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BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

The Honorable Edward P. Wojnaroski, Sr. (D)

71st District

Cambria County

1997-2008

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Jesse Teitelbaum (JT): Well, good morning.

The Honorable Edward Wojnaroski, Sr. (EW): Good morning.

JT: I am here with Representative Edward Wojnaroski, a Democrat, who represented the 71st District, Cambria County, from 1997 to 2008. Thank you for being with me.

EW: Thank you for inviting me.

JT: I'd like to start out by asking you a question about your background; where you grew up, your family life, and your education?

EW: Well I grew up – I'm a native, in from Johnstown all my life and in Johnstown, I'm the oldest of six kids. I went to school at Catholic High and went on to school up in New England and came back to Johnstown.

JT: What was your career that you had prior to going into politics?

EW: Well, what triggered me into politics, I was a young man; I was a member of the Jaycees. One particular evening, we had the Democratic County Chairman from Cambria County speak to us and then the next month we had the Republican Cambria County Chairman speak and that triggered me; I was interested. They got my attention from that moment on. So, then I sort-of got involved with it. Then I got involved with a friend of mine who was running for school

board director, and that was actually the birth of my political career then, you know. Then, I sort-of got really into it.

JT: Were there any influences that you can think of that shaped you to being a Democrat?

EW: Oh, my father.

JT: Was it?

EW: My dad, he was a total, 100 percent Democrat, you know? It was a nice growing up period because at that era, you know, the Democrats and Republicans, there was a lot of infighting, but not as much as today. But, my dad always said, you know, “Don’t even come close to me if you change Parties,” you know? Democrats are the only one. But, from the old school. It was a great time. But, the Jaycees got me into that, then I got involved, and then I got on the school board in Greater Johnstown. After that, I spent some time up in the county for a short period of time, and I came to work for the city of Johnstown. I spent 26 years there; Income Tax office, and then I was a Recreation Director, and then for 14 years I became Comptroller. After the Comptroller’s position, there came a time in the history of Johnstown where they wanted to change the form of government, which they did; the citizens voted. So, my position was eliminated, the Treasurer’s was and the Mayor. So, when one door closed another one opened. Senator Stewart [William J; State Representative, Cambria County, 1977-1986; State Senator, 1987-1996] retired, Representative Wozniak [John N.; State Representative,

Cambria County, 1981-1996; State Senator, 1997-present] jumped ship and left us an open seat and that's where I've been for the last 12 years.

JT: Excellent. Did you enjoy campaigning?

EW: Yes.

JT: Did you?

EW: Yes. You see, that was an era when politics was a lot of fun; it was a lot of fun. Because, door-to-door, people would answer the door. And I enjoyed people; I always said I'm a people's person to a large degree. Today, that has changed. Society has changed. People don't answer the doors anymore. Police officers are telling the people, the residents, and papers say, "Do not open the door unless you positively know who it is, and that includes utility people." So, after doing that and, you know, watching that, observing that I was only getting about one out of 24 in the house, so, and I had a young student from UPJ [University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown] with me and she did all the statistics, so, yes, but I did enjoy it. In answer to your question, I did enjoy campaigning.

JT: Good.

EW: Yeah.

JT: Tell me about the 71st District, specifically the geography and its constituents.

EW: The 71st comprises – there’s ten boroughs, three townships, and the city of Johnstown. I have the largest townships in Cambria County. In the other boroughs – what we have in the city of Johnstown, what somebody, the past-president of US Steel called it, “Chaos 19,” because we have 19 boroughs and municipalities surrounding us. But, getting back to the question; so, it’s such a great area, the 71st. It’s approximately about 59,000 people in it there too. Quite a diversified – five school districts, in that there, but, that’s about the demographics how it sits. It’s only nine miles, you know, from my district office to the furthest place. So, it’s really nice.

JT: Yeah. What were some of the issues that were important to the constituents there in that district?

EW: Well, you know, it’s a fair question, because if you go back 12 years, it varies from what it is today.

JT: Okay.

EW: Today, it’s healthcare. Before, 12 years ago, it was jobs, okay? They had the healthcare. The transition from the city has been fantastic because, if you think about it, at one time we had 25 percent unemployed. Bethlehem Steel collapsed; they left there. The other company bought it out¹, but then they collapsed too. The mines went out. So, what happened was, and this is important, I think, from that point on, especially these last 12 years; I can’t tell you how thrilled I

¹ International Steel Group.

am at the spirit of cooperation that existed between elected officials, unions and companies. We got together and that's why it worked. I mean, you take Congressman Murtha [John Patrick, Jr.; State Representative, Cambria County, 1969-1974; U.S. Congressman, 1975-2010] and the County Commissioners, me and Senator Wozniak, and we had all the AFL-CIO unions in there, we had the company corporation CEOs, and we worked together. And one of the prime examples of how successful we were, a few years back we brought in 17.2 million dollars in downtown Johnstown and that was the shot in the arm that we needed. We put 8.5 million dollars in the War Memorial. The War Memorial was dedicated to the veterans. It was started in 1950 or [19]51. Then we built a parking garage, enormous parking garage, with 600 spaces. Then we built a convention center that can feed about 1,000 people. And the proximity, they're all together, you know. So, that was a big shot, but only, only because we all got together and we came here together. And not only we came here together, we invited them to physically come there so we could show what we were going to do, in which they did. But, I'll close with this: one of the individuals said to me, a veteran that works up here – not a veteran politician, just a career person – he said, "This is the first time I've ever seen Cambria County on the same page working towards the same project."

JT: Wow. So, you noticed a lot of changes then across the district –

EW: Yes.

JT: – during your time in office?

EW: Well, sure, because there's been a trend with Bethlehem Steel moving out, the mines going, we lost so many people. So, now because of Congressman Murtha, we have a lot of defense contractors in the city of Johnstown and in the 71st District; that helps us out a great deal. We have combined the hospitals, consolidated them; we have one hospital now. The main hospital employs 5,000 people. So, you can imagine the impact that has on us. So, when you think about the city of Johnstown, per se, even today as we speak, 7,200 people come to Johnstown to go to work. We have the highest paying jobs in Cambria and Somerset County, so you can imagine how important it is that we retain that hub.

JT: After you were first elected, what were your impressions of the building – the Capitol building – and your Swearing-In Ceremony?

EW: Tattooed in my memory bank forever; it was awesome, as my granddaughter would say, awesome. I was fortunate because, as I said previously, I had a government background in, you know, but the magnitude of this building and going on that Floor of the House, it was just yesterday that it was a sad moment that I know that I'm walking out of that Chamber for the last time as a Member, you know. So, I've never seen anything like it; I don't think I ever will. I don't know if this is true, but when I was up here, I've been told – I've never seen it in writing – the magazine came out – I can't remember the magazine; It's National Geographic – said that they went across this great country of ours and they physically examined all, every one, of the Capitols in every respective State. They said this is number one. I've never seen it in writing, but I'd vote for it anyway.

JT: Absolutely. Also, when you first came in, was there anyone in particular that you saw as a mentor?

EW: Yes, one guy that I found was Representative Harry Readshaw [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1995-present]. You know, he was one term ahead of me and we're both military guys and it wasn't long before we became close friends. If you lose your power to laugh, you lose your power to think, and we balanced that out throughout the last 12 years and I'll truly miss him. But, the man that probably made the most impression on me was Matt Ryan [Matthew J.; State Representative, Delaware County, 1963-2003; Speaker, 1981-1982, 1995-2003]; the late, great, Matt Ryan. I mean, just a remarkable man. His love for this institution and the pride he took in it. You know, enthusiasm breeds enthusiasm. When you see somebody excited about this institution and what it meant to so many people and has meant for 300 years or so, you get excited about it and that carries on and I shared that enthusiasm with my district, my constituents. I told them what a great place – I brought them up here, you know, bus trips. Yeah.

JT: Did you have a good staff?

EW: I've often said, in politics, family plus friends plus staff equals success. I encourage everybody to run for office; men and women. But, if they ask me, you better start with the family and the friends, because that's your nucleus, you know? That's your nucleus. You should have those; they'll stay with you no matter what. And you ought to, because I found out

also, I would say that; run for public office and you'll find out who your friends are too. And I never, never lost a friend spanning 40 years, just about, in politics.

Besides my political life, I've also had a wonderful family life. Without them, nothing would have been achieved. As I retire, I am able to devote a lot more of my time to them. I am very grateful for the lifelong support of my wife, especially these last 12 years. Sandy encouraged me in all of my endeavors, and rode back-and-forth from Johnstown to Harrisburg with me for the last eight years. For her, I am grateful. I would also like to mention the rest of my family, as they have made some sacrifices for me also. I have a son, Ed, Jr., who is a partner in a law firm in Pittsburgh and also a Colonel in the Marine Corps Reserves. He and his wife gave us three beautiful grandchildren, who are the apple of my eye. There are two boys, Aleksander, 11, and Teofil, eight. I have one grand-daughter, Floryntna, five. With my retirement, I'll be able to spend more quality time with all of them.²

JT: That's great.

EW: I always thought that you never know when it's going to go, and I kept my friendship with all my friends that I'm leaving here now, and I still have all my friends. Have I lost acquaintances? Hundreds, hundreds.

JT: One of the neat things that we found after doing some research was in your newsletter, your "4 F's."

EW: Oh yeah.

² This paragraph has been added by the interviewee and is not in the recorded Oral History interview.

JT: Yeah.

EW: That's been – I followed that, you know that?

JT: Yeah: Family, faith, friends, and freedom.

EW: Absolutely. Absolutely, you know? **JT:** Getting into your legislative work, what were some of the issues that were very strong for you?

EW: Well, in the beginning, I wanted to see some changes in healthcare, you know? Our people were just struggling in jobs and transportation. We are, in the city of Johnstown, we are right in the bottom in the hub. It's so difficult to get there. But, I was fortunate, as you well know, a lot of people will probably second this motion, but I think we lost the war on drugs to a large degree. But, I was fortunate in my freshman year I got a bill passed, a drug bill passed, under a Republican Administration; I was proud of that. That was drug dealing 500 feet from the schools and the areas. But, there were so many issues that confronted me all at once and these were vast, because you're going in from a desk job as a comptroller, the transition, you know. Somebody came to you and you'd say to them, "Well, you have to go to this authority." I love being a State Representative because I had the opportunity to help people; maybe not in a big way, but in a way – for their driver's license, for their birth certificates et cetera, you know?

JT: Was it frustrating, or, let me rephrase that; what were some of the obstacles that you found in trying to get some of your legislation passed?

EW: The mechanism, the time it takes, to get it passed. It just frustrated me so. And then the anxiety when you get it through committee and you finally get it through the House, and then it sits in the Senate and goes through that, layers of bureaucracy, and then they find out, they pass it on and then you have to reintroduce it again. Change is inevitable; direction, it counts. We are going in the right direction. I think that there's a lot of young men and women coming in here and a lot of older ones are going to be blended in and change the direction we've been going in getting legislation passed. Now, understand; you have 12 million people, you just don't want to ramrod bills through, but it's taken, in my perspective, entirely too long to get any piece of legislation passed.

JT: You served on a number of committees during your time. Did you have a favorite one?

EW: Yeah, Game & Fisheries. That was my favorite. My friends that happen to fish with me say that, you know, Ed participates in all but excels in none. No, I enjoy the outdoors; I'm very sensitive to the environment. But, I also enjoyed Transportation, I also enjoyed Insurance. Every one of the ones I was on, you know, it's a learning experience. And that's how you grow and mature, you know, in this job. With the freshman coming in, that's where you listen and you can learn a lot. There are so many gifted people here, you know. Staff people are fantastic. Without staff, none of these Representatives would never be as successful as they are.

JT: What is the Alzheimer's Awareness Caucus?

EW: It came to me, my precious mother died seven years ago – maybe longer than that – eight years, from the terrible disease, the Alzheimer's. It took her six years to die from that terrible disease. When I came here, I wanted people to be aware of what a terrible disease this is. And not only my colleagues, but I wanted the 12 million people in this Commonwealth to be aware of this disease and how it affects so many millions of people here, you know? So, that was the birth of it. I asked some people to get together and I am proud to say that today we have 70-some members and I've been told that, from the Alzheimer's Association, we have the largest amount of members in any given caucus in any other state. So, I'm really proud of that.

JT: That's great. You are a strong proponent of career and technical education. Can you tell me what you've been able to accomplish in helping community colleges and technical schools?

EW: This has been one of my objectives when I first came. However, I wasn't that successful, but I certainly tried. There's been many approaches to this here. What I wanted to do was have government partnership with them, with the community college, that is, and also with the vo-tech school. But, doing it this way, first of all, go to businesses and say, "What is your need? How many welders do you need? How many machinists do you need? Tell us your need. Give those numbers." Okay, you'll go to school as a student and you will go get your academics in the community college and your vocational training in the afternoon with the aspiration that you're going to get hired when you're finished, depending on how great your grades are, this company is going to hire you. They made a pledge to us; the five welders or machinists, or whatever they

need. Okay, I thought that was a plan, because a lot of them go to school, they come out and there's no jobs. This way, they know if they excel in school, under this program, they come out, there's a job waiting for them. I just couldn't get the partnership to work. That's one of the disappointments that I leave with.

JT: Another piece of legislation that you were involved with was House Bill 1757 from 1998, which dealt with miners and drug trafficking. Was this something that was constituent-based or did you have personal connection to that?

EW: Constituent-based, constituent-based. That piece of legislation was long overdue. Not only for me, and I've talked to other people – that's how I learn things – I asked other people how effective is it? What's going on in that area? And they said the same thing. So, then again, we put the language together, and put that bill together. That's the bill I'm talking about in the beginning.

JT: Yes, yes. Also, doing some research we found that you also sponsored some pieces of legislation that renamed various bridges in your district, so it was obvious that you have been doing a lot for your constituents. One of the things, in particular, that I would like you to tell me about is the World War II Veterans Ceremony that was in May of 2008.

EW: That was, without a doubt, the best that I've ever been involved with. I became Chairman of the Conemaugh Valley Veterans in 1997. It didn't exist before then. There was, in 1997, I was walking down Main Street and a World War II veteran, all by himself in his uniform, was

walking up Main Street with cars coming. And I went up to him and said, “Harry, what are you doing?” He said, “It’s Veterans’ Day. We don’t have a parade, we don’t have anything.” “But Harry, you’re all by yourself.” He said, “What am I going to do?” I said to Harry Flowers, that was his name, “You’ll never walk alone again.” So, I formed the Conemaugh Valley Veterans and we did have parades and Memorial Days and other services. I came up with the idea about having a World War II recognition ceremony for members of the Cambria County World War II Veterans. And it overwhelmingly was passed – by the way, there’s 22 members of the Conemaugh Valley Vets – they passed it. But then, a lot of people said to me, “Listen Ed, what are you trying to prove here,” you know? “Heck, they’re over 80. Nobody’s going to come. Why didn’t you do this before?” So, I said, “We’ll see, we’ll see.” One year we worked. The staff people here are fantastic. But, my colleagues from Transportation, we raised 23,000 dollars. Bottom line, on May 18th, 922 World War II veterans sat in the War Memorial on wooden chairs and as they came in and registered, we had bagpipes, three guys with bagpipes, they entered the building, they played all, we had a big band – a 20-piece band – they played all 1940 music. We proceeded with the ceremony; Congressman Murtha spoke; we announced 1,574 names that signed up. We had a toast, we served those 922 members, we gave them a toast – non-alcohol – and we paused to pay respect to all the people that were lost; their friends, all the lives we lost in World War II; and we presented a medal to each one of them. But probably the most emotional thing was when there was two of them; in the beginning a girl sang the National Anthem and she started and all of a sudden the other guys, the 922 World War II veterans, they started and pretty soon by the end it was so loud. After seeing that, then came the time the emcee would say “Would you all distinguished World War II veterans of the United States Army please stand up?” and they played the Army song and I’ll tell you, the place was

just – And they did that for the Navy, the Marines, and the Air Force, you know. So, all in all, we had so many accolades about it. It was fantastic.

JT: That's wonderful. I'm sure the military service hits home with your son being in the military.

EW: Yes, he's a lieutenant colonel in the United States Marine Corps. Yeah. He went to law school – he went to WJ [Washington Jefferson College] in Washington, PA and then he went to Pitt Law and right after that he went into the Marines as a JAG officer and spent seven years there; came back to Pittsburgh, got married, and had some children, and joined the Reserves and was called out in 2003 as a company commander of a Marine Corps unit of 360-some men – there was no women at that time, you know – and spent a year over in Iraq. Terrible.

JT: You had a lot of friends in the House?

EW: Oh yeah.

JT: Tell me about the camaraderie.

EW: It's one of the finest fraternities I've belonged to, you know? And, you know, it's not only Democrats; it's a blend of bipartisan, Republican, Democrats. You know, we've learned to get along quite well. I mean, what you see on the Floor and after is two different areas of society we live in. I mean up here it's basically, you know – It's been wonderful, no regrets. It's quite a

learning experience and I shall truly miss a lot of them, you know? I don't think in any other field I've ever been able to meet so many great, wonderful people in the field of politics than I did in these 40 years. I mean that. It's remarkable. And I've always focused on the wonderful people that I've met. Some of the other ones I just erase from my memory. Just focus on the great people; and that's what kept me going.

JT: Very nice. What aspect of the job do you think was your most favorite?

EW: Helping people, helping people. Seeing that satisfaction, like I said previously, for a simple small thing or a big thing; giving a check to foster grandparents, seeing the look in the eyes of those kids; the small things like that. Just working with the people in my district.

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

EW: One, as an individual who did the very best he could, who worked as hard as he could. I worked at it full-time; I didn't have another job. I took pride in my job. I took pride in the fact that I was fortunate enough to be elected by the citizens of the 71st District. So, I came in with my palms clean; I'm leaving that way too.

JT: A final question for you: what advice would you give someone who is interested in being a public official?

EW: I would say this to them: when you choose public life, which is a fantastic field, make sure you have time that you dedicate to your family or your friends. Don't get wrapped up in it so much that you, like, put a wedding band on to marry it. I always needed the balance, and I would recommend to anyone, you need the balance; you need your private life and you need your public life. I also would say stay involved in your community. Stay involved, get involved. Just through organizations, help people; there are so many people that need help. And be yourself; don't try to be anything you aren't, and don't make any promises, you know? It may be difficult to sometime to look somebody in the eye and tell them you can't do it, but, you know, that person, he or she, is going to come back and respect it. Don't try to tell them that you're going to do something and you know you may can do it; maybe you can do it or maybe you can't. If you can't do it, be honest with people. Honesty, that's it.

JT: Very good. Representative Edward Wojnaroski, I want to thank you very much for participating in our Oral History Program and for sharing your stories with us today.

EW: Thank you so much. My pleasure.

JT: Good luck in the future.

EW: Thank you so much.