

PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

The Honorable Ronald S. Marsico (R)

105th District

Dauphin County

1989-2018

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY: Drew E. Greenwald, M.A., Research Analyst
December 12, 2018

Transcribed by: Cameron R. S. Smith, M.A.

© Copyright, Pennsylvania House of Representatives, Office of the Chief Clerk

Drew E. Greenwald (DG): Good afternoon.

The Honorable Ronald S. Marsico (RM): Good afternoon.

DG: I'm here today with State Representative Ron Marsico who represented the 105th District from the years 1989 to 2018. The 105th District is in Dauphin County. Thank you very much for being with me today.

RM: Thanks for inviting me.

DG: Could you describe your childhood and early family life?

RM: Well, I'm the oldest of five boys. Grew up in Steelton, Pennsylvania. Went to St. Anne's School and then I was 14, we moved to Rutherford in Dauphin County, and then from there attended Bishop McDevitt High School. Mother and father were hard working parents. My father was involved in the – is still involved somewhat – in the tree industry, tree service and landscaping. My mother was also involved with a small business. She was a beautician for a number of years and operated out of our home in Rutherford and also before in Steelton. So, oldest of five boys, like I said, and I played sports growing up in Steelton and also in Rutherford and also at Bishop McDevitt.

DG: Was your family politically active?

RM: Not initially, no. Not until basically, I think, when I got to be, somewhat before, probably in the 70s we start getting active.

DG: Okay.

RM: Yeah, so that would've been when I was just out of college.

DG: Was your family Republicans?

RM: Republicans, yes.

DG: Is that how you came to be a Republican?

RM: Yeah, I guess. Family and then also understanding the differences between the parties, the principles and things like that. I certainly leaned Republican.

DG: Sure, sure. Could you describe your educational background and your career before you came to the House?

RM: Well, yeah. I was, like I said, attended Bishop McDevitt High School in Harrisburg, Dauphin County. And then I graduated from the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio in 1971. Did transfer from Baylor University in Waco, Texas to Ohio State. I started out, actually, at Harrisburg Area Community College and then got a notice from the draft board in 1967 or

[19]66, something like that, that I had to go to the draft board, and I went there, and then was notified that I was eligible for the draft, and I was very fortunate to enlist in the United States Army Reserve at Harrisburg, the 313th Infantry Division. I was able to, like I said, enlist there for a six-year enlistment. Did Basic Training and AIT, Advanced Individual Training, at Fort Ord, California in 1967.

DG: And did you move back to the Harrisburg area?

RM: Moved back to the Harrisburg area, then got married to my beautiful wife, 50 years.

DG: Oh, Congratulations.

RM: Elaine. And then we travelled south, southwest, enrolled in Baylor University. She was a recent graduate of Penn State at State College, University Park and worked at the library at Baylor University. I was in the business program. I actually was on the football team there as a defensive back. Just didn't work out there, especially for Elaine. I got injured a couple times and we decided to then look at other areas of the United States. I really wanted to go to a Big 10 school back then with a good reputation, good academics, that was close enough to home – which at that time was around seven hours away – that was Columbus, Ohio State.

DG: Sure, sure.

RM: So, that's where I ended up. Finished my degree there, we came back home after that.

DG: What made you decide to run for the House for the first time?

RM: Actually, got home and probably in the mid-[19]70s or so to late-[19]70s, I was getting involved in some local politics. Congressman Gekas [George William; United States Congressman, 1983-2003] with his campaign, so much my parents got involved, so I got involved a little bit there as well with his campaign. In 1979, one of my best friends Rich Lewis – who is now president judge Lewis of Dauphin County – asked me, who was working at the DA’s office in Dauphin County as, I think at that time, as an assistant, then first assistant, to help him with his campaign for District Attorney of Dauphin County. So, I became his campaign chair manager. That was my real initial thrust into politics and campaigning. He was successful. Then after that, I was getting involved with LeRoy Zimmerman’s [Pennsylvania Attorney General, 1981-1989] campaign for Attorney General of Pennsylvania, the first elected Attorney General of Pennsylvania. So, I was involved with his campaign. Then afterwards, went to work with him at his Office of Attorney General in 1983 or [198]4, something like that. So, I got involved in those campaigns, and then went to work for Attorney General Zimmerman for almost six years. In the meantime, I was asked to leave the Office of Attorney General to help run the campaign for reelection –

DG: Okay, sure.

RM: - which was in [19]83. My predecessor in 1988, Joe Manmiller [Joseph C.; State Representative, Dauphin County, 1975-1988], announced that he was retiring from the House of

Representatives, I think after 14 years. So, at that time, I was actually approached by a number of county politicians, including my good friends, to consider running for the seat. So, they gave me about four weeks to make a decision and on February 12th of 1988, I announced my candidacy for the House of Representatives, 105th Legislative District.

DG: Very good. And what was your experience like during that first campaign?

RM: It was a grueling campaign. It was a 12-way primary.

DG: Yes.

RM: Which is probably, I think it might be one of the largest primaries ever in Pennsylvania. So, yeah, there were 12 of us.

DG: Yeah.

RM: They called us the Dirty Dozen. So, I went on to win that, obviously, by a pretty good margin with 12. I think I had 22 percent of the vote.

DG: Yeah, yeah.

RM: Do you have the information there?

DG: Yeah, that's about what we have.

RM: Get me a copy of that once when you have a chance.

DG: Sure, yeah, absolutely.

RM: So, yeah, went on to win that. My Democrat opponent, Anthony Petrucci –

DG: Yes.

RM: – was at that time a rising star in the Democrat Party locally. Went on to beat him pretty convincingly. In fact, I was on the ticket with George Herbert Walker Bush [President of the United States, 1989-1993]. That was quite a time then, certainly a big fan of President Bush, 41. So, that was my first election, 12-way primary. Both of these races, by the way, were very high-profile in this area. There was lots of press coverage, media coverage, debates, all of those things.

DG: Sure.

RM: Really, like I said, very high-profile races, both of them.

DG: Do you have any anecdotes or particular things that stood out in that first campaign or any of your campaigns that – ?

RM: Oh, there's so many different things that I could point to. Let me think about that. Like I said, they called us in the primary the Dirty Dozen. The debates were hard to do because there were 12 candidates in the primary. They were hard.

DG: Sure.

RM: You think about that.

DG: Right, one question.

RM: One question, two questions, and then you give a statement, and that was about it in the debates. Now, in the general election though, it was a little different. Of course, it was one-on-one.

DG: Right.

RM: And there was a lot of media coverage, like I said. It was typical campaigns. There was some mudslinging here and negative stuff, but I always, throughout all my campaigns, I stayed positive, talked about what I wanted to do, talked about my background and my plans, my goals, and platform. Never got negative, others did through the campaign, all my campaigns.

DG: Sure. Were your family active in assisting your campaign?

RM: Oh, my word, yes. Are you kidding me? Without my family, I wouldn't have been where I got to with my being so successful in my campaigns. Family was very much the backbone of my campaigns, and then friends.

DG: Sure. Did you enjoy campaigning?

RM: Actually, I did. I have a really positive approach. I think that's what you need to have. Not everyone's going to agree with you or support you, but you have to realize that. I did enjoy campaigning. I enjoyed being with the people and knocking on doors and being in events. Realizing that with the experience I had before with helping to run campaigns, I mean, that was a big help, having that prior campaign experience, it certainly was a help in being successful in my campaigns.

DG: Sure, sure. Do you have any memorable Swearing-In ceremonies that you remember?

RM: The first one, especially the first one, absolutely. Having my family and friends and campaigners there that really worked their tails off was especially meaningful.

DG: Sure. I'm going switch topics a little bit and I'm just going ask you about your district, if you could just describe it to me?

RM: Well, my district has changed so much from the beginning of [19]88. I had maybe eight or nine municipalities, maybe 10. Rush and Jefferson in Dauphin County, which is referred to as the upper end of Dauphin County, down to parts of Derry Township and Hershey.

DG: Yeah, Hummelstown.

RM: The borough of Hummelstown as well, and east, west, south and Lower Paxton Townships. Now, my home township is Lower Paxton.

DG: Okay.

RM: Which is a very large township in terms of population. Forty-nine to 50 thousand now, and back then it was probably 45 to 46 or 44. So, my township has grown, obviously. It's probably almost the size of the city of Harrisburg in terms of population.

DG: Yeah, probably now.

RM: Hanover's west, south, and east, very much the heart of the district as well. Like I said, the borough of Hummelstown I represented until 2000 I think.

DG: Looks like that redistricting is when it –

RM: And then parts of Derry Township, Hershey, which was a central part of Hershey going over from the central part over to the other side of the Hersheypark and into the Hershey Hotel area.

DG: Sure, sure.

RM: And then, like I said, Rush and Jefferson, very small population, but that was my first election, as well, first term.

DG: Sure. And what would you say makes your district unique?

RM: Well, you know, first of all, that district probably has the most state employees in Pennsylvania. Obviously, with the proximity to the Capitol, that's one thing that is unique about it because of that reason. It's a beautiful district from the mountains to farmland. The highway infrastructure, Interstate 81, goes right through the heart of the district. The people are wonderful there. They're really hard-working folks, mostly service industry. The school districts are very large, Central Dauphin and then Lower Dauphin High School. Went to Catholic school, Bishop McDevitt is in the district now, has been for the last five or six years. Yeah, it's a beautiful district. It's a really good place to raise a family. Good schools, you know, so, I would say that's what makes it unique, because of the state employees and also the variety of backgrounds there as well. Little mix of ethnic and lots of Germans, Irish, few Italians here and there, but it's a really good area. It's a good district. I was very fortunate to represent the 105th District.

DG: Would you say that there were issues that were important to your constituents that maybe Representatives from other districts couldn't quite understand?

RM: Well, I think from the aspect of having a lot of state employees in the district –

DG: Sure. A little more tuned in?

RM: – little more tuned in, but also when it came down to budget time, those budget stalemates early on, those budget issues where they weren't getting paid, so that was certainly unique from other districts because of the number of state employees in the district. What else did you ask me about that?

DG: Just if there were any other issues that maybe were important to your constituents?

RM: Well, the highway issues, like I said 81 especially back in the [19]90s there was a lot of construction, which there is today. Work zone deaths were happening in the [19]90s, and so that made it challenging for me and also for PennDOT folks and the State Police. I forget how many deaths in those work zones, which was just like crazy. So, we tried to address those through the Capital Beltway Advisory Work Zone Construction Committee which I helped put together to address those work zone accidents and deaths. So, that was something that I helped put together to address the beltway highway accidents and casualties.

DG: Were there any challenges in keeping your constituents informed of issues, or how did you go about that?

RM: Actually, from time to time there were challenges with the media because they would not respond to the things that we thought were important for my constituents to know. You do that through newsletters. You do that through outreach programs, through town halls, and special meetings, and things like that. Yeah, that's important. Back in the day when emails weren't that available, we would get letters or cards or postcards or phone calls. I mean, my desk back in the day, in the early [19]90s and [19]89 and [19]90, [19]91, [19]92, I would have letters stacked up, handwritten letters.

DG: Sure.

RM: Now, we very rarely get those; it's mostly emails. Technology has changed. But we would certainly get a lot of emails from constituents, so yeah.

DG: We'll switch gears a little bit again. I'd like to ask you about your time as a freshman Member. Did you have any mentors when you began your career in the House? If so, who were they?

RM: Good question. Like I said, things were a lot different back 30 years ago. We had lots of paperwork, lots of memos to read. Mentors, I would say that I really looked up to Speaker of the House, Majority Leader then, Matt Ryan [Matthew J.; State Representative, Delaware County,

1963-2004; Majority Leader, 1979-1980, Minority Leader, 1983-1994, Speaker of the House, 1995-2004] and also Sam Hayes [Samuel E., Jr.; State Representative, Blair, Centre and Huntingdon Counties, 1971-1992; Majority Leader, 1981-1982, Minority Whip, 1983-1992] was the Whip. Learned a lot from them. I learned a lot from Jeff Piccola [Jeffrey E.; State Representative, Dauphin County, 1977-1995; State Senator, 1996-2012] who was a Member of the House in the neighboring district of Dauphin County, then became a Senator. Learned from him. Yeah. those three especially; I looked up to Sam and to Matt of course and then relied heavily on Jeff's help.

DG: Sure. Later in your career, did you ever take a mentor role for anybody?

RM: Yeah, I believe I did, especially as a Chair. I helped a lot of the Members on the committee, advised them, even before I was Chair, too, as well.

DG: And you talked a little bit about your relationship with the media, but I wanted to ask you what your relationship was like with the local media and also what type of relationship did you have with lobbyists and how did that – ?

RM: Well, the media was hot and cold. As you go on with relationships with the media and also with the lobbyists, you really learn who you can trust and who you can't trust.

DG: Sure.

RM: That had a lot to do with relationships, obviously, with those groups. You know, if a lobbyist walked into your office and they told you one thing and it really wasn't the truth, you really didn't have time for the lobbyist again.

DG: Sure.

RM: Really the same with the media, the way they could and did twist things, especially the print media, and also the TV media as well. They were not always truthful, not always honest, and not always would present the story like they should have. We'll just leave it go with that.

DG: Sure, sure, that's fine.

RM: So, one of the things I got to tell you though, back in the 1988 first election, the general election, the *Patriot News* endorsed my opponent.

DG: Okay.

RM: And they said that I would be a backbencher. In fact, that's in my remarks. So, that really fired me up, got me motivated to prove them wrong. Of course, I went on to win that general election in a landslide.

DG: Right, right.

RM: So, I just wanted to prove that point to them. Thirty-three laws later after 30 years, I think I proved that to them.

DG: That's actually a great segue, because I wanted to move into your legislative career. I wanted to start by asking you, since you served as Chair of the Judiciary for six Sessions, what work you're most proud of as Chair of that committee?

RM: Oh, there's so many different issues and bills and laws that I was involved with. Judiciary Committee is a very high profile, complex committee which deals with very tough issues, very tough bills throughout the responsibility that you have as a Chair. The bills will come in. For example, there's so many examples of what I'm proud of. The cyberbullying legislation, that law. Bullying, of course, has been an issue, especially cyberbullying recently, so we increased the awareness and penalties regarding any cyberbullying involved, there would be an increase in penalties. Medical marijuana came through my committee. I was one of the proponents, advocates of medical marijuana. What else? Trying to think what else. There's a ton of things that I could talk about. I'll think about them as we go on.

DG: Okay, sure, sure. Was there any legislation that kind of stalled out or that you couldn't get over the finish line that you wish you could have?

RM: Well, there was legislation that I really fought for and did get over the finish line, and that took a lot of energy and persistence. What I just thought of, there was a county judge called me about an incident where a mother's boyfriend raped her three-year-old daughter. Of course, that

was something that really got me interested, and the penalties were not sufficient according to the judge and the DAs. So, I went ahead and made the penalty for that, I think, I'm not quite sure back then, I think they were only able to give that guy 10 to 15 years. So, we raised it to 30 to 40. So, it was a challenge. You would think that would be a no-brainer, but it was a challenge. We were able to get that across the finish line to increase the penalties for such a crazy crime.

DG: Sure. Was your committee – how would you describe the partisanship, was it – ?

RM: That's a good question. If I had a bill come before my committee, Democrat, Republican, if I believed in the issue and thought that was something that should be considered or at least brought for a vote, we did. Didn't matter if it was Republican or Democrat, I think Democrats would tell you that same thing that served on my committee, and I think that's the way it should be.

DG: You had good working relationships with the Minority Chairs?

RM: Excellent, excellent with Minority Chairs, Minority staff, and Minority Members, absolutely.

DG: Obviously, I think this is probably an easy question, but is that a good thing or a bad thing?

RM: It's a good thing. I think there should be more of that. We should be reaching for a common ground, and we tried to do that. That didn't always work out, but my staff and I tried to do that with all the Members of the committee, Republican or Democrat.

DG: What would you say was your greatest strength as a legislator, as a Chair?

RM: I don't know. I guess that's hard to say. Being fair, being fair is something that I think I can look back at, and look for common ground. Yeah, those two things. Fairness. Considerate.

DG: Sure. So, we'll switch gears a little bit again, start talking a little bit about your memories of the House, and I wanted to ask you if there were any extremely memorable events that stood out during your tenure here of note?

RM: Oh, jeez. Good questions. Talking about that one bill that got signed into law about raping a child under 13, that was something that I actually debated on the Floor of the House, because there were some folks that interrogated me and then also voted no and debated. We debated on that at 3:30 in the morning.

DG: Oh, wow.

RM: I'll never forget that time, because that was before the 11pm rule. So, many, many times throughout my early part of my tenure we did all-nighters at times. Before the summer break, there would be all-nighters under the budget, all night. Sometimes, *sine die*, trying to get

legislation in before the Session ended. So, there were many all-nighters, and that's the one time I remember debating and pointing out that there were more cases like that I referred to, not just Dauphin County, there were others in the Commonwealth that that issue needed to be addressed. I actually pointed out specific cases in other parts of the Commonwealth to show that I wasn't reacting to just one case in Dauphin County. That took a while, and I remember that was about an hour debate at that time.

DG: Wow.

RM: I remember that specifically. The all-nighters, especially, they were tough, especially during the budget stalemates.

DG: Would you say that's one of the major changes that you've seen in your tenure, just, sort of the conduct and the way business is done?

RM: Absolutely, absolutely. The conduct, the business, yeah, absolutely. Back then, too, those days there was more camaraderie between Republicans and Democrats and Leaders. Today, there isn't as much as there used to be, and there should be more.

DG: Why do you think that changed?

RM: Politics has changed somewhat. I think the newer Members that have come in in the last five or 10 years – not all of them – but a lot of them are just straight party line. Republican,

straight party line, Democrat – they’re not willing to give, and I think that needs to be done. It was done before for the good of all of Pennsylvanians. I think they’ve got to be more mindful of the difference of opinions. The Commonwealth is so diverse that they’ve got to be mindful and be respectful and be civil about the others’ opinions, even though you may not agree.

DG: Sure.

RM: But, I think that needs to be done. That needs to be worked on by the new Members and also by the current Members.

DG: Sure. That’s a good answer. Building off that idea of camaraderie, as you said earlier in your career there was a little more of it in the House, were there events that you participated in, maybe across party lines that used to happen, they don’t happen as much anymore?

RM: Well, one of the things that we did in the mid-[19]90s was we had a flag football team.

DG: Okay.

RM: It didn’t matter if you Republican, Democrat, or a Senator, or a Republican. I was actually the captain of the team. So, we went ahead and were challenged by the Ohio legislature in the [19]90s.

DG: Oh, okay.

RM: So, I jumped at that chance to participate and put together a flag football team. We were very successful. We were 6-1-1 against Ohio. Our first –

DG: So, there were multiple games, it wasn't?

RM: Yeah, those games were held before the Ohio State-Penn State college football games. So, there was a lot of interest. It was really neat. And guess what? Republicans and Democrats, we worked together as a team, and that's what should be done in the legislature, but we worked together as a team and we were successful. 6-1-1 is a pretty good record.

DG: Yeah, yeah it is. That's a good story. What aspect of being a Representative did you enjoy the most? And which part of the job did you enjoy the least?

RM: Helping constituents, I really enjoyed being able to help them with their issues or problems. Also, being the Chair of a very powerful and very good, meaningful committee. I enjoyed that immensely, and also to help Members of the committee and Members of the House to advance legislation through the committee or sometimes not in the committee. That was fulfilling and satisfying, as well.

DG: As you retire, are there any regrets that you have from your time?

RM: Not really. I tell you, it's really hard to, though, juggle your legislative work and then family time and also campaign time. That's challenging, that's hard to do. I don't regret that. I'm just saying that was difficult to handle at times. But, I knew what I was getting into. I like my job; I love my job. But it was tough to juggle those, especially the campaign time, because it did take you away from your legislative job and from your job as being a Chair and also being out in the district and providing services and help to constituents. But I really think, though, throughout those years, I really do think that I reflected the views and the opinions of my district throughout my career.

DG: I give you a chance to give any advice you might want to give for current or future Members.

RM: Like I said, be mindful of others' opinions. Be respectful, be civil. You're going to work hard. The new Members are going to work – they don't know what they're getting into, to tell you the truth, because the different responsibilities and duties they have as a legislator and also as a family person and also the responsibilities they have to their constituents. So, take your time. You're going to hear a lot of negative, but have broad shoulders and thick skin because not everyone's going to agree with you and you can't please everyone, that's never going to happen.

DG: What are your plans for the future?

RM: Take it easy right now and see what happens here. Thirty years in one position and then not have previous, like I said, six years with the Attorney General's Office, so that's 36 years of

state service. See what happens, take it easy, and do what I want to do. So, I think that my son has a sports recruiting business [Marsico Sports]. He's involved with that. I've been helping him with that, promoting his programs, his Mr. Pennsylvania Football program and Mr. and Miss Pennsylvania Basketball programs.

DG: Oh, okay.

RM: And helping with coaching, I did coach way back in the day, [19]87, [19]88, [19]89, [19]90, a Bishop McDevitt football coach. So, help him with what he has going, then we'll see how it goes.

DG: Our final question is always, how would you like your tenure in the House of Representatives to be remembered?

RM: Good question. That I was fair, helpful, and that I made a difference with the issues and the policies that I was involved with. And also caring and really did care for what I was doing to help my constituents and the people of Pennsylvania.

DG: I think that's a good place to end it.

RM: Okay, thank you.

DG: Thank you so much for being with us today.

RM: Thank you. Appreciate it.