

## **ILOHI Interview with John Bushemi**

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Indianapolis, Indiana

Interview by Ben Baumann

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John Bushemi=JB:

Ben Baumann=BB:

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BB: [0:00:00] So just to state for the record, today is March 31, 2021. And my name is Ben Bauman. I'm here in Indianapolis, Indiana, and I'm speaking via phone with John Bushemi, who is in Schererville, Indiana. And we're doing an interview for the Indiana Legislative Oral History Initiative. So just starting off, when and where were you born?

JB: I was born on April 13, 1948, in Chicago, Illinois.

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

JB: My father was Samuel Bushemi, and my mother was Pearl Bushemi.

BB: Okay. And how long did your family live in Chicago?

JB: I happened to be born in Chicago because that was simply a nearby hospital when my mother went into labor. [0:01:00] Our family was living at that time in Gary, Indiana.

BB: Okay.

JB: And Gary, Indiana, is the town where I was born and raised.

BB: Okay, sure. Okay, cool. And where was your family from before Indiana?

JB: Well, my father was born in Centerville, Iowa in 1914. And he was there with his eight other brothers and sisters and my grandparents who immigrated from Sicily to Centerville, Iowa. My mother Pearl Bushemi was born in Gary in 1916. And dad and mom met through mutual family and friend acquaintances.

BB: Oh Okay, cool. And what were your parents' occupations growing up?

JB: [0:02:00] After his family moved from Centerville, Iowa, to Gary, my father graduated from Emerson High School in Gary, and served for four years as a member of the United States Marine Corps in the South Pacific, in a combat assignment.

BB: Yeah, okay.

JB: After service in the Marine Corps. When my father returned home, he was a steel worker at United States Steel in Gary, and also a restaurant owner and operator and later went into a career of government service.

BB: Cool. Okay. That's interesting.

JB: And [0:03:00] Mom was, as I indicated, was born in Gary and worked. Jobs in the business sector in Chicago, Illinois, so commuted to work in Chicago, Illinois prior to marrying my father.

BB: Okay, interesting. Did you have any siblings growing up?

JB: I did. I'm the oldest of five children. I have a sister Teresa, a brother, Jim, and twin sisters, Mary Ellen, and Mary Elizabeth.

BB: And how would you describe your childhood?

JB: Happy, fun and terrific.

BB: And who are the most influential people in your childhood?

JB: By far my father and mother. [0:04:00] And being the oldest of five, I get the privilege of being mentored by our father. And also equally influenced by our mother who was a loving and caring person. While we were growing up, mom was a homemaker and stayed at home, took care of the affairs at home took care of the needs of the five of us children. And as you know, Ben, you don't see that very much these days. There aren't opportunities because of economics for the mother, oftentimes to stay at home with children.

BB: Right. Yeah, true. And what understanding if any, did your families or did you have about your family's political beliefs? [0:05:00]

JB: My father's belief, his fundamental belief was service to the community.

BB: Okay.

JB: In whatever capacity, you have the opportunity to serve. So that could be service to the community in the private sector by volunteering and serving your community, but my father, for example, one of the many positions he held was in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. He was the director of Lake County civil defense.

BB: Wow. Okay.

JB: Which is the equivalent today of being the Director of Homeland Security in Lake County, Indiana, and that was a volunteer position. And we talked about it many times. My dad viewed that as an opportunity to serve the community. My mother [0:06:00] was a member of many social and community clubs and organizations that provided charity work for those that are disadvantaged in the community. We were all raised as members of the Democratic Party. So, our political beliefs that were instilled in us, primarily through dad.

JB: Were the beliefs of the Democratic Party and we've stayed consistent with those beliefs to this day.

BB: Yeah, that's interesting. Okay. Now, what schools did you attend as a child and teenager?

JB: As a child and teenager, I attended St. Mark's Catholic school in Gary and Andean High School [0:07:00], a Catholic school in Merrillville. And then I had the opportunity to attend Indiana University undergrad in Bloomington and also graduated from Indiana University Maurer School of Law in Bloomington after undergrad.

BB: And how would you describe your educational experiences from childhood into college?

JB: They were terrific experiences at every level elementary school, high school, undergrad and law school. I had the privilege of being mentored by great teachers, great instructors, great professors. People who cared about their students took an interest in their students you know, yourself other than parents and family members, the people that you remember, as you move on, through life, oftentimes are the best teachers that you had earlier in your life.

BB: [0:08:00] Yeah that's, that's really neat. It sounds like you had a pretty good upbringing there and, and a good situation. Now, did you have any favorite subjects in school or were you part of any extracurricular activities?

JB: Yes, in high school, I served in student government. I enjoyed all subjects at the high school level. My favorite subjects were mathematics, and science and government. And then again, at Indiana University. My undergraduate degree was a major in political science. And that's when I started focusing, along with the influence from dad on political science and a potential opportunity to serve in government. Yeah.

BB: And now your dad served, correct?

JB: [0:09:00] He did.

BB: Yeah.

JB: Prior to my service in the General Assembly, three of our family members preceded me. My father, Sam Buscemi, served as a member of the House of Representatives for six years from 1948 to 1954. My father's brother, Marion Buscemi, my Uncle Marion, served for 16 years in the House of Representatives from 1960 to 1976. And my mother's cousin, Victoria Caesar, served in the House of Representatives for six years from 1962 to 1968. So, as I was going through college and law school, I had the opportunity to be mentored by [0:10:00] three members of the Indiana General Assembly that were either serving at that time or had already completed their service.

BB: Yeah, wow. So, when you were in like high school, and did you think that you're going to serve one day in the General Assembly as well?

JB: I thought there was always an opportunity for that. And hoped that there was an opportunity for that. At the high school level and even in my undergraduate years in Bloomington, I had other interests, but nothing that was as great an interest as service in government.

BB: Yeah. Now as a child, what were your views of the State of Indiana or about being a Hoosier?

JB: [0:11:00] We were raised in a Household where our father instilled in us the value to always be proud that we are Hoosiers and to be proud that we're residents and citizens of the great State of Indiana.

BB: Yeah, that's cool. And in what ways did your awareness of politics change as you entered law school?

JB: Well, at the law school level, you start to have a better understanding and comprehension of politics and government and how the two work together to deliver government policy and deliver government services. And my view of it just became more earnest and the desire to serve increased while I was in law school. I enjoyed taking courses in law school that [0:12:00] directly related to either local government, state government or federal government or the field of political science.

BB: Yeah. Did your political views deviate at all from your father's when you were in college? Or did you feel like you pretty much had the same thinking on a lot of different political issues at the time?

JB: I can't say that my views deviated from my father's or that my views were totally aligned with my father's. I think it's accurate to say that my views were predominantly influenced by my father at that particular stage of my life and at that particular stage of my career.

BB: [0:13:00] Yeah. Now, what was your first job out of college?

JB: I graduated from IU law school in Bloomington in 1973. And so my first two jobs right after graduation was I opened a private civil law practice here in Merrillville, Indiana. And at the same time, I served as a Lake County Juvenile Court public defender. So my duty assignment there was to defend juveniles who could not afford private legal counsel before the juvenile court.

BB: Okay, interesting. Yeah. And [0:14:00] when, if at all, did you get married?

JB: My wife Betty and I were married in 1985.

BB: Okay. And do you have any children?

JB: We do. We have two daughters. Amanda. Who is Amanda Buckley, who was born in 1986. And Cara, who is now Cara Essling, who was born in 1988. This made my service in the General Assembly even more fun, Ben, both Amanda and Cara were born while I was serving in the General Assembly.

BB: Oh, wow. Okay. Yeah, that that is I'm sure that would make things interesting. Yeah. Now, how did you get involved in the General Assembly? What was the first time that you decided to run?

JB: [0:15:00] In 1974 and 1975. I started to focus on possibly being a candidate in the 1976 primary election and general election for state representative for the House of Representatives. However, in 1976, the incumbent Indiana State Senator, who was the Senator for my district, Adam Benjamin, was elected to the United States Congress. So, he resigned his position. With some time remaining on his state Senate term, the State Senate seat became vacant. And I

became a candidate in the vacancy filling election in December of 1976. To fill the two years [0:16:00] remaining on that Senate District Four seat that was vacated by Adam Benjamin.

BB: Okay, got it. And how did your family influence your time the General Assembly, you mentioned that you had two daughters while you were serving, did that impact your life much?

JB: Well, having children certainly impacts your life in a positive way. And having our children I think just it renewed my commitment to want to try to make the world a better world and to make our community a better community. So that there was a heritage passed on to our children.

BB: Yeah, sure. That makes sense. [0:17:00] Now, when you first got involved, and you're trying to become a member of the General Assembly, did you have any key issues or legislation that you wanted to champion or fight against?

JB: Yes. When during the time that I was a candidate for the vacancy filling in 1976. I made a point of meeting with all of the 100-precinct committeemen and committee women that were in that particular state Senate district, so that I could get a feel for what they felt was important.

BB: Yeah, that makes sense.

JB: With the hope that I could then become elected as a state senator, in that vacancy filling election, and then serve that district for the [0:18:00] two years remaining on the term. And the topics that came up. Most frequently, were amending the Indiana Constitution to allow for an Indiana lottery program. Also, another topic that was a priority was a drainage improvement district for a waterway, that's the primary drainage waterway across the northern part of Lake County, and that's the little Calumet River. And then also working with members of labor organizations, on things that were important to organized labor [0:19:00].

BB: Okay. Now, did you have any national state or local political heroes? I know you mentioned that you had several sort of family mentors, but anyone else that that you kind of looked up to when you were first getting involved in politics?

JB: Absolutely, President John Kennedy, who served as president of our nation from 1960 to 1963, and also President John Kennedy's brother, Senator Robert.

BB: Okay. Sure, yeah. Now, how would you describe your campaign strategy?

JB: Well, in the first election which was the vacancy filling election, is not a direct popular vote. It's an election that is held by caucus of the committeemen within the geographic boundaries of that district. The campaign strategy was simple and straightforward [0:20:00] to be successful in that election, I felt I had to personally meet with each of those 100 committeemen so that I could introduce myself to them, get to know them better on the personal side, and also get to understand what they felt was important for that position Indiana State Senate for the fourth district. That's the strategy and plan that I implemented. Prior to the election, which occurred on December 11, 1976, Indiana Statehood Day, I did meet with all 100 over the course of three months, with all 100 committeemen of that district.

BB: Wow. Yeah, that's a lot.

JB: And my meeting with them primarily was typically a meeting, drinking a cup of coffee, [0:21:00] sitting across the kitchen table at the committeeman's House.

BB: Okay. Wow. So, I guess you really got a chance to get to know them fairly well, in those meetings.

JB: Yes. And I think that allowed me to do a better job because I understood what my duties were to represent the interests of the residents of the community of the district.

BB: Right, right. So, what was your first election day like?

JB: That caucus on December 11, 1976, there were seven candidates, including myself for the position. It was an exciting day. The caucus occurred at Gary City Hall. The groups of committeemen had different rooms that they were meeting in. And so, all of us [0:22:00] seven candidates, including myself would go from room to room to make remarks and make a speech to the committeemen and present our goals for the office. And then the voting actually occurred. On the first ballot, none of the seven candidates had a majority of 51%. On the second ballot, none of the candidates had a majority of 51%. On the second ballot, I finished first among seven, but without the 51% majority I was still first among seven but didn't have the 51%. And finally, on the third ballot, I went over the 51% and was successful in winning that election. [0:23:00]

BB: Wow. Okay (Laughs). That must have been quite the process to sit through that. And that's a lot of stuff happening there. Wow. Okay, so then you finally won. And how did your campaign slash strategies change over your political career with, like the next elections that you were involved with?

JB: My other direct elections were in 1978, I was elected to a full four-year term I was reelected a third time in 1982, and a fourth time in 1986, for four-year terms each of those times. And I would say, Ben [0:24:00], that my campaign, and my priorities and my approach evolved over time as new issues came up. But the key component that I always maintained was staying in touch with my constituents, whether that's by phone, or whether it was by mail, or with meetings in the community, in order to stay aware of what the desires and wants and needs of the community were. The General Assembly was serving in session in January, February, March, and April of each of those 14 years that I served. I had habit on the weekends when the General Assembly was in adjournment holding Saturday morning constituent [0:25:00] meetings at different locations throughout the district. So that it would be convenient for residents of Gary at one location, residents of Hobart in another location, residents of Lake Station at another location. Because those were the three cities and towns that were part of the fourth district, and the Saturday morning constituent meetings were always vital and always helpful.

BB: Yeah, yeah. I bet. Now do did your feelings change with each time you got reelected?

JB: I think my feelings evolved. My commitment to serving the community and serving the voters never changed. But as new issues came up, feelings and ideas certainly changed. Nothing specific comes to mind. [0:26:00] But if you have something specific in mind, I'd be happy to touch on it.

BB: Yeah, I mean, I guess, you know, did you feel just as excited to continue to serve with each time you got reelected as you did when you're first elected?

JB: Absolutely, yes. The 1978 election, when I ran for the four-year term for the first time, that was exciting. The 1982 election was equally as exciting. And the 1986 election was equally as exciting. However, in 1982, and 1986, I ran unopposed in both the primary election and the general election. So, I really didn't have an opponent. [0:27:00]

BB: Yeah.

JB: Which was kind of disappointing.

BB: Yeah. That's right. Not as much fun when there's no one there to I guess, compete with you (Laughs). What were you thinking as you walked into the state House for your first day in office?

JB: I was thinking that I was the beneficiary of one of the greatest privileges that a human being could have. And that is to be an elected member of the Indiana General Assembly, sent to Indianapolis to serve your community. So that recognition of privilege was the pervading thought the first time I stepped in the halls of the state House. BB: Yeah, that's cool. Okay. [0:28:00]

BB: And did you feel like you had a pretty good feel when you first got elected of the legislative process, since your family background, and also your time around government before that?

JB: I did. But I quickly learned that there was so much more to learn and understand about the legislative process and the intricacies of the legislative process that I really didn't know, the types of things Ben, for example, that are not listed in textbooks about the legislative process.

BB: Yeah, okay. And let's see. So how did you learn those are extra ins and outs that you don't really get educated about in the textbooks?

JB: You learn those, I think by working with your colleagues, working in a civil manner, working in a bipartisan manner, [0:29:00] staying committed at all times to working for the common good, and what's best for the community. And that's how you learn those.

BB: Yeah. So now, are you thinking primarily about like, interactions with other legislators and how to work together? Is that kind of the thing that takes some getting used to figure out versus just sort of the standard process of how you know, bills become a law? Is that what you mean?

JB: Yes, developing your relationships of trust with your colleagues and with your fellow members of the General Assembly, because ultimately, if you have a particular project or have a particular program or have a particular bill, in every case, it requires 26 votes [0:30:00] to pass the Senate, 51 votes to pass the House of Representatives. And then there's the third hurdle. the bill, even if passed by the General Assembly has to be signed by the governor into law.

BB: Yeah. Right. So, did you have any political mentors in the General Assembly while you were serving?

JB: I would say the most influential mentor I had the Indiana State Senate was then State Senator and later, Governor Frank O'Bannon of Corydon, Indiana. State Senator O'Bannon and I served together during the entire 14 years of my service, and I was so [0:31:00] happy when he became Governor of Indiana after winning the 1996 election, and he, as you know, served almost two complete terms and passed away unexpectedly. And tragically, while serving in his second term as governor, Frank O'Bannon was probably the most influential mentor for me. And the thing that was remarkable about Frank O'Bannon was what we touched on before his civil nature, ability to work in a bipartisan fashion and work for the common good. He was a legislator that everyone liked. And that everyone looked to and that everyone trusted.

BB: Right. Yeah. And how did you sort of keep [0:32:00] track of the needs and wants of your constituents while serving? What were your sort of methods for doing that?

JB: Well, back at that time, there was no internet. And back at that time, there were no cell phones. So, the primary methods of keeping in touch with constituents and their wants and needs were mail. Telephone. And those weekend, Saturday morning, constituent meetings that I mentioned that I would hold at different locations throughout the district.

BB: Yeah. Okay. Did you find it pretty easy to talk with constituents?

JB: Yes, I always have. And that's because I view the job of a member of the General Assembly [0:33:00] as simply being a delegate, representative of the district, sent to Indianapolis to serve and represent the interests of the district in the General Assembly.

BB: Yeah. Now you served for, you know, a fairly long time. How common would you say in your experiences is it to get some type of contact from a constituent who was really upset about something? And might even like, blame you for something. Was that something that happens? Every once in a while? Or is it common at all? Or?

JB: I think it happens every once in a while. But I'd like to think that my service was satisfactory enough where no one [0:34:00] would wrongfully blame me for something. But I think the key in that situation is, if possible, meeting in person with that particular constituent, and patiently listening to what their concern is and what their objection is, getting a better understanding of it. And then sharing the knowledge and information that the legislator has with the constituent so that there's an exchange of information. And hopefully, by the end of that meeting, a better understanding of the problem, but also the common interest.

BB: Yeah, I've always thought that must be a kind of an interesting dynamic at play when someone's a legislator to figure out what's the best way to handle those situations. [0:35:00] Since obviously, you represent a lot of different people with different interests and backgrounds, I'm sure get into some complex situations with that.

JB: Sure. But the best solution always been to confront that information head, on welcome it and exchange ideas about it. So that constituent understands where the legislators coming from. And the legislator, first and foremost, understands where the constituent is coming from.

BB: Right, right. What was the first bill that you sponsored, if you remember?



JB: The first bill that I sponsored in the 1977 session was I signed on as a co-sponsor of the Equal Rights Amendment.

BB: Oh, okay. Sure.

JB: Indiana, as you know, [0:36:00] was the 35<sup>th</sup>, And unfortunately, last state in the union, to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, and we passed Equal Rights Amendment in the Indiana State Senate on January 18, 1977, which was within the first two weeks that I started my service as a state senator.

BB: Yeah, okay. And so, what were the type of debates going on at the time over that...did you feel like is a pretty controversial thing or is for the most part, people were on board with it?

JB: The majority of legislators were on board with it, because in its essence, the Equal Rights Amendment is nothing more than a policy statement [0:37:00] that equality of rights under the law would not be denied by the United States or any state on account of sex. The Equal Rights Amendment simply says both sexes are equal in the eyes of the law. Simple, straightforward, easy to understand, especially in our life today, right?

BB: Right.

JB: Yet if you look back at that era in the Indiana General Assembly, the Equal Rights Amendment and Indiana's ratification of it was somewhat controversial. There were a minority of legislators that oppose it rather vehemently making incorrect claims that adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment would lead to homosexual marriage would lead to sexual deviancy would [0:38:00] require females to become soldiers and would lead to children becoming motherless.

BB: Okay, wow, that's interesting. So how are they coming up with some of these type of arguments? What was the...was there some type of...you know reasoning for them to come up with this stuff? Or is this just kind of like desperate attempts to prevent the legislation?

JB: I respected the fact that the few legislators that had those views and expressed those views, for example, during the debate, honestly and sincerely had those [0:39:00] views and at that point, you know, that if the views are held strongly, you're not going to convince them otherwise, you have to move on.

BB: Right.

JB: And then just proceed with the bill.

BB: Sure, sure. Okay. And what was the...what were the regular interactions like between Democrats and Republicans during your time the General Assembly?

JB: The interactions were always great and open. Having the Senate chamber where all of us Republicans and Democrats alike are there makes it very conducive on the floor [0:40:00] of the state Senate to interact with your colleagues. So I think interaction was excellent.

BB: Okay, was the environment where like Republicans and Democrats would were perhaps sort of good out to dinner and stuff together outside of the, you know, outside of work and sort of developed friendships?

JB: Absolutely.

BB: That's neat. Okay. What differences, if any, were there between members of the House and Senate?

JB: I think the differences, if any, were driven simply by we were a smaller body half the size of the House, and therefore, each member of the Senate had a little more influence over legislation.

BB: Yeah.

JB: There were only 50 of us compared to 100 members. House members would always joke with Senate members and razz us [0:41:00] and say, well, you guys are the House of Lords and then they would chuckle.

BB: Ok.

JB: I think there were differences. But the overriding commonality was we were all fellow members of the Indiana General Assembly, all in all, 150 of us.

BB: Yeah, yeah. How did you garner support for your legislation?

JB: Garnered support for it in a variety of ways. I would always reach out to constituents in the district to have them express their support for different pieces of legislation to other legislators. Other members would also reach out to organizations that had an existing network in the community [0:42:00] for the organization to speak as a group to contact state senators and state representatives to support legislation. For example, if it was something that related to labor management relations, or if it was something that pertained to improvements of working conditions, if it was something related to unemployment compensation, and if it was something related to workers compensation legislation, if it was something pertaining to work safety in industrial settings, we would reach out to the labor unions of the steelworkers the building trades that were existing and have them express their support to other members of the Senate and other members of the House using their large networks. [0:43:00]

BB: Yeah, okay. That makes sense. Now, did you have a good idea of how people would vote prior to actually voting on a bill?

JB: We usually did. The custom and practice in the Senate, is that prior to going to the floor in the afternoon for the voting, the Senate Democrats would caucus privately, and the Senate Republicans would caucus privately, and we would go over the calendar. And your colleagues would share whatever information they had on the chances of success or failure of the particular bill. If someone had strong feelings, that was their opportunity to express their feelings to the caucus for or against the legislation. If someone wanted to offer [0:44:00] an amendment, that would be their opportunity to explain why they're offering the amendment and the benefits of the amendment. And by time we left the caucus room to go to the floor for the floor voting on the

bills that were on the calendar for that day. I think most members of the Senate had a good idea of the likelihood of success or failure for the bill when the vote did come.

BB: Right. Okay. And during your time in the assembly, what roles did party leadership play?

JB: Party leadership played important roles. Your party leaders and caucus leaders were the people that you trusted to look out for the best interests of the caucus and to guide the caucus in its deliberations and guide the caucus in its thinking. An example [0:45:00] that I'll go back to was one of our most respected caucus leaders while he was serving as a state senator was Governor Frank O'Bannon.

BB: Yeah.

JB: And likewise, the Republicans in the Senate had good, knowledgeable and well respected caucus leaders as well.

BB: Yeah. Okay. That's neat. What was a time where you had to work with the other party to get legislation done?

JB: Almost always.

BB: Okay.

BB: So, I guess it was always a pretty competitive, General Assembly. So, you really needed those swing votes, I guess?

JB: Yes. You're exactly right. The General Assembly in the era that I served in the 1970s. And 1980s, was much more balanced, much more competitive than it is today [0:46:00]. And so, you did typically on any piece of legislation that you were pushing, you needed bipartisan support from both Democrat and Republican senators.

BB: Okay. And what's your opinion on why things have changed so much today? You know, why is it so lopsided now.

JB: It's lopsided now. As we speak, Ben, as you know, the House of Representatives is composed of 71 Republican members and only 29 Democratic members. And the Indiana State Senate is composed of 39 Republican members and 11 Democrat members. It's lopsided due to the terrible gerrymandered districts for the House of Representatives and Senate that has led to [0:47:00] these lopsided electoral results, the Republican Party in recent decades. The last two decades especially, has specifically structured the geographic boundaries of the Senate districts and the state House of Representative districts so that the Republican Party would win a disproportionate share of House seats and disproportionate share of Senate seats. And their efforts have been successful for them. But I think that is a disservice to citizens of the state of Indiana and a disservice to the taxpayers for either party to have a lopsided margin in the [0:48:00] General Assembly because that's your policy and lawmaking body and policy and lawmaking always is best when both parties contribute their ideas.

BB: Right. So, what was gerrymandering like when you were serving? Was it just not sort of abused as much or?

JB: Yes, it was not abused as much. It was not as blatant back in the 70s and 80s.

BB: Okay. Yeah, so alright. How do you think, you know, something like that can be sort of fixed? It seems like, especially when it's run away this much. And I guess obviously, Indiana is not the only state where you have sort of this really dominant political presence from one party. But how do things like that get better? What's the best route in your opinion? [0:49:00]

JB: Well, there are a variety of solutions that are under consideration right now. But each of these solutions will require the direct cooperation and reasonableness of Republican Party leaders in order to implement a solution. Some solutions that are found in some states is to establish equal number, an equal number, equal member bipartisan reapportionment commissions that are separate from the general assembly itself that draw up the maps for the Senate and the House in a bipartisan fashion. Another solution has been to challenge the gerrymandering as unconstitutional through the court system. And that route has proved to be unsuccessful [0:50:00] in recent years because the United States Supreme Court whenever confronted with an opportunity to directly address the unconstitutional nature of state legislative gerrymandering, has always refused to make a ruling that calls for fairness and equality.

BB: Yeah, interesting.

JB: So, I don't know, as we talk today, whether there'll be a solution immediately, I hope there is (once) the 2020 census has been completed. So, the states are going to reapportion (in 2021).

BB: Yeah.

JB: And Indiana is going to reapportion its districts now with maps that will be in effect for the next 10 years. So a solution of fairness is needed immediately.

BB: Yeah, I guess it's always [0:51:00] kind of a battle of, you know, is it sort of party over country versus trying to actually just have some bipartisan examination of that process. That's, that's always a challenge, I suppose in state politics. What would you say the public does not know about the Indiana General Assembly and how it operates?

JB: The public oftentimes does not know that individual legislators sometimes sponsor pieces of legislation that advance their own financial self interest. Members of public sometimes don't know that individual members of the [0:52:00] General Assembly sometimes sponsor legislation that advance their own of special interests that have made significant financial contributions to their campaign. Those are some of the um bad sides of things that the public often doesn't really know or understand or comprehend. On the good side, one of the things generally, that the public doesn't recognize and give state legislators credit for is that the majority of state legislators are honest, good, dedicated people who understand that their mission, and their job is to [0:53:00] serve the community and serve the district and legislators work hard. They work long hours, and they work very tirelessly for the interests of their constituents.

BB: Right, right. What would you say were the most controversial legislative issues during your time in the assembly?

JB: Well, passing the constitutional amendment to allow the Indiana State Lottery and other forms of gambling was a controversial issue in the 1988 session of the General Assembly. And then the Constitutional amendment was passed by the voters. Then in the following year the 1989 session of the General Assembly, there were individual bills to approve various forms of gaming, including the lottery, and including casino gaming and including charity gaming, and those items were controversial. [0:54:00] The Equal Rights Amendment back when I first started my service in 1977 was a very controversial piece of legislation.

BB: Yeah. Okay. And why were they so controversial?

JB: Simply because different people had different views over the benefits or detriments of passing the amendment and passing the laws.

BB: Okay. Yeah. What legislation that you worked on took the most of your time?

JB: I would say among others, there were three pieces of legislation that I co-sponsored that took [0:55:00] the most time and effort. One was the constitutional amendment to allow the state lottery and allow other forms of legalized gaming, and then the follow up legislation to implement a lottery and gaming programs. A second was a bill that I sponsored that took approximately six years to get passed into law. And that was a consumer benefit bill that allowed substitution of therapeutically equivalent generic drugs for a brand name drug. If the doctor gave you a prescription written only for the brand name drug, [0:56:00] there was a time in the late 70s and early 80s, when the doctor's prescription for the brand name drug had to be the drug that of what the pharmacist dispense to the consumer. And the brand name drug products, as we know, can be very, very expensive.

BB: Yeah.

JB: The law had to be changed at that time to allow substitution of less expensive, but therapeutically equivalent, generic drugs. And it took six years to get that passed. And another consumer law that took a couple of sessions to get passed was the Lemon Law for automobiles that requires auto manufacturers to replace lemon cars. If there is a car that's bought new [0:57:00] from your dealership, and if it's got a major malfunction, and the dealership makes repeated efforts to correct it, and can't correct the malfunction in the automobile, the lemon law requires that the manufacturer replace your exact vehicle with a brand new motor vehicle.

BB: Oh, okay. Wow, that's interesting. That's, and then that got passed?

JB: It got passed, but passed despite the resistance and opposition of the motor vehicle manufacturers and their lobbyists.

BB: Right, naturally. Yeah (Laughs).

JB: And the generic drug substitution law got passed despite the opposition of the (brand) drug manufacturers and their lobbyists.

BB: Yeah. And what was your sort of thoughts on lobbyists in your time? Do you think that lobbyists were helpful, or were lobbyist, more just pushing an agenda?

JB: Both. I viewed lobbyists as a resource. And I use lobbyists as resources to give me information regarding that particular issue, because the lobbyist is the person from that particular industry that knows how that particular industry works. Um And if they're candid with you, they can share their information to allow you to be as a legislator, better informed about a topic in order to write the bill amend the bill, or simply get a better understanding of how you should vote on the bill. At the same time, lobbyists can assert improper [0:59:00] undue influence on the legislative process. And that's true in our Indiana General Assembly. And all of us know that that's true in the United States Congress in Washington, DC, as well. And that's the detrimental side of paid lobbyists who are hired hands to advance special interests and financial interests, and legislators have to work around that. And that's what you do, and view the lobbyist as a resource for information but not for undue influence.

BB: Yeah, I guess that's something you have to sort of try to have a balance about since being able to accept information that's useful while not also sort of adopting their bias towards an issue. Yeah. Interesting. And did you feel that [1:00:00] money from our campaign donations was that a problem at all during your time and service or?

JB: It could be for some legislators, obviously. Any legislator that's performing his duty of service to the community is not going to let that happen. But it can be in some instances.

BB: What was your proudest moment as legislator?

JB: I think my proudest moment, Ben, is this. In my 14 years of services in Indiana State Senator, over those 14 years, there were 633 daily sessions of the Indiana Senate that were held during that period. And I had a [1:01:00] 100% attendance record at all 633 of those session days, I never missed a session day.

BB: Wow.

JB: Despite the fact that I drove through ice storms, snowstorms and dangerous road conditions on I-65 to get to the Capitol Building and to get to the statehouse so that I wouldn't miss a session day.

BB: Yeah.

JB: I'm equally proud that during those 14 years that I served, there were about 8,400 individual roll call votes on various bills. And I have a 99% plus roll call attendance voting record on the bills. [1:02:00]

BB: Wow, okay. Yeah. That's impressive geez. What would you say was the biggest hurdle you overcame during your time in office?

JB: Do you mean individual legislation or a hurdle in some other sense?

BB: It could any type of challenge that you faced as a member of the General Assembly. But it could be about legislation, as well, if that was one that came to your mind first.

JB: Passing the lottery amendment probably was the biggest legislative hurdle because I worked on that, prior to adoption of the constitutional amendment in 1988, to send it to the voters, we

worked on lottery legislation for a good five or six years unsuccessfully [1:03:00], until 88. In the late 1970s, and early 1980s, Indiana at that time had no lottery program and no legalized gaming at all. And Indiana came from a history over decades and even centuries of being a conservative state with social values that dictated that gambling was immoral. And gambling was improper, and shouldn't be sanctioned by state governments. Slowly over time, the General Assembly during my service recognized that the Indiana lottery could be a substantial source of supplemental [1:04:00] revenue to operate state government and state government services. And I think in the end, that ended up being the tipping point argument in passing the lottery and the other gaming legislation that we finally enacted in 1989. And that was that state government services and services to citizens would ultimately benefit by having this supplemental form of revenue separate from the income tax and separate from the sales tax.

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

JB: The most important work of the Indiana General Assembly is to understand what the wants and needs of Hoosier residents and taxpayers are and to loyally serve the interests [1:05:00] of Hoosier residents and Hoosier taxpayers and not to serve the special interests?

BB: Yeah, sure. That makes sense. Well, when I was doing some research, in preparation for this interview, a few things I noticed that was interesting. Were you the youngest legislator at the time?

JB: Yes. When I was elected in 1976 and started to serve, I was 28 years of age Ben, and the youngest member of the State Senate at that time.

BB: Wow. And what was that like being the youngest ?

JB: That was a big experience, my eyes were wide open to learn what I could see. My ears were wide open to learn what I could hear. And it was fun and exciting, to talk with [1:06:00] older, more experienced members of the State Senate and the House of Representatives to learn from them, in addition to having had that childhood experience with my father, and my uncle and my cousin and learning about serving in the Indiana General Assembly from them as family members.

BB: Sure, yeah. And so, did people in the General Assembly ever kind of joke with you a little bit about your age being so young or?

JB: All the time.

BB: Yeah. All the time (Laughs).

JB: I was told I was wet behind the ears.

BB: Oh, boy. Yeah. Yep, I can imagine.

JB: So we had a lot of fun with it.

BB: Yeah. Yeah. I bet. Also, do you remember a bill that looked like you were connected with about the patronage system bill, I guess, to prevent sort of politically [1:07:00] based hiring in state government?

JB: Yes.

BB: And so what was the cause of that? Was there an incident at all that made you get interested in that, or?

JB: No specific incident, but just generally, the desire based on what we know and what we see the desire to have nonpartisan, trained and educated civil servants in important government positions, and for them to have job protection so that if the voters happen to make a change in the administration, from one party to the other, there's no threat of the person losing their position, and no threat of the state losing the resource and that trained and experienced person in their job.

BB: So yeah, that makes sense. So someone can't just go through and wipe out [1:08:00] all the different leadership roles and replace them throughout state government, I guess.

JB: And Ben that's not to say that for example, if there is a new governor of a different political party, that Governor should always have the opportunity to change his department (heads).

JB: His cabinet heads because that governor in order to be successful as the governor needs to have dedicated people that are loyal to him to implement the governor's policy. But we're talking about the mid-level and lower level positions of administration through state government, making sure that there was no patronage removal rights there and making sure that those people who are really the frontline in implementation [1:09:00] and administration of state government, those people should and need to have civil job protection.

BB: Right. Yeah, that makes sense. So now going to sort of life after the Indiana General Assembly. So what made you leave the General Assembly?

JB: Nothing made me leave the General Assembly I had served almost four full terms in the State Senate. My wife Betty and I had had our daughters, Amanda, and Cara, and Amanda was four years old at the time. Cara was two years old at the time. I recognized that they were very shortly going to be entering elementary school and then soon thereafter, would be in high school and then soon after that would be moving on to their own families [1:10:00] in their own life. And I sincerely did not want to miss an opportunity to be with our children on a daily basis at home, at that age that they were at. I simply made a conscious decision that I had served the state to the best of my ability for 14 years. And it was time to pass the torch to a new state senator, someone other than I to serve the district.

BB: Yeah, yeah. Okay. And how would you summarize your time as a state legislator?

JB: 14 years of the best experience that a person could have. I talked with young people frequently about this, wherever there's an opportunity. Serving in the General Assembly [1:11:00] is an opportunity for public service. And it's formal service through government. It's an opportunity to serve the community and serve the best interests of the community. And there's no greater privilege than to have been elected by your constituents, and have the constituents as a



group say, out of this group of candidates, we're selecting you, John, to be our trusted representative for us. Go out and do the best that you can.

BB: Yeah, yeah, that's great. What is your favorite story or anecdote from your time as a legislator?

JB: That's interesting. I have to give some thought to that, Ben.

BB: Yeah, no problem. That's alright.

JB: I think no one particular story, no one particular anecdote [1:12:00]. But the floor sessions that we talked about where all 50 members of the Senate are on the floor together. Those were the times that were the most fun. They were the most intriguing. Each day there were examples of heroism. Each day, there were examples of funny things that happened that were matters of a personal note that had nothing directly to do with any particular bill. And first and foremost. Each day involved the sharing of that, that common bond that we that all 50 of us had, whether we were Democrats, whether we were Republicans [1:13:00], whether we were men, whether we were women, whether we were from an urban district, whether we were from a rural district, but that recognizing that we had the common bond that we were all legislators serving the Hoosier State. And that was, Ben, always a source of pride for all 150 members of the Indiana General Assembly.

BB: Yeah, okay. Yeah, that's cool. What lessons, if any, did you learn?

JB: The most important lesson that I learned from my 14 years of service in the state Senate, is the need in government and in life, for civility, [1:14:00] the need in government and life for open communication and sharing of ideas, the need in government and life for bipartisanship and nonpartisanship and the need in government and life to work for the common good. And we know in life today, we've seen examples where those important traits about citizenship have been sorely lacking? But I think that that is a faze that we've been through. We've seen the other side, we've seen the detriments that occur when those values aren't recognized and aren't followed. And I trust that the majority of Americans are good people. They're good at heart. We're all good at heart [1:15:00] regardless of whether our particular political views or our particular views about a particular candidate differ, mildly or differ significantly. All Americans and all Hoosiers have the same goal. And that is for health, safety, security, and happiness.

BB: Yeah, sure. Did you have any regrets as a legislator?

JB: None whatsoever. Those were 14 of the best years of my life and the best opportunity to serve my community.

BB: Yeah. Awesome. Okay.

JB: When I speak with young people, I always recommend service in the Indiana General Assembly if they're politically inclined, and if they're motivated that way, and if they ever had that opportunity in life that I was granted.

BB: Right, right. [1:16:00] What advice would you give to future legislators or even current legislators?

JB: Conduct your affairs civilly. Think and work in a bipartisan fashion. Think and work for the common good. And consider yourself a delegate or representative of your community. And don't consider yourself to be the beneficiary of anything. Consider yourself to be privileged to be a representative.

BB: Yeah, okay.

JB: Give what you can instead of taking what you can.

BB: Right, yeah. Yeah, that's good advice. [1:17:00] So let's see last few questions here. How has the State of Indiana changed over the course of your lifetime?

JB: The State of Indiana has changed in many ways over the course of my lifetime. And even since my service in the General Assembly in the 1970s and 1980s. The state has grown in population. The state has grown and developed economically. The population of the state is increasingly becoming more diverse. The opportunities in the state of Indiana are unlimited. The State of Indiana has always been in a key geographical location located right in the middle of the heartland of the United States of America. [1:18:00] And I think that's a great trait for Indiana. A great thing for Indiana, a great opportunity for Indiana. And as the state continues to change, I'm optimistic and I only see good things for the future of Indiana.

BB: Yeah, that's good. How has the Indiana General Assembly changed? I know we've touched on that a little bit. But any other thoughts on perhaps how it's changed over time?

JB: Yes, we did touch on it, the General Assembly has become more of a partisan body. And I don't think that's good, for the citizens and for taxpayers. There's been in the recent current session, there has been a breakdown in some [1:19:00] respect in the civility among the members of the General Assembly. And I was disheartened to see that and never want to see that. And at the same time, the General Assembly still is performing its vital mission of being the primary policy maker for Indiana citizens for state government policy. And I think the legislator does a responsible job and they have been even today.

BB: Yeah. Okay. What about politics? Do you feel like the politics of Indiana has changed quite a bit?

JB: I don't think the politics of the state of Indiana in terms of partisan politics [1:20:00] has changed very much in the last 50 years. I think there are certain percentages of Democratic voters that have remained constant, certain percentages of Republican voters that have remained constant, certain percentage, relatively constant, certain percentages of independent voters that don't view themselves as predominantly aligned with one party or another that has remained relatively constant. But as we discussed before, what I think has changed is the Republican Party leadership in Indiana, I think has wrongfully especially in the more recent decades, intentionally gerrymandered, the Indiana General Assembly legislative districts for the specific political goal of [1:21:00] maintaining super majorities of the Republican Party in the House of

Representatives and super majorities of the Republican Party in the Senate. And I don't think that serves citizens well. What's best for citizens is to have a bipartisan government so that if one party is in power at a particular point in time, the other party in a meaningful way, can function as the loyal opposition and work with the majority party for a better policy outcome.

BB: Yeah. Last couple questions. What if any enduring qualities do Hoosiers still have or hold dear?

JB: Friendliness, hospitality, [1:22:00] understanding that we are all common people and members of the Hoosier State, citizens of the United States and also citizens of our world. Respect for the environment. Respect for all religions. Respect for government. And probably first and foremost. Respect for the family regardless of how your family is composed, but respect for the integrity of the family unit as being the basic principle in life.

BB: Yeah. Okay. Last one, what [1:23:00] do you want Hoosiers to know about their role in relation to the function of the Indiana General Assembly?

JB: All Hoosiers should know that they play an important role in the functioning of the General Assembly by virtue of being a voter, and by virtue of being a taxpayer. And every citizen should take the time that they have available to express their views to their state legislators and to work with others in the community for issues that they think are important.

BB: Yeah. All right, perfect. Well, is there anything that we didn't touch upon that you want to talk about? Or do you think we covered it for the most part?

JB: No, Ben, I think we've covered everything very well. This has really been an enjoyable [1:24:00] experience sharing these topics and sharing these experiences with you for the purpose of the General Assembly history project.

BB: Yeah, well, thank you so much for being a part of it. It should be a cool thing to add to the archival collection. And so yeah, thanks again for being willing to participate.

JB: Alright, Ben, nice talking with you, good working with you on this. And if you believe that there's ever anything that I could do to assist you in your work, feel free to reach out to me as a resource if you think I might be able to help in any way.

BB: Perfect. I appreciate it. Thank you so much.

JB: Take care.

BB: You too. Bye bye.