

ILOHI Interview with John Cox

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Indianapolis, Indiana Via Phone

Interview by Ben Baumann

Transcribed by Ben Baumann and Otter.ai

MP3 File, Sony

John Cox=JC

Ben Baumann=BB

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BB: [0:00:00] All right, so I would just like to state for the record that today is December let's see, I believe December 9, yep. 2020, and my name is Ben Baumann. I'm here in Indianapolis, Indiana and I'm speaking via phone with John Cox. Who was in Evansville. Is that correct?

JC: That's correct.

BB: Evansville, Indiana and we're doing an interview for the Indiana Legislative Oral History Initiative. So just starting off, when and where were you born?

JC: Born in Evansville. November 15, 1941.

BB: Okay. And what were your parents' names?

JC: Warren M. Cox Jr. and Ruby Mae (Unintelligible) Cox. Her Chinese name was Ting Mae Lee.

BB: Interesting. Okay. So, you have some Chinese ancestry then?

JC: Negative she taught in China. [0:01:00] She taught anesthesiology in China.

BB: Oh, interesting. Okay. Wow. And where was your family from before Indiana?

JC: My father was from Alabama. And my mother was from Virginia. The family they eventually lived here before I was born. And I've lived here in Evansville, all my life. And the family has been here for 60-65 or so years.

BB: Okay, cool. Interesting. Let's see. Do you have any siblings at all?

JC: Five siblings. All deceased.

BB: Okay. And what was your dad's occupation? Again?

JC: He was a biochemist that made Johnson. [0:02:00] You've heard of (Unintelligible) That was one of his creations. Did a lot of chemistry both in China and here.

BB: Wow. Okay. So how would you describe your childhood growing up?

JC: We lived...our home was in uh what used to be called a farm areas now subdivision area. And it was a rural type of outside of Evansville. And it was very concentrated on education and learning and religion. And it was an active childhood. I did a lot of athletics. [0:03:00] A lot of extracurricular scientific educational types of things.

BB: Okay. Interesting. All right. And who would you say was the most influential people in your childhood?

JC: Obviously, my parents. And I attended a athletic camp in Quebec, Tennessee where I spent pretty much all my summers and had a lot of good contact with that camp and their military approach to helping boys grow up.

BB: Oh, cool. Okay. Yeah, that's interesting. [0:04:00] And what understanding if at all did you have about your family's political beliefs as a child?

JC: I understood them to be very conservative.

BB: Okay. Got it. So, what schools did you attend as a child and teenager?

JC: Well, the public schools here in Evansville, I didn't go to any private school except to college.

BB: Okay. And how would you describe your educational experiences?

JC: In Evansville?

BB: Yeah.

JC: Well, story on that. I did very well in school in high school. I was number three in my class. And I went to Johns Hopkins and found out I didn't know anything. [0:05:00] The level of education was monument ahead of what we do here in Evansville.

BB: Yeah, okay, sure. That's pretty good school. That's true. Now as a child, what were your views about the state of Indiana or being a Hoosier? Were there anything at all you thought?

JC: I just enjoyed the environment, enjoyed the life locally and enjoyed being close to the river. But we didn't do a lot in the river, but we had a lake and I enjoyed fishing. And that sort of thing all around this area, which was more prevalent at that time than it is now.

BB: Yeah, okay. [0:06:00] Did you have any favorite subjects in school or were you participating any extracurricular activities?

JC: A lot of speaking. I did a little sports. I was in track. I was in football. I was in basketball. All sorts of things. These studies or whenever we got home my father would go over them in the greatest, greatest detail.

BB: Yeah. Okay. And what was your major in college when you went to Johns Hopkins?

JC: Liberal Arts.

BB: Okay. And what made you choose that major?

JC: I liked the best choice of seven (Unintelligible). I could study in philosophy [0:07:00] which I took a lot of and some of the philosophers I'm sure you're probably not aware of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He was one heck of a philosopher and wrote the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, which is an amazing work.

BB: Yeah. Okay. Interesting. Wow. Now, what did you hope to do after graduation with your education?

JC: Well, after Hopkins, of course, I went to law school.

BB: Okay, got it.

JC: So, at IU. Now the Maurer School. And I came back to Evansville to be somewhat helpful to citizens of Evansville. [0:08:00] Worked for a lawyer who is deceased now. Sidney Berger did a lot of work for him in terms of worker comp. And personal injury and that kind of work. After the legislature I joined the Mayor Russell Lloyd's administration and became Corporation Council for the city for eight years. So that was a lot work and that was all sort of mind design and helped as much as I could (Unintelligible) the community.

BB: Yeah, that's good. Now in what ways did your awareness of politics change as you got older and you went through college and law school?

JC: [0:09:00] I became a conservative with a bit of uh soft touch on it. I could switch to Democrat positions as I saw appropriate, and I didn't have...I was not hell bent on staying Republican. I did register as a Republican. But did a lot of things in the legislature with Democrats and I think that's the way to go meet the subject head on. Your party affiliation is second question.

BB: Yeah, okay. That's cool. So, you were really I guess big on bipartisanship?

JC: No question.

BB: What...do you have any examples of like of a time that you, you sort of really expressed that value that you had. [0:10:00]

JC: Well, let's see when was that? When I became a Corporation Council of the city, I saw that at that time, it was straight divorce law. So, this was also in the legislature, I saw that that finding fault in divorce was absurd. So, we, I wrote the Dissolution of Marriage Act, which got passed in the legislature, and is very, very popular I think today, and I think it solved a lot of problems. [0:11:00] Helping people resolve their differences, and not finding anybody at fault.

BB: That's interesting. All right. Cool. Let's see. And, when, if at all, did you get married?

JC: December the 21st of 1963.

BB: Okay. And did you ever have any children at all or?

JC: Four children.

BB: Okay, cool. Now, how much influence would you say your wife and children had and the development of your political career?

JC: Significant. It gived me focus on what was important. I [0:12:00] was motivated primarily to have a successful career to be able to support and educate the children and help with the family lifestyle.

BB: Yeah. So, when was it that you decided to become seriously involved in politics?

JC: When was it? That was before the legislature that be before 69'. Would have been probably, after I got out of law school. That would have been 66'. And I was trying [0:13:00] get my name known in public. So, I decided to join the Republican Party. I was already Republican, but the

chairman of the Republican Party was a family friend. So, we got together and I became a Republican, and they asked me to run for the legislature. So, I did. I guess that was the beginning. About 1967-68'.

BB: Yeah. Okay. That makes sense. And what would you say? I guess you already talked a little about your family was very conservative. So, you would say that pretty much shaped your political outlook for most of your life? Where was your parents, right?

JC: Yes, sir.

BB: Okay. Now, what key issues or legislation did you want to champion or fight against when you decided to get involved in politics?

JC: [0:14:00] I was very interested in trying to and this is strange for a Republican, try to develop and support the working people of the community. And I worked for comp law, I had done a lot of work comp classifications, working for Sidney Berger. And so, I was fully well aware of the (Unintelligible) of worker comp. And so, I made some changes in that law. And we still have work to do on it, but it's a whole lot better than it was.

BB: Yeah. Okay. That's cool. All right. Great. Did you have any national or state political heroes at all?

JC: Well, [0:15:00] Robert D. Orr was a neighbor and a friend, and he was at one time Chairman of the Republican Party here. Benbrook county and probably know, became Lieutenant Governor and then Governor for two terms. And I was very close with him.

BB: Yeah, okay.

JC: As far as national figures I can't really say, I don't know if I can identify with one.

BB: Okay, no worries. So, when you're running your political campaign, did you have a particular campaign strategy? Or were you running as part of like a group of people or?

JC: No to both of those questions. [0:16:00] There was not a particular strategy except go out work at the factory gates and shake hands. That sort of thing. Pretty standard type of greet the people.

BB: Yeah. Do you remember your opponent?

JC: No.

BB: Okay. What was your first election day like, and how would you feel?

JC: Elated. And amazed. Of course, I was elected to serve in the legislature. And I must say that that was the year when Richard Nixon was very successful and very popular. And also, Republicans. Then when I ran again in two years. Mr. Nixon was [0:17:00] in considerable (Unintelligible) so I promptly lost as a Republican running for the legislature.

BB: Okay, yeah. Yeah, that's...I've heard other legislators talk about. Yeah, just how drastically things changed after the everything happened with Nixon so.

JC: Oh, boy. Another World. Russell Lloyd who was the gentleman that I supported to become the Mayor of Evansville was a strong Republican, so I bonded with him and was his attorney for eight years and ran the city attorney's office for eight years.

BB: Yeah, okay. Interesting. All right. What were you thinking when you walked into the state house for your first day in office? [0:18:00]

JC: I was an awe being from Evansville I was in well, we're on a different time. As a matter of fact, I litigated that issue at one time in court. But the Northern tier and the Southern tier or Central Standard and rest of the states on the eastern so that's an interesting problem, but going back to the legislature I don't know if there's a particular thing that wowed me except the capitol this beautiful building, didn't know my way around, didn't know how to get there. Except on a bus. So, [0:19:00] it was a learning experience.

BB: Yeah, that's, that's interesting. Okay. And when it came to aspects of the general assembly, what were your expectations for the legislative process? And was it more or less what you expected?

JC: Well, I did not expect was the significant amount of work that's involved in being conscientious legislator. I've pretty much read every digest of every bill that was introduced in the House. I [0:20:00] was given an award about the same first year freshman legislature by the Indiana Broadcasters Association. So, I was in the back row I believe in the last seat. And Doc Bowen would let me raise a little hell and Doc Bowen would let me come up speak. And so, I enjoyed doing that. But the amount of work was just horrendous. The Legislative Council works beautiful job. And does great drafting of legal and very helpful to the legislators. [0:21:00] But I was I just amazed at the amount of work that goes into that whole process.

BB: Yeah, sure.

JC: Even not during session, but in committee work. After the session before the next session. There's a whole lot of work. I don't think the public really knows how much goes in.

BB: Yeah, probably not. Yeah, I think that's probably a good point. Definitely, requires a lot of different moving parts. And it's probably far more complex than people realize when it comes to how legislation gets passed.

JC: Oh boy and the legal intricacies. The financial intricacies. And the... [0:22:00] I remember one bill we were gonna get all the statutes on computer that they were not. So, we hired a computer company. I think it was out of Ohio due to the confirmation of the translation of its statutes to computer there was a grammatical error every third line and so we had to correct them all.

BB: Yeah. Wow. Did you have any political mentors in the Indiana General Assembly? [0:23:00]

JC: Mentors you say, uh no. John Donaldson and I got along very well. Doc Bowen and I got along well, with my fellow legislators from Evansville, Vanderburgh County didn't know they're behind a hole in the wall.

BB: (Laughs) All right, fair enough. How'd you know the needs and wants of your constituents?

JC: Pretty much just, we had regular meetings. I would get [0:24:00] communication from people mainly by notes and things. And the biggest influence I guess, although I didn't let it influence me that much. Were lobbyists. They do a lot of good work. And they help out trying to get some information to the legislators. Because they want you to vote a certain way.

BB: Sure. Yeah, true. Do you remember the first bill that you've ever sponsored?

JC: Yeah.

BB: Okay, what was it?

JC: It involves the rules of civil procedure that was prepared by the Indiana Judges Association, [0:25:00] and they asked me to sponsor it, so I did and there was...Indiana was still practicing law on the basis of old case law on Indiana procedures. I don't know if you know what it was or?

BB: I might have heard of that one point in time, but not very familiar with it.

JC: Motion makes more specific motion strike. All of the procedural we're done away with the Indiana Rules of Civil Procedure. And they're pretty much based on the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. Making the practicing law much more efficient, and much more capable of coming to conclusions. [0:26:00] Hopefully the right conclusions have a better chance of getting the right conclusion if you have issues cleared up. You don't have all bunch of side issues about procedures, details that aren't relevant. That was my first bill. Rules of Civil Procedure.

BB: Okay, interesting. So, what were the regular interactions like amongst members of the general assembly, formal and informal?

JC: I didn't have a whole lot of interaction with them. I pretty much get out of the session and take the bills back to my [0:27:00] motel room and study them. Back the next day. I do know that a lot of legislators took time to party. I didn't participate.

BB: Okay. Wow, that's interesting. How would you say the relationship was between Democrats and Republicans when you served?

JC: I would say they're cordial, but somewhat standoffish. And I remember one funny story. We would have, at that time, [0:28:00] we had an ad for Dodge, the Dodge Good Boys we would have, where their cowboy hats. Said Dodge Good Boys and come buy our cars and that sort of thing. And when I was in the session, it was a Republican majority. So, the Democrats at the last day all came in the House with the Dodge Good Boy hats alleging that they were the good people in the legislature and that the Republicans had all screwed it up. And I remember the statute a KKK statute that prohibited the assembly in any public place of three or more persons while wearing white hats. So, I called the sheriff for the rest of the Democrat [0:29:00] delegation.

BB: Wow. That's crazy. Oh my gosh, yikes.

JC: The whole Democrats had white hats on can't do that.

BB: Yeah. Wow. What would you say were the differences between the House and Senate? In terms of like members, and how they acted?

JC: House I would say is much more relaxed. The Senate is pretty firm. Of course, I was a House member so. I thought the Senate was pretty stiff, rigid, but the House members who I knew were much friendlier. So that was just generally the impression. [0:30:00] I didn't have any trouble with the senators and worked with them a fair number on various legislation that had to go get passed in both houses and signed by Governor Bowen.

BB: Yeah. Okay. Now, how would you get support for your legislation?

JC: Depending on the subject area, I would build to the...if it was an area that was geographically important part of the state of legislators for that part of the state, if it's a subject matter that I knew that certain legislators had an interest in, I would go get support from them. And [0:31:00] law enforcement is a huge important area. And I would try to get The Sheriffs Association or the state police, get them involved and see what's going on with the issues that are at hand.

BB: Yeah. Okay. Now, when it came to people voting on legislation, did you have an idea of how people would vote before they actually voted?

JC: No. Well, I'll refine that a little bit. Because if you have committee meetings first, the Speaker of the House refers the bills to committee. Committee will tell you, [0:32:00] we'll review and make a recommendation to the House on second reading. Whichever committee it would be it, whichever on that committee I would know who it would be. I'd say what do you think about this? And then they'd give me the lowdown.

BB: Yeah, okay. Sure. What role would you say party leadership played in a general assembly?

JC: Organizationally, I would say a crucial role. Midterm I would say, would begin to diminish some. Cause individual legislators become more independent and make up their own minds. [0:33:00] If it's a huge, big issue, its party principal type of issue, then the heads of the party can come down (Unintelligible). But most of the time, after saying mid-session, the legislative pretty much decides themselves.

BB: Let's see here. So, you already talked about this, I think a little bit but what would you say are some of the most important things that the public does not know about the Indiana General Assembly and how it operates?

JC: (Laughs) I've taught at the University of Southern Indiana political science [0:34:00] and tried to educate folks on what goes on in the legislature. What decisions are made is well-nigh impossible unless you go down through each issue. If you go down through the process, of course reading and second reading, third reading, conference committee, signature by the governor, unless you get some way to educate the public concerning that process and make it somewhat interesting. The public is not going to be interested at all and it's a hell of a lot of work. And that process is complex. But it is complex for a reason to try and make the right decision. [0:35:00] Try to get everything cleared up appropriately, people get so angry and concerned when legislation takes a while. You know, I deal with it the same thing in the practice of law. I do a lot of social security work. Takes a long time.

BB: Right.

JC: That's because issues are complex. We got to make it right.

BB: Yeah, it's true. Everyone, I guess kind of thinks that legislation can be passed within a day or something just immediately and.

JC: Feels that your fingers can get a result.

BB: Yeah, exactly, pretty much. Now, how did your legislative service affect your family [0:36:00] life?

JC: During session, it was awfully hard because I would leave for the whole week. I'd fly up to Indy and stay the week in a motel and then fly back Friday night.

BB: Oh, wow.

JC: That's hard work on a family.

BB: Yeah, definitely.

JC: And so. I really don't know what it is. If you say living in Marion County. I would think it'd be a lot easier. But I don't know that is a fact. You do have to give up your workaday world for the legislature. And that would be very difficult. I had to because I was a practicing attorney when I was elected. And so, I had to give up that for two months, 90 days. [0:37:00] And that was hard on the practice.

BB: Yeah, sure. Makes sense. What would you say was the most controversial legislative issues during your time the General Assembly?

JC: Road taxes. This big lobby was the industry and trucking industry, teamsters union. Various other people really have an interest in the price process. Moving covers.

BB: Okay, sure. And what piece of legislation [0:38:00] did you work on that took the most time?

JC: It was called Vandigov.

BB: It's called what Vandigov?

JC: Vandigov and you know, Marion County and Indianapolis are a single governmental unit, it's a consolidated city.

BB: Oh so like Unigov then yeah, okay. Interesting.

JC: Overwhelmingly defeated.

BB: Okay. Now how do you how do you spell that one just so people aren't confused.

JC: V-A-N-D-I-G-O-V

BB: Okay, Vandigov [0:39:00] got it okay. Interesting.

JC: (Unintelligible) and I went around the country studying various locales of unified government. I found no objection to consolidated government and it works everywhere to varying degrees. There is so much...such an improved system, Indiana just won't change from the county, the city, the townships, Indiana, independent boards and agencies. We have locally in

Vanderburgh County we have I think 24 independent [0:40:00] agents, agencies that set the tax rates. How can you organize that?

BB: Yeah. So, I guess you just got you kind of wanted to do what Marion County did then?

JC: That was it, yep. Luger, he spoke to get Unigov in my session at the legislature, I'm sold. And I gotta bill passed that ordered Vanderburgh County to have a study commission. And the Senate Commission overwhelmingly rejected it.

BB: What would you say was your proudest moment as a legislator? [0:41:00]

JC: Being elected.

BB: Yeah, okay. Sure. What was the biggest hurdle you had to overcome during your time in office?

JC: Getting to and from the session.

BB: What in your opinion is the most important work of the Indiana General Assembly?

JC: Representing the people of the state and doing so in a logical and rational fashion, and being conservative in their approach to imposing government on people.

BB: Sure, okay. Now, one thing when I was looking up your background a little bit through some old records that we have, I noticed that during your time the general assembly you sponsored, it appears like a lot of legislation connected with law enforcement. Do you remember anything about that?

JC: I do. [0:42:00] Probably because I represented the FOP as an attorney. I was obviously a legislator that would listen to their requests. And I did so in an effort to support the FOP and enforcement of the law of the state. And be fair to people.

BB: Yeah, okay. I also saw that you sponsored a bill regarding trade secret thefts. Do you remember anything about that one?

JC: That was just Chamber of Commerce. [0:43:00] I believe one was concerned that and across state lines it would be I believe this what it was. Be some concern that the FCC was not controlling the interstate commerce.

BB: Okay. Yeah, interesting. So, overall, how would you summarize your time as a legislator?

JC: For me personally or for the community?

BB: For you personally.

JC: Fabulous educational years [0:44:00] at work, prepared me very well, to be Corporation Council of the city, because I was able to take the city's needs, relate them to the state and get them integrated. So, that we could get the job done in the city.

BB: Sure, okay. Do you have a favorite story or anecdote from your time as a legislator?

JC: I think I told you one about the Dodge Boys hats that's about the funniest one, I think. I thought was interesting and funny. Because I came up with having read the old statutes requiring you can't wear white hats.

BB: Right, right. [0:45:00]

JC: I think that's been repealed since then.

BB: What lessons, if any, did you learn from your experiences?

JC: The complexity of state government, the legislative process and that's crucial throughout the years. I mean, I rewrote...when I came back after the legislature, it was appointed to Corporation Council from the city. The city did not have a code of ordinances.

BB: Right. Okay.

JC: I thought holy smokes. So, I wrote the code of ordinances for the city. And that was crucially [0:46:00] related to how the statutes (Unintelligible) structure.

BB: Oh, wow. Interesting.

JC: That was one great benefit the legislature helped me prepare for the city.

BB: Yeah. What advice would you give to future legislators or even current legislators?

JC: Study the issues. There's so many relevant areas to study. And they should make an issue that they're interested in. We implement and get to work on it with some experts, [0:47:00] get your universities or colleges involved. Getting all of the different opinions come to your own conclusions. If you're none an author then get somebody to write it for you.

BB: Did you have any regrets as a legislator?

JC: Being defeated.

BB: Yeah, well, yeah. Sure. What would you say about how the State of Indiana has changed over the course of your lifetime?

JC: I pretty much focus on Marion County. I think it has [0:48:00] the Unigov, has helped Marion County, develop a national and international reputation. That is very important. I voted for the consolidated Marion County and I talked to Dick Luger about it several times. And I think that's the best thing that came out of that session.

BB: Yeah. Okay. And we're there were you a part of any tense debates at all during that session over Unigov?

JC: No.

BB: So, it was just more like you just took part [0:49:00] in helping pass it and?

JC: I was on the committee that reviewed it in the House.

BB: Sure. And what was it about Unigov? What was like the thing that I guess stood out most to you that made you think like, oh, yeah, we need to pass this?

JC: The organization and direct line of responsibility clarified for a government employees and so that the public can see more clearly what needs to be done and how to do it. It needs government employee to do it for you. But there's so many independent agencies, federal, state and local. It's impossible to get done. So that's [0:50:00] what I saw was needed. That was

Marion County Unigov. And I tried it here, failed. It works in Nashville beautifully. It works in (Unintelligible) beautifully. It works in Marion County beautifully. It works in the State of Washington beautifully. I can't find a consolidated government anywhere that's failed.

BB: Was there much opposition to it in the general assembly?

JC: No. None.

BB: Okay, wow. How would you say the general assembly has changed over time?

JC: Well, since [0:51:00] I haven't been back in since 1970. I don't know precisely. I don't have any firsthand knowledge. I do know that the computer has changed it a lot. Actually, I think a lot of changes have gone in. And media coverage and what the legislators can do with the media and in some specifics I'm not in the House, haven't been for many years.

BB: How has politics changed in Indiana? [0:52:00]

JC: The only way I could truly describe it is that both sides have put on their boxing gloves.

BB: Okay. Yeah. So, a little bit more polarized, I guess.

JC: Right.

BB: Yeah, that's kind of a thing. I hear a fair amount from legislators that served around the time you did. Yeah. It's quite a bit. Quite a bit more polarized. What if any enduring qualities do Hoosiers still have or hold dear?

JC: Hoosiers have the quality of speaking honestly and straightforwardly, and not trying to hide behind the bush. And come right out and say what you think. [0:53:00]

BB: Yeah. All right. So, I guess last question here. What do you want Hoosiers to know about their role in relation to the function of the Indiana General Assembly?

JC: Get involved. Do it any number of ways, that you contact your legislators. Contact your, whatever party you are, you can contact the party chairman of the state chairman, or any number of areas that you can contact and get involved personally. And have yourself heard.

BB: Yeah, okay. Absolutely. All right. Well, is there anything that about your career at all that I didn't ask about that you want to mention or? [0:54:00]

JC: Well, there is a little personal thing is. I'm in a wheelchair now. And accessibility for state government is very important to me and its very important for the state offices. I believe they've done a fair job but not completely. For example, I don't think being in a wheelchair now. I could serve in the legislature as a legislator, because I couldn't get in the House.

BB: Okay, interesting. Yeah.

JC: I could get in, but I'd have to be sitting in the alley.

BB: Yeah, that's an interesting point. I never heard anything [0:55:00] about that. Yeah. Okay. Perhaps that would be a good thing then that people definitely change for sure.

JC: And so, even if I wanted to, which I don't I couldn't run for the legislature, because if I were elected, couldn't serve.

BB: Right. Yeah. Interesting. Okay. Well, I appreciate you taking the time to take part in this project. It's been really great talking with you. You had some really interesting things to say. Yeah. So thank you so much for taking part.

JC: Okay. Thank you, Ben.

BB: Alright, take care, and have a good rest of your day.

JC: You too, sir. Thank you,

BB: Alright, bye bye.

JC: Bye.

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