

PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
BIPARTISAN MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH:

**The Honorable Constance H. Williams (D)**

149<sup>th</sup> District

Montgomery County

1997-2001

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September 24, 2008

Transcribed by: Jesse Teitelbaum

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**Jesse Teitelbaum:** Well, good morning.

**The Honorable Connie Williams:** Hi.

**JT:** I am sitting here with Senator Constance Williams from the 17<sup>th</sup> district of the Senatorial service who formerly represented the 149<sup>th</sup> Legislative district of Montgomery County. Good morning.

**CW:** Hi.

**JT:** Senator, I'd like to start out by asking you a question about your background. Tell me about your family life and growing up and eventually how you got into politics.

**CW:** I was born into a political family, so that's how I got into politics. I grew up in a family where political service and elected office was valued. My grandfather, David T. Wilentz, was the National Committeeman from New Jersey at the time when the Democratic Party in each state only had two Committee people. And he had been the Committeeman for 40 years. He was one of the major leaders in New Jersey in the Democratic Party. He was the Attorney General in New Jersey and prosecuted [Richard "Bruno"] Hauptman in the [Charles] Lindberg kidnapping case [1935]. He probably would have run for office, but as a Jew, at that point in time, it would have been very difficult to be elected. So he really was a Party leader. The town I grew up in was Perth Amboy in Middlesex County, and he was a force in Democratic politics until he died in 1988. Election Day was important. My mother and my grandmother used to

work the polls. I remember that. I remember going with my grandfather to Trenton when the Democratic underdog won for Governor; Governor [Robert B.] Meyner [1954-1962] won. And so, that was part of my growing up and the other part was that my father was a self-made man, and so hard work was really valued in our house. He built a company from scratch to be one of the top Fortune 500 companies in the country. And so, I was brought up in a family that public service and hard work were important values. I love politics. When I got out of college, my uncle, Warren Wilentz, was running for U.S. Senate. It was in 1966 and he was running against a long-time incumbent, Clifford Case [Senator from NJ, 1955-1979], for U.S. Senate. He lost. Actually my grandfather didn't want him to run, but I worked on his campaign and I loved that. I loved the competition. My mother told me that girls shouldn't act too competitive (*laugh*) or act too smart. But, I guess I am really competitive so I really liked the competition of the campaign. I liked that there was a beginning and an end and then you can always start new again. So, I worked on Warren's campaign. We were the Wilentz girls, and we would go out in hats, it was 1966, and get crowds and leaflets and do visibility, basically. I always loved it. When I got married we moved to Georgia. It was 1972, I got married a week after Watergate. And I went to work on the McGovern<sup>1</sup> campaign in Atlanta. Well, McGovern lost Georgia by more votes than any other state.

**JT:** Wow.

**CW:** So, I never was particularly involved in organizational politics. I worked for Bobby Kennedy [U.S. Senator, 1965-1968] in New York. I made phone calls, I went door knocking for

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<sup>1</sup> George McGovern [b. 1922], South Dakota U.S. Representative (1957-1961); Senator (1963-1981); 1972 Democratic nominee for U.S. President.

him when he ran for President. Anyway, eventually we moved to Lower Merion in 1981, and I went to vote in the Primary at eight o'clock at night and I was the eighth Democrat. The Democratic votes came from the Democratic inspector and the clerk and their spouses, my husband and me and two people we didn't know.

**JT:** Wow.

**CW:** So, I got involved. I called a friend of mine and she connected me with the Chairman of the Montgomery County Democratic Party. I became a Committeewoman. Then, I became head of the Party in Lower Merion and Narberth. I became the area leader in the county Party. We started picking up one or two one time seats in our municipal elections. Then the next municipal election we wouldn't win any. It was a long haul. By 1992, though, we got lucky. Governor [Robert P., Sr.] Casey [1987-1995] had appointed Harris Wofford [U.S. Senator, 1991-1995] to fill the seat of Senator [H. John] Heinz [U.S. Representative, 1971-1977; U.S. Senator, 1977-1991] when he was killed. So, all of a sudden we had a U.S. Senator from our neighborhood. Then in 1992, when Bill Clinton [U.S. President, 1993-2000] won, Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky [U.S. Representative, 1993-1994] won for the Congressional seat. She was the first person I worked for that won ever. And she gave me a job and I really liked that. I loved the idea of being able to help people, because I believe that government is there not to be a hindrance, but to be a help. And working in a Congressional office, you really did get to help people directly and make a real difference in their lives, just as you do in the House and in the Senate in Pennsylvania. The problems and the issues that come to a Member of the Legislature are difficult. They're challenging, sometimes they're very hard, and each side can have perfectly

legitimate reasons why they're for or against. So, I found that dealing with the issues very interesting and very challenging and I liked that. When Marjorie – this is a long story, but you're getting the whole thing – when Marjorie lost, she lost after her first term, my youngest daughter was going to college and I decided that it was time for me to re-look at what I had been doing. I have a Masters of Business Administration. I went to Wharton [School of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia]. I'd gotten an undergraduate degree from Barnard [College, Columbia University, New York, NY] in English and most of my work before I went to work for Marjorie had been in publishing and communications and in marketing, and I worked for a non-profit for a while. I also did consulting for small businesses after I had gotten my degree and I liked that a lot. Marjorie had made me the liaison with the business community, because she was put on the Small Business Committee. Anyway, after Marjorie lost when my younger daughter was off to college, I decided what I should do is run for office, to run for the House. The incumbent was a first-term Republican, Colleen Sheehan [State Representative, Montgomery County, 1995-1996]. She was a professor of political science. Actually, she was not very responsive and open to her constituents. And she ran on a very conservative platform. She was triple A rated for the NRA, she was pro-life, she was one of Governor [Thomas] Ridge's [1995-2001] leaders for school vouchers. But the district is moderate. And those were the three issues, the three value issues that were totally opposite of my value issues. I support strong public schools. I think vouchers would decimate the public school system. Vouchers also blurred the line between church and state. I'm absolutely pro-choice and for reproductive rights and I believe in gun safety. So I won. I won by 500 votes. It was great.

**JT:** How was your campaigning?

**CW:** Well, a Democrat had never won in that district. Colleen, I think, took it for granted and was not around that summer. And I went out door-to-door at least four nights a week. It's hot. I had a student whom we hired for the summer who went with me. We knocked on the doors, then we'd go get ice cream. Also, I had a Primary race which showed me where our weaknesses were with the campaign organization we had put together. In November, I had as many family members who could come. My daughters came home from college; they all came with friends. My oldest daughter Betsy was standing at a very Republican poll. She did such a good job that for years afterward people were coming up to me and saying, "I didn't know who you were but your daughter was so lovely that I voted for you." Now, I only won by 500 votes, so she turned around 100 votes – that was a 200 vote margin. So, she did a great job and my younger daughter was there all day and my brother-in-law, Ed Sullivan, came from Georgia, and so he was out there and my cousin, Ellen Rifkin, came from Kingston and she worked a poll, and everybody thought she was me because we look alike. My sister and her husband came down; we had all the family at the polls. It was great. And so I won that race. That was in 1996, and so I became the first Democrat elected.

**JT:** Excellent. This was for the 149<sup>th</sup> District, Montgomery County.

**CW:** 149<sup>th</sup> District which was half of Lower Merion and all of Upper Merion.

**JT:** Can you describe for me the, say the constituents of the –

**CW:** The district?

**JT:** – the 149<sup>th</sup> District, right. And then maybe you can tell me some of the differences between the 149<sup>th</sup> and then the 17<sup>th</sup> Senatorial District –

**CW:** Oh, all right.

**JT:** – that you were involved with.

**CW:** Well, the 149<sup>th</sup> actually, at that point, had most of the Republicans in Lower Merion Township. I didn't know anybody in Upper Merion Township. Lower Merion had about 60 percent of the district and Upper Merion had 40. So, you know, when I won, it was a very small margin. I think I won one poll in Upper Merion. I actually never won my own home polling place, which was Republican until a few years ago. It's really a middle-class district with some high wealth in Lower Merion. It's a little more centrist in Upper Merion. Also, West Conshohocken is part of that district then. Now Bridgeport is also, but it wasn't at that point. West Conshohocken was a mill town. The district is diverse not only in the people and their ethnicities, but in the economics. I represented small, the news shop on Lancaster Avenue in Bryn Mawr and the second largest retail shopping mall in the US – the Court and Plaza of King of Prussia. There are little tiny start-up companies, but Glaxo-Smith-Kline and Lockheed Martin also have operations in the district. So, it was very interesting. In the House I represented about 60,000 people in the House. In the Senate, one represents about 265,000 people. So, it's quite a

bit bigger. Now I represent Radnor and Haverford Township in Delaware County, plus Lower Merion, Upper Merion, and Plymouth Townships, Norristown, East Norriton, Narberth, West Conshohocken, Conshohocken, Bridgeport. It's much bigger and it is totally diverse. As are the school districts, Norristown's tax base is low. Radnor and Lower Merion Township spend much more per capita per student. In the Senate it should be like that. Each Senator serves a larger area than a Representative, which makes us have to be more centrist. I feel that I'm a moderate. In fact, in the Senate, the part of the State one's from is more influential in many votes than which party one represents.

**JT:** Nice. With regards to campaigning, did you notice an increase or decrease in the amount of money that you would be spending on your campaigns? For example, do you think you spent the most on your first campaign –

**CW:** No, because –

**JT:** And then once you got your foot in – ?

**CW:** No, I didn't spend a lot because they didn't expect me to win.

**JT:** Oh, okay.

**CW:** So, they didn't spend a lot.

**JT:** Even with an incumbent, going against the incumbent?

**CW:** No, because nobody thought I could win. My opponent didn't campaign; she was away for a month in August, and I knocked on doors and, as I said, I won by 500 votes. So, there wasn't a lot of money spent. The next time I ran there was a great deal more spent. In fact, I remember one day early on in the campaign – the state had a lot of money in those days, the state did. The economy was great and I did not vote for [Governor Tom] Ridge's budget, because I didn't think he utilized the resources we had judiciously in regards to education. We were totally underfunding education at that point. So, I voted against it and I remember one morning waking up to the radio hearing this ad saying, "Connie Williams is a liar. She said she supported education and didn't vote for so much money for education." So, I realized, well, that's it. So after that, the years I campaigned, I never listened to anything but public radio where there were no campaign ads. You only could watch the cooking channel because everything else had campaign ads. I just didn't want to see what my opponent spent tons of money against me all the time. But, you know, if you work hard and you pay attention to your constituents needs, and you vote your values. People ask me, "How can you be pro-choice if there are many people in your district who aren't pro-choice?" or, "How can you be for public education even if there are many children in independent schools?" I mean, 40 percent of the kids in Lower Merion go to independent schools; they don't go to the Lower Merion School District, which is a very good school district. My kids did not go to Lower Merion, because when we moved there they had been a one-sided board, they were closing schools indiscriminately. I had friends whose kids went to three different schools in three years. I said, "I didn't want to do that." But I think that everybody should have the same opportunity for good education, but I believe we have to really

invest in our kids across the board. And so this is what I tell people, you must be true to your values. The voters know how I feel, they voted for me anyway, or in spite of it, but then you really have to represent the other issues, the constituencies of your district. So, that's always how I campaigned.

**JT:** Absolutely, very nice. With regards to getting elected into the Senate, you were elected after a Special Election, following the resignation of Richard Tilghman [State Representative, Montgomery County, 1967-1968; State Senator, 1969-2002].

**CW:** Right.

**JT:** Was there a big difference between Special Elections and General Elections?

**CW:** There are a big difference. Usually in Special Elections the party base will come out, so whoever has a bigger base – often Special Elections are not even on Election Day will get a bigger turnout. Ours was actually on the General Election day in November, but it was the November after the Presidential, and the least amount of people come out and vote in that because in Pennsylvania, it's the election of the municipal people and the school boards. So, you really get your base, because there are people who sometimes only vote Presidential years. But it was complicated that year, because Senator Tilghman announced he was going to resign on the Thursday before Labor Day. You know, most people were out of town. I got the call. I spent the weekend thinking about it. Now, the previous election he had run against Lynn Yeakel and she almost beat him. She only lost by under 1,000 votes. So when he resigned, Lynn wanted to

run. I had never wanted to do it. I liked being in the House. I didn't want to jeopardize my House seat to run. The Republican was my colleague in the House, Lita Cohen [State Representative, 1993-2002], and we both represented Lower Merion Township, which was split between House Districts, and Lita was a very moderate, pro-choice Republican. I knew that against Lita, Lynn wasn't going to win. My whole House district is in the Senate district. Lita's was not all in the Senate district. That was the big consideration for me. Anyway, I got the nomination but it took about a week-and-a-half of negotiations. I got the nomination on a Saturday. Monday morning we were going to put the campaign in motion. However, Monday at eight o'clock in the morning was the day that the airplanes went into the Twin Towers. It was September 11. It was a very strange election because we really did not start campaigning until the beginning of October, after the Jewish holidays. It was difficult. You know, we decided we would wait to see when New Jersey and New York, because they were so impacted began their campaign. So basically, we had a five-week campaign and I had very some good allies in new districts who wrote letters for me. John Lawless [State Representative, Montgomery County, 1991-2002], who was a State Rep[resentative] in the northwestern part of the district, was fabulous. He wrote to all his constituents, notes to support me. The Governor [Edward G. Rendell, 2003-present] was great. He came out and endorsed me. I would meet people who said, "Well, if Eddie likes you, I like you." And I won. We had an incredible field operation. We had hired Election Day workers, college kids. We gave them hoagies and flashlights for the early morning. We sent them out in vans. And so, at four o'clock we moved our workers to an area that supported me but whose voters had not been voting in big numbers to bring out the voters. I won by about 2,300 votes.

**JT:** Excellent.

**CW:** So, it was great.

**JT:** It was great. Was it also difficult with regards to some of the relationships with Lita Cohen. From our research that we found, some of the campaigns, not necessarily in yours, but sometimes they escalate to personal public attacks.

**CW:** Well, I don't –

**JT:** Do you think they intrude on some of the messages that are trying to get across?

**CW:** What I tell people is that if you're gonna run for office, you can't take it personally. That's why I never listen to it, I never listen to the ads. I would see the mail. But I kept saying that no matter what happened, we were gonna have to work together because she would still be the State Rep[resentative] or I would be and she would be the Senator. So, you know, people do what they do and, you know, there is a feeling that personal attacks are not good. But, there's a fine line between who you are and what you do. Actually, Lita has become a Democrat. She supported Hillary [Clinton], she's supporting [Barak] Obama [U.S. President, 2009-present]. Basically, I think she was a moderate, like me. Our issues really were exactly alike. I do think that a Republican will vote for a moderate Democrat over a liberal Republican, given the choice, for people who are not just straight party voters. And I think that happened. I mean, she

certainly did not represent the right-wing conservative arm of the Republican Party, just like I don't represent the far left wing of the Democratic Party.

**JT:** Right.

**CW:** So, I mean now, we were just together at an event for Obama last week and, I mean, we've met, we've had lunches together. But, you do what you think you have to do and as I said and I tell people, "If you're gonna run for office you cannot take anything personally. Life's too short for that." So, I don't.

**JT:** Good. Good. Getting back to your House service, what were your first impressions of the House after you got elected and do you remember your Swearing-In Ceremony and what that was like?

**CW:** Oh, I do. I mean, it was great. I had my daughters with me. It was huge, you know. I didn't realize we all would stand up together. I had a lot of flowers. Actually, I had so many flowers on my desk and one of my colleagues who was being Sworn-In for like the tenth time had none, so we gave him some flowers. It was very exciting. We had busloads of people who came up to support us. We had a television in my office. We were out in the hall. It was a very exciting day. One of my daughters came in and really paid attention, I don't think she had been to the Capitol, and she looked at it and she said, "They spent so much money on this place. This place is unbelievable." So, that's what I remember about that day. When I compare the House and the Senate, one of the things that I compare is the House is more like the balls that pick the

lottery. In the House, there are 203 Members. They have to all run every two years. They have to be noticed. So, in the House people are bouncing up and down all the time, speaking, making sure that their message is heard, that their constituents know they're working for them. It's like the lottery balls. The Senate is not that way. People only run every four years. It is much more deliberative. Things can go a little slower there. But, the House is great. I had some very good friends and I was seated near and around some veterans who they really helped me, because I'm not a lawyer. Representative Kathy Manderino [State Representative, Philadelphia and Montgomery Counties, 1993-present] is a superb attorney. And so she was great, because she really could help me with some issues of criminal law. I knew Business Law and I knew Civil Law, but Criminal Law I didn't know a lot about. I loved the people. I sat next to Louise Bishop Williams [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1991-present], who was great, and behind Steve Stetler [State Representative, York County, 1991-2006], and in front of Kathy Manderino and [W.] Curtis Thomas [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1991-present]. I mean, you remember that; they were like your best friends from high school or from grade school.

**JT:** Did you share an office with anyone?

**CW:** No, I had my own office. I was in the Irvis Building, whatever it was called then, South Office Building.

**JT:** South Office. Right.

**CW:** And actually I had a beautiful office that had French doors that opened on to a little balcony over where the judges park. And I loved that. I would sit and open the windows there and it was great.

**JT:** Very nice. Did you get a lot of – I’m sorry.

**CW:** And my assistant there, Anne Foreman, is still with me and so we’re very sad now. I mean, we’re gonna end a great 12-year relationship. Her son was a little boy, now he’s a junior at Temple so it’s been a long time.

**JT:** During your time, did you get a lot of support and advice from the constituents of the district?

**CW:** Well, you know, Lita Cohen was a very good State Rep[resentative] and she would go everywhere and be everywhere and often in the beginning, people would say, “Well, Lita did this and Lita did that.” So, even though Lita didn’t help me particularly, all her constituents did. I don’t think I ever told her this, but I think it was a very good learning process and for me it was wonderful. One of the reasons I decided to run was that I really liked talking to people and it’s really cool to be able to go up to someone and say, “I’m your State Representative,” or, “I’m your State Senator. What can I do?” Or “How are you?” Or “Is there anything on your mind?” And I used to love to do it. I’d read about a company in the newspaper. I’d call them and say, “I just read about you,” you know. “I’d love to come see what you’re doing to see if there’s any way we can be of help, anything you need.” Early in my tenure in the House we changed the law

so that computers were no longer charged sales tax, and I went to one small dot-com company who knew about it but didn't have the time, there were only like three guys, to apply for their refunds. And so we helped them do that. They said, "We just can't spend the time to do that and we're not sure it's worth it." But, everything's worth it, so we said, "You can do this." We helped them do it, just because I'd read about them and called and went over there.

**JT:** Oh, my gosh. Were there some major legislation issues that you helped to push through?

**CW:** You know, at that point it was a Republican Administration and a Republican House and Senate. The Republicans didn't feel I deserved to be in my seat so they wouldn't even give me a chance to make a deal with me on a vote they needed. They went to other people. And for a while I didn't understand. There was this one guy who used to walk up and down all the time during votes and in the beginning I didn't know who he was or what he was doing but he was Tom McCormick, John Perzel's [State Representative, Philadelphia County, 1979-present; Speaker, 2003-2006] Chief of Staff, and he was going around getting the votes or making the deals. Of course, he never made eye contact with me. Before he died I had like one nice conversation with him and I regret the fact that I didn't really get to know him. But, anyway I was able to be effective in the House. First thing that happened was in the budget that year, 1997, Governor Ridge cut out the funding for the Commission on Women. My main focus when I was doing small business consulting was women in business, women business owners. The Commission on Women still serves at the pleasure of the Governor; he funds it, he appoints the members. So, I put up a resolution to reestablish the Commission on Women as a statutory commission. And when I got up to speak about it, somebody said, "Well, why do you need that?"

You're in the Legislature." And I said, "Well, look around here. Twelve percent of this Legislature are women. This body is the Commission on Men." While we didn't get it in law, Governor Ridge did allocate the money to continue it. That was the first thing. Next thing that happened was that there was some big issues background checks for child care providers and unannounced inspections of child care centers. One of the first jobs I had out of business school was to do work for a company in Philadelphia called I.S.I., which was one of the first computer-based data systems. And they hired a lot of women, former librarians to track scientific references in different journals. Now, of course, it's easy, you know, to Google it. But then this was 1981. Laptops were just coming in. I.S.I. hired me to prepare the business plan for an on-site childcare center. During that process I learned about as much as anybody in the country about on-site childcare. And having young children at that point of my own, it has been an issue that has been forefront in the issues that I care about because it's important not only for families, it's important to the economy. When women go to work, and most women now are working, and many have young children, families want to make sure their children are in safe place. And in Pennsylvania, home-based childcare centers, you know, a neighborhood woman who is watching two or three kids was not required to have a background check. So we were having trouble initiating this. However, Representative Bob Godshall [State Representative, Montgomery County, 1983-present] from Montgomery County, a Republican, had issues with these background checks as well as unannounced inspections of child centers. What had been happening was that the DPW [Department of Public Welfare] would come in, they'd call the center and say, "We're gonna come do your inspection next month," so the center could get ready for the inspection, which meant if they had more kids than they should have per teacher they would bring in people for the day. It's really not good to do that. You really need

unannounced inspections. So, we couldn't get it through so he and I started a caucus called the Children's Caucus.

**JT:** Yes.

**CW:** The Democratic's and the Republican's Caucuses meet. The Legislators are assigned to standing committees, but you're only assigned to so many. In fact, if one wasn't on Children and Youth, which would handle these issues, or on Education, which might, but if you are still very interested in issues like child care, it's a way to still have an impact on what's going on. So we formed a caucus, we had some hearings. At that point we didn't get the law changed, but we got the reg[ulation]s changed. So, I feel that was a great success of mine. Also, I was able to amend some legislation while I was in the House dealing with child support issues. At one point, when I was still in the House, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* did a big study on libraries, on the decaying library systems in Pennsylvania. And so, I was the Democratic lead on that with Representative [Thomas] Stevenson [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1997-2006]. And we worked very hard, and we brought together stakeholders from all over the state and all different kinds of libraries. We got some of the changes through, but what Governor Ridge did then was that instead of adopting our measures which put a lot of responsibility on local communities, and if they raised enough of their own share they got more money from the State. We've done some of that. But he increased library funding by a great deal. So, the advocates backed off the other reforms. But at least we did get something, so I'm very proud of that as well. I was the Democratic lead in the House when we were developing the tobacco settlement money and worked very hard for the bio-tech greenhouses which had been a great success and I'm very

proud of that. And now in the Senate, I have been the Democratic Chair of the Life Sciences Caucus, and am the Democratic Chair of the Communications and Technology Committee.

**JT:** Well, you were a strong proponent of having the laptops in the Senate chamber.

**CW:** Oh, yes.

**JT:** Has it been effective?

**CW:** I think it's very good. The Senate is so different from the House. We don't have to be in our seat to vote, as long as you are on leave in the Capitol or in your district. In the House it was great to have the laptops because you could not leave your seat while in Session. Sometimes, the debates went on and on, yet constituents could still reach you if an amendment starts to move, for example. If we were in session now, I could be on Capital Leave and still vote. I have to tell them how I want to vote, but as I said, it's more deliberative, so you really know what the situation is before it gets to the Floor. We review the Calendar every day in Caucus. It was early on, I think it was early March of my first term and so, you know, we get Sworn-In in the beginning of January and we really are not in session, the House or the Senate, until the last week in January, and then we're in for three weeks. And then after the Governor gives his budget address, and then we come back. So, I think I had only been on the House Floor for three weeks. One day I learned that Senator Santorum was going to be visiting my high school, Lower Merion High School, and I had never seen him in person. So, I decided I would miss session and would stay and go. So, in fact, this is a Lita Cohen story. So, I went to an event that was

honoring Lita the Saturday night before and I said, “Well, are you gonna stay home for Santorum?” And she said, “No, I can’t stand him, I would never be on the same stage with him. I’m going to be in Harrisburg.” So, I called and we had asked for Personal Leave. So, I went to the high school and then I got in the car to come to Harrisburg because there were events that evening and the next day we were in session. I’m on the turnpike, I get a call from a reporter. He said, “Why were you voted on?” I said, “What?” So, this is what happened; Ivan Itkin [State Representative, Allegheny County, 1973-1998] was the Democratic leader then. For some reason, he did not put me on leave, although we had let his office know. What I didn’t know is that it was very common for people around you to push your button Present, assuming that you were somewhere in the Capitol and had just missed the roll call. So somebody voted me Present. But I had only been there for a short time. I didn’t know this was going on. I wasn’t paying attention to that. Not only did they vote me Present, they voted me on a bill. I talked to the reporter. I was stunned. I got to my office, all of a sudden a camera crew has come in. Well, I was so embarrassed. I won this election by a few votes. Then I was furious and wrote letters to Itkin telling him no one could ever vote for me. I did not want to say to the press, “Well, this happens.” I just didn’t want to do that, even though it was common practice. Well, the next morning I get up and look at the local section of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. There’s nothing, and I’m so happy. But then I saw the front page of the *Inquirer*: “Ghost Voting.” I was mortified. Of course, my opponents used it in future campaigns. It was terrible. I don’t know who did it, but I screamed at everybody around me. I said, “Don’t you dare vote me anytime, anyplace. If I’m not there, I’m not there.” So, that was the worst thing that had ever happened to me in the legislature. It’s different in campaigns. There’s always an October surprise from your opponent. They did that to me the following year. But I tell candidates now, “Be ready. Have all your

envelopes stamped. You spent so much time and money. If you have to spend another \$1,000, or whatever it is now, on postage, have the letters labeled and ready to go to your target audience. Then, if something drops on Saturday before the election you can write the letter, get it printed and get it first class to the post offices in the districts.” Just go to the post offices Sunday night in the districts where you want it to deflect whatever this October surprise is.

**JT:** Oh boy. Have you taken a lot of the issues that you were promoting in the House to the Senate?

**CW:** Yes, it was the first bill that I had authored that got signed into law. It was a bill requested by the U.S. Department of Labor to protect children who were going around door-to-door selling newspapers or selling candy for organizations. I mean, you know, kids’ schools have wrapping paper drives, read-a-thons to make sure that whatever the organization it was, that 90 percent went to the charity, and only 10 percent went to administration. I got it through the House and then I was elected to the Senate. And the bill came over to the Senate. I spoke to Senator [David] Brightbill [State Senator, 1983-2006], who was the Republican leader and I said, “I would really, you know, hope this bill would get passed.” He said, “Well, it would be up to my members to see if they think it’s important.” Well, many of the Senators were House members where we were all rank-and-file and are my friends on the Republican side; they still are. I went to them, I said, “This is a non-controversial bill, this is important, it’s something the Fed’s want us to do. Do you have any problems with it, because Brightbill’s asking me to ask you?” They said, “Oh, no.” And so, I went back, I reported to Senator Brightbill that I had the support in his Caucus. He said to me, “How did you get them to eat out of your hand like that?” Anyway, he

kept his word and the bill was signed into law [Act 161 of 2002]. So, I have many bills with my name on it, but I have a few. This reminds me of one of the ads that Lita put out during our campaign touted the fact that she had gotten seven bills through in her whole career in the majority and I didn't have any. And people know that I have a connection with football. So, she had one flyer that had a football score that said, "Cohen 7, Williams 0." I looked at it and said, "They don't know this is only the first quarter." (*laugh*) Anyway, there were a number of other bills. One of the early successes I had when I got to the Senate was the approval of all the sale of property in Haverford Township. The township had been negotiating for a long time to buy it. There were a lot of concerns about the price and desire for open space. And so, in the land transfer we wanted to save 120 acres for passive recreation, which means walking trails and nature areas, and then, I think, about 10 acres for ball fields or tennis courts. And finally, I was able to get that through the House and the Senate. And, you know, relationships are so important because I think there was some movement among the Delaware County Republicans at the last minute to stop it, because they didn't want us to do it. At that time there was a split in the Republican Party in Haverford Township anyway. After the land transfer passed the Senate and got to the House, it was stalled. I went to see Speaker Matt Ryan with whom I had a very good relationship. And so, I went in and he was just marvelous – and what a loss his death has been – I said, "I understand that there's some problem." He said, "Well actually, Connie, I just got a call yesterday from some people who asked me not to run this bill." He said, "But they're awfully late. And I told them it was too late and so the bill's going to run." That was great. It's a wonderful legacy. Another legacy is the Upper Merion Senior Service Center. When I was first elected, one of the first pieces of information that came across my desk was an announcement that there were grants for senior centers. So, we called around to Upper Merion

and Lower Merion and West Conshohocken. Lower Merion had two senior centers. Upper Merion had none. I knew there were many retired people in Upper Merion because I met them when I was knocking on doors. We brought together the leaders in Upper Merion, most of whom I didn't know, all Republican, that February, to my office and began planning. Today there is a very vibrant, active senior center in Upper Merion. It's become a natural model because the school district had a school which they were no longer using, which they rent to the seniors for a dollar a year. And it's wonderful and these are active seniors. They have great programs all the time. One of the things they are doing with the school district is that some of the seniors have become mentors and tutors to the kids who have been adjudicated or in the alternative ed[ucation] programs. The seniors now feel they're getting some value out of the school tax dollars. Last week, they presented me with a quilt that the crocheting group had made for me, which was just beautiful. And so, now I'm going to go there and learn how to crochet. *(laugh)*

**JT:** *(laugh)* Take it away with you.

**CW:** Yes.

**JT:** Yeah. What do you think is the hardest issue that's before the Legislature right now?

**CW:** Right now? I think the healthcare is really the most important – how we're going to deal with healthcare in this country is a huge problem. It's not just a federal issue. A lot will depend on what happens in the election this year. But, it's a terrible issue here. Our country should be

too great a country to have so many people without health insurance. It's the working poor that don't have the health insurance. Very poor people are covered. Another important issue is next year's budget. Revenues right now are down and the whole financial situation in this country is terrible. We've suffered a great deal from the decisions in Washington. Our federal funds have been cut. Another big issue is how will we find the funds to fix our bridges? We can't toll I-80 now.

**JT:** Yeah.

**CW:** Energy's another issue. We worry so much about energy costs, and especially with we have the deregulation of the rates in a few years. That's a huge issue. I hope that my successor, whomever it will be, is a very wise and judicious person who will make good decisions for the district.

**JT:** Do you feel your experiences in the House led you to be an effective Senator?

**CW:** In the House is that you get the information about bills much more directly. In Caucus there's more discussion of the bills as they come up in Committees. Committees meet much more often. As I said, it's more bubbly, you know, people have to move much faster because they need to show their constituents they've gotten something done in two years, so things move much quicker. When I came over from the House I felt I was much more prepared about the background of issues and about the legislation that was coming over. It's important for us to know what has been debated in the House.

**JT:** Right.

**CW:** Some days we'll be in meetings and hearings, and we don't know what's happening in the House. When Representative [Michael F.] Gerber [State Representative, Montgomery County, 2005-present] gave an incredible oration on the floor about why the smoking ban bill should be passed, we didn't know about it. You know, then it came over and our votes were different. He should have even sent me his remarks. Sometimes they're not. We try to communicate, because mostly the issues are the same for the districts, I mean, you know, I have five or six House Members whose district I represent.

**JT:** Oh, gosh. Between –

**CW:** Or more, I'd have to think about that; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. Nine House Members in my district. Most are Democrats, but there are a few Republicans.

**JT:** Oh, boy. Between 1997 and now, do you feel that you have changed as a Representative and/or a Senator over that time, personally?

**CW:** Yeah, I've gotten older. *(laugh)*

**JT:** *(laugh)* True. But, with regards to your ability to help your constituents, do you think that –

**CW:** Well, it's harder. I mean, one of the things I loved was to go to the fire company dinners. I only represented seven fire companies when I was a member of the House but in the Senate there are 17 or 18. Now nights there are three dinners, so I can't stay long enough at one to really get to know the people –

**JT:** Sure, sure.

**CW:** – get to know everybody. It's the same with the little leagues. When I was in the House one of my girl's groups went to nationals. I knew the kids, I knew the coaches. There are just too many, you just can't know that many people, so that's harder. So, that's the difference. In the Senate, scheduling is harder and I have to spend at least an hour or two a week trying to figure out what I'll be doing or where I'll be going. If you went to, you know, Llanerck's Dinner this year you need to go to Manoa's dinner this year, and what about Gladwyne's dinner or King of Prussia?. And it was the same with the holidays. On the Fourth of July, when I was in the House, on Fourth of July, there were three events. In the Senate, you know, every community celebrates, so it's frustrating when you can only stay a short time at each event.

**JT:** Yes.

**CW:** People understand it, but I found it was very frustrating.

**JT:** As you look back on your time both as a Representative and as a Senator, is there a story or stories that come to mind right away that you want people to know about?

**CW:** I think that it's just been the most marvelous experience. I've had the opportunity to meet so many people I probably wouldn't have met no matter what else I was doing. And I've had the most marvelous people working with me – loyal, interested, dedicated, smart people who understand what the job entails, who have represented me beautifully. And we've had a lot of new college graduates work with us. Most of my younger staff work for two years or so and gone off. A lot of them been hired by lobbying groups or associations, I feel we've trained them quite well. Hopefully, some will run for office eventually, because I would love that. Some have gone to graduate school. We've really helped them focus their lives. One of the men who worked for me has just gone back to Penn to get a degree in Urban Planning. He came to work for me just out of college; he was in charge of all the work we were doing in Norristown. He found it fascinating, so he's at Penn now in Urban Studies and that's great. When you're in the Legislature it's terrific to get to know people from all over the State from different kinds of communities. I mean, I try to explain to my constituents at home that everybody's not like us. Everybody doesn't live in places like Lower Merion or Norristown, I mean, it's very different. The rural parts of Pennsylvania really are rural.

**JT:** Yes.

**CW:** The issues are different. I've found that often times the issues are much more regional than Party based. For instance, mass transit. So, it's been an incredible experience. I've loved it all. You know, I've had a bill passed recently that will permit that any woman who is nursing

her baby can do it anywhere she's allowed. We had a big rally with nursing mothers in the Capitol. It was very cool.

**JT:** Oh, boy.

**CW:** And we got that bill passed. I'm sorry that I'm not able to get some workplace legislation through to make sure that, for instance, that not only a partner in a law firm can have time to pump, but her secretary can or a teacher, or nurse, or electrician, or woman on the assembly-line can do it if she wants to continue nursing and go back to work, or a teacher. So, that I've not been able to do but I hope that one of the people who follow me in the Senate or in the House will do that. The other bill that we've just gotten passed into law is a bill that makes sure that there's anti-bullying policies in all the schools. District needs are also important. We were able to get redevelopment money for a movie studio in Norristown. It's gonna be very exciting and will help Norristown. I am very happy about that. My grandparents lived in Norristown, and they're buried in the Jewish cemetery there. The first time I ever went to Norristown after we moved to Montgomery County, I parked on Main Street right in front of the place where they had their store. And now I've been able to help Norristown and leave a legacy there.

**JT:** Final question for you: do you have any advice for those that are interested in becoming a public servant, or even some of the newly elected legislators that are in office now?

**CW:** Well, my advice really is that you can't take things personally. You've got to really like being with people. It's about the constituents, not about you. I wouldn't have traded these last

twelve years for anything. It's been great. I wish the legislature would be more family friendly, but they're not. When I announced I was going to retire, I said that it's been a wonderful life but it's not my whole life.

**JT:** Wonderful

**CW:** Thank you.

**JT:** Well, Senator Constance Williams, I want to thank you very much for giving some time for the Archives. Is there anything finally that you would like to add?

**CW:** No.

**JT:** Great.

**CW:** This was good enough.

**JT:** Well, again, thank you very much. I appreciate it.

**CW:** You're welcome. That was great.