be able to play golf every day.” She said, “You’re going to go crazy,” and I said, “I know that.” I said, “You know, I’m going to have to find something,” but for the time, and she agrees, I don’t want to rush into anything, but I have some feelers out there, whether it be something up here or maybe back home or maybe both. I don’t know.

HM: What would your advice be for new Members that will be starting soon?

DL: Probably don’t take yourself too seriously, and that advice was given to me when I first got here by a senior statesman. He said, “Don’t take yourself too seriously because you’ll drive yourself nuts, and you’ll just ruin yourself,” and other advice that was given to me by Sam Hayes [Samuel E., Jr.; State Representative, Blair, Centre and Huntingdon Counties, 1971-1992; PA Secretary of Agriculture, 1997-2003] and given to everybody, I think. One of his favorite statements was, “Keep your powder dry.” Something may sound good to you, but that doesn’t mean you rush out and commit to it. Keep your powder dry till you find out where everything’s landing, and then you can make a much better informed decision on what you want to do.

HM: My last question: how would you like to be remembered?

DL: I would like to be remembered by somebody who held the office for 20 years, who did the best they could with what they had, both physically and mentally, and one who

enjoyed his job and hopes that whoever follows in my footsteps will enjoy it as much as I did.

HM: Thank you very much for coming.

DL: You're very welcome.

HM: This concludes our interview today.

DL: Thank you.

HM: I appreciate you being here with me today.

DL: Oh, my pleasure. It was fun.